University Lutheran Church

REPORT OF THE ASSISTANT PASTOR

November, 1967

As I look over past reports I notice that they have been heavy on detail and light on rationale. This seems to be a good time to redress the balance a little bit. So I will save the details for a later time. Actually, the details can mean very little if the underlying philosophy is faulty.

I. The Perspective

"Religious people," Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in what now has become a classical theological affirmation, -- "Religious people speak of God when human perception is (often just from laziness) at an end, or human resources fail: it is in fact always the Deas ex machina they call to their aid, either for the so-called solving of insoluble problems or as support in human failure -- always, that is to say, helping our human weakness or on the borders of human existence. Of necessity, that can only go on until men can, by their own strength, push those borders a little further, so that God becomes as superfluous as a Deus ex machina. I have come to be doubtful even about talking of 'borders of human existence.'....It always seems to me that in talking thus we are only seeking frantically to make room for God."

The frantic attempt to make room for God in modern life. That, I surmise, is indeed the religious mood which has accompanied many of us since our early religious training. We yearn for captivation by the simple stories of the Bible, as we were once captivated by them in Sunday School. Meanwhile we are working on space research, genetic surgery, and cybernetics. So the question lurks in our hearts: where and how shall we fit God into all this?

This is Bonhoeffer's response. "I should like tp speak of God not on the borders of life but at its centre, not in weakness but in strength, not, therefore, in man's suffering and death but in his life and prosperity. On the borders it seems to me better to hold our peace and leave the problem unsolved. Belief in the Resurrection is not the solution of the problem of death. The beyond of God is not the beyond of our perceptive faculties....God is the Beyond in the midst of our life. The Church stands not where human powers give out, on the borders, but in the centre of the village."

The church is at home in the decisive moments of life! Not just at the time of death and the time of sickness. But in the time of scientific breakthrough, secular merry-making, or political controversy. The church is at home there, since God is at home there. That is what God's Incarnation in Christ is about; God enters the affairs of men, with all the risks involved. God does not attempt to draw men out of their own sphere into some heavenly religious realm apart from ordinary life. God is in, with, and under the contemporary world in Christ, and Christians are therefore called forth (ekklesia) to enter into God's ministry in the world in Christ.

The church in the center of life, it should be stressed, is still a worshipping church. Bonhoeffer underlines this when he calls for a "secret discipline" of faith, a life of confession, praise, hearing the Word of God, and partaking in the sacraments. On the other hand, he is convinced that the reality attested to and participated in when the church worships cannot be directly, that is, verbally, conveyed to men who do not so worship. He calls for a certain Christian silence along with a Christian presence in the contemporary world.

This, then, is Bonhoeffer's challenge to us: to establish our church in the midst of contemporary life, not at its edges; and at the same time to continue our worship as our own secret discipline, recognizing also that more often than not we will choose to be silent about God as we stand with Him in His world outside the confines of His church.

There is a powerful missionary impetus in that kind of stance. One who cares for the vital center of modern life and who at the same time worships is, or can be, in his life the Word of Christ to a world which so deeply needs Him and His reconciliation. I have come to know a certain professor at Harvard. I was introduced to him as the "Lutheran Chaplain at Harvard." He in turn introduced himself as "Chaplain for the Agnostics." Which pretty much reflects his religious stance. The other day that professor attemded a public meeting of students held in the wake of the Dow Chemical affair. He was deeply impressed by the judicious, fair-minded, and creative leadership of the student chairman; whom he later found out was a Divinity School Student. "I find that hard to believe," he said. Clearly the actions of that Divinity student spoke to the agnostic professor about the vitality of Christian faith and commitment in a way that a hundred sermons could not.

I want to underline the theme of mission here. The church which is in the centre of modern life ought to be an outgoing church, not a stay-at-home, self-indulgent church. I am afraid that the modern world is so complex and so problematic and so overwhelming that we are tempted to withdraw behind our ghetto walls sometimes, only <u>thinking</u> that we are in the center of life, only <u>talking</u> about being in the center of modern life. But the missionary life -- "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" -- surely requires <u>deeds</u> as well as talk. It surely requires us to emerge from our ghetto bodily to bear witness to Christ amidst all the perplexing and sometimes disheartening ambiguities of contemporary life.

II. A Working Model

Immediately prior to the time of the Reformation, the model for the Church, implicitly if not explicitly, was the <u>circle</u>, with Christ at the center, the church as the inner circle, and the world as the outer concentric circle. This model is based on the assumption that the only way to Christ is through the Christian community, that you have to come to Church to be ministered to by Christ.

