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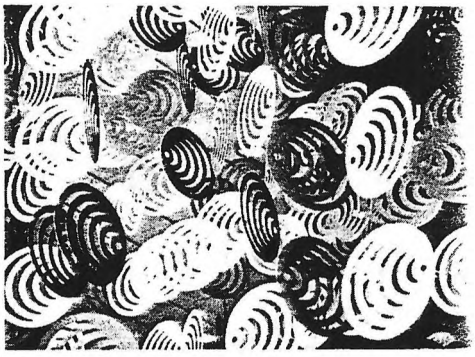

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H. PAUL SANTMIRE

GETTING WHERE THE ACTION IS:

A Fresh Theological Approach to Community Organizing

NOT TOO long ago a sizable segment of American clergy and other church leaders believed that "getting where the action is" was next to godliness. One venerated way to do that, in the late sixties and early seventies, was to ride on the coattails of the likes of a Saul Alinsky into the sometimes confrontational projects of grass-roots community organizing.

But the times have obviously changed. Community organizing, by and large, lost its halo of popular theological sanctity with the decline of the activism of the sixties. The final nail was put in the coffin, it would appear, with the debacle of the Denominational Ministry Strategy's (DMS) controversy with the Lutheran Church in America in western Pennsylvania.

There the situation was, and is, grave. The global flow of capital from the industrial Northeast to places where cheaper labor can be found, with the resultant deindustrialization of the region, has had an enormously destructive impact on the lives of many families. DMS has sought to respond to those structural injustices and to all that personal suffering. But the sight of a church-supported community organizer and several fellow-traveling clergy allowing themselves to be driven finally to make public spectacles of themselves—with no apparent strategic efficacy—can only send pain through the veins of anyone who has ever tried to support community organizing from a church base.

If the partisans of the DMS group have made themselves vulnerable to criticism from a practical point of view, they have at the same time opened themselves to a devastating theological critique. A blue-ribbon commission of the LCA lately took aim at the theology underlying the often histrionic and ineffective DMS tactics and blew it full of holes with the ease of people who might gather to shoot at fish in a barrel. It would therefore appear that community organizing, as it has faded from the public mind generally, has died an ignominious theological death.

Still, the facts of the matter belie the headlines. Grass-roots community organizing, often reminiscent of an Alinsky model but now much more diversified and particularistic and therefore much more indigenous and sophisticated, is alive and well in many cities across the land. From Florida to Texas, from California to Connecticut, even during the lean and mean years of cultural narcissism and Reaganomics, grass-roots community organizing has been making significant gains for the sake of the poor and the oppressed, notwithstanding the death notices that the media and some court theologians of our denominations have posted in the public square.

Even more striking, much of this highly localized but consistently effective organizing has been significantly supported—often initiated—by local congregations or coalitions of local congregations. These congregations have also served as conduits for national funding, especially from agencies such as the Roman Catholic Church's Campaign for Human Development.

But much if not all of this grass-roots activity with such solid church support has unfolded in the absence of a forceful, publicly articulated theological rationale, especially in Lutheran circles. The church proponents of community organizing across the country have depended mostly on the powerful but sometimes simplistic-sounding injunctions of biblical prophecy or the still relevant but sometimes tired-sounding authority of some church social statements, many of which emerged in the now largely forgotten days of the sixties.

The international discussion focusing on "liberation theology," especially as that has been generated by Latin American theologians, has not really found a place within many North American congregations—at least not in the so-called mainline churches—for reasons which it would be interesting to explore. Nor has it helped, in this respect, to hear a distinguished Lutheran proponent of the theology of hope, Carl Braaten, call the key liberation theology construct, *praxis,* a Trojan horse of

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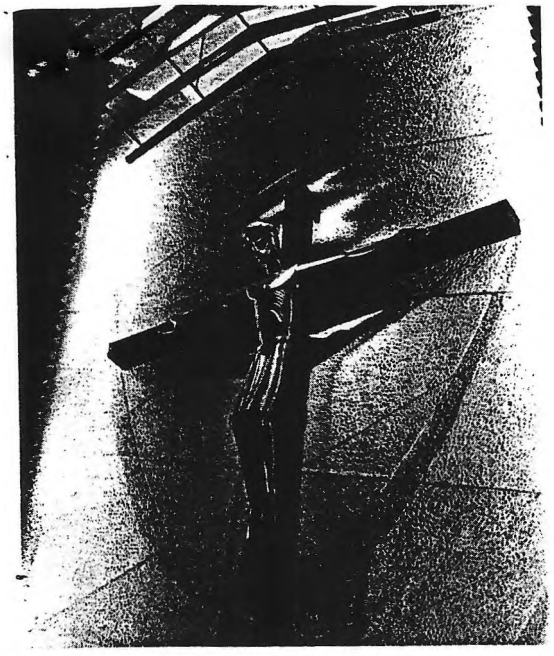


In this world the Church lives under the cross, but always in anticipation of the coming Kingdom.

works-righteousness. Why, then, should anyone, Lutherans in particular, plunge into the politics of grass-roots struggles in the name of liberation?

THE CHURCH PEOPLE who are immersed in the grass-roots processes of church-supported community organizing projects across the country obviously need some theological help. That is what I propose to give here—as a beginning *and* as a plea to our academic theologians for some attention!

I want to explore the following theme, in outline form, as one possible theological approach to grass-roots community organizing: "the eschatological witness of the Church and the stewardship of love."

To define my theme we need a theological framework. I instance first the work of the Dutch theologian J. C. Hoekendijk, long associated with the theology of missions. For him, the Church is a function of its *evangelical outreach*. "When one desires to speak about God's dealings with the world," Hoekendijk wrote in 1966, "the Church can be mentioned only in passing and without strong emphasis." More specifically, the Church is the Church, "it *happens,* insofar as it actually proclaims the Kingdom to the world." That is to say, "the Church is a function of the apostolate." The proponents of the church-growth movement that has been flourishing in the eighties can often be heard to make similar statements.

Other theologians have argued in a similar way that the Church is, rather, a function of its *service* to the world, that the Church *happens* when its faith becomes active in love—particularly when that love is directed to the poor and the oppressed. The proponents of liberation theology in this decade can also be heard, now and again, making similar statements.

But to envision the Church as either a function of the proclamation of the Gospel (*kerygma*) or as a function of loving service to the world (*diakonia*), is to allow its "being" to be swallowed up by its "doing" and thus, essentially, to undercut the grace of God which gives the Church its being. Eventually that kind of ecclesial functionalism can lead to a colossal ecclesial burn-out (which seems, in fact, to have happened in numerous cases during the waning years of the sixties).

Pushed to its logical conclusion, ecclesial functionalism, whether of the evangelical-outreach or the loving-service model, means action without being, instrumentality without reality, concerted effort without cultivated identity, the imperative without the indicative, Protestant principle without Catholic substance, ethics without theology, fruits without roots, Christ the Lord without Christ the Savior.

The gathered being of the Church (*koinonia*), particularly as that comes to expression in liturgical celebration, precedes the scattered doing of the Church, and properly so.

THE MISSION of the Church seen from this perspective, then, is first of all to "get where the *being* is," and then, and then only, to "get where the *action* is." But here comes the rub, especially for Lutherans who have historically—in fact if not in theology—tended toward quietism. The mission of the Church *is* two-fold: being and doing. It is not first *koinonia,* and then, in addition, *kerygma* and *diakonia.*

Koinonia, as we know it in the New Testament, as a matter of course overflows into the world as *kerygma* and *diakonia.* The being of the Church is not the being without the doing, anymore than the soul is the soul without the body. Born of what is truly essential, *kerygma* and *diakonia* are essential moments (not merely occasional expressions) in the life of the Church. We are talking here about the *esse* (the being), not just the *bene esse* (the well-being) of the Church.

Koinonia, kerygma, and *diakonia* are one and inseparable, just as the persons of the Trinity are one and inseparable even as, in the language of the tradition, "the Father" is "the source and origin of the whole Trinity." *Koinonia* overflows, always, in the form of *kerygma* and *diakonia,* just as the eternal fecundity of "the Father" overflows and manifests itself in the eternal Word that goes forth, and in the eternal bonding of the Spirit of self-giving love.

At this point, then, I want to focus on the *diakonia* aspect of the

Church's witness, since that offers us the most visible linkage to the processes of community organizing. I will presuppose that those congregations which are, or which might be, involved in supporting grass-roots community-organizing projects will as a matter of course also be evangelistic, that they will also as a matter of course be dedicated to proclaiming the *kerygma* in word and deed—although the famous quietism of our Lutheran churches has affected not only their social involvements in this respect but also their evangelistic praxis as well.

Here, however, we must make an important observation as we move from the Church seen as *koinonia* to the Church seen as *diakonia*. In so doing, in order to be found faithful to the Word of God in our day, we must—as did Luther—listen to the testimony of the Scriptures. With this in mind I state the exegetical fact bluntly: The New Testament witness, as we can most faithfully hear it today, in continuity with the witness of the Old is an *eschatological witness*. There is no going back behind theologians such as Juergen Moltmann and Carl Braaten, who have tried to formulate eschatological theologies, to the days of the theologies of stasis—theologies of the "eternal now" (Tillich) or "authentic existence" (Bultmann) or even "eternal election" (Barth), all of which have in one form or another dominated the Reformation mind since the late sixteenth century.

This means that we can no longer start every theological statement with a de-eschatologized neo