Luther protested against the notion that the Church possesses Christ and can deal with him as it pleases. So he established the notion of two kingdoms or <u>two spheres</u>, spheres touching tangentially in the life of the individual Christian. Christ is available to the world, then, through the priesthood of all believers, as well as in the communal worship of the Church. Here the notion of a church going out into the world is established, but the full burden was left to the individual believer. Luther did speak about the Lordship of Christ in the world, but he felt that that was mostly hidden and that it therefore was of little import for Christians.

Bonhoeffer follows in Luther's path, but he goes further. He emphasizes the tangible Lordship of Christ in the world more than Luther had done. He sees Christ concretely at work in the world before the believer in Christ even emerges on the scene. The burden of Christ's ministering to the world therefore does not rest entirely on the shoulders of the individual believer. On the contrary, Christ is already there in the world ministering; and the believer only enters into that prior ministry. As in the parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25, Christ is seen to be present when the hungry are given food, the thirsty given drink, the stranger welcomed and the sick visited. Christ is seen to be present, in short, wherever there are signs of authentic new human life and freedom in the world.

The model of Bonhoeffer, then, is something like this: an ellipse with two foci, the one being the life of Christ in the church, the other being the life of Christ in the world. This allows for the "secret discipline of faith" or worship, on the one hand, and for easy entrance into God's ministry to the world in Christ on the other hand.

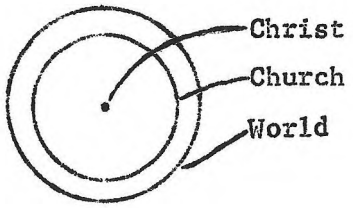
I think we will have to specify further that both focal points are primary, lest we fall into a ghetto mentality (the worshipping community is really all that counts) or a sectarian mentality (the world is all that counts basically, worship amounts to very little).

My assumption has been that if we truly want the church to be in the center of modern life, as we so often say we do at University Lutheran Church, we will have to opt for a model like Bonhoeffer's until a better one is suggested. It seems to me that Model A is no longer possible, that the world, the outer concentric circle, has broken away from the inner circle, folded back on itself, and become a new circle independent of the first. The world is not interested in Christ's ministry inside the Church. De facto, then, that church is not in the world.

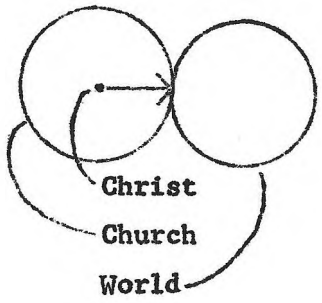
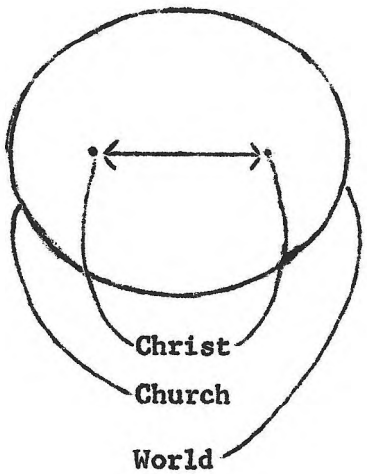
Model B, it seems to me, is better, but questionable. It places much too heavy a burden on the frail shoulders of the individual Christian. Especially at times of crisis, such as our own, it becomes all too easy for the individual to throw up his hands in despair and withdraw into a ghetto church, thus losing touch with the world, creating again two separate spheres. With Model C the individual is given not a burden, but a call and an opportunity. Christ's ministry in the world does not depend on him; but he is called and invited to enter into a ministry of Christ in the world that is already underway.

When, in Christ's name, and with deep faith in Christ, Bonhoeffer entered the conspiracy to murder Adolf Hitler, he knew that the ministry of Christ in the world did not depend on him -- that Christ would cleanse Germany's political temple even if Bonhoeffer did not act. Even so, Bonhoeffer heard the call to action and accepted the invitation to act. He was free to enter into that world-historical drama. He did not feel compelled to withdraw into his ghetto, shivering and saying to himself, "My God how can I do anything about that!" Bonhoeffer's decision, it is interesting to note, was not only a great act of sacrificial love in the midst of highly ambiguouspolitical circumstances, it was an act of untold missionary significance. His act told about Christian faith and Christ a thousand fold compared to sermons in a Church, which he might have preached had he lived, sermons which few people, in all likelihood, would have heard.

Model A (Medieval Catholicism)



Model B (Luther)



Model C (Bonhoeffer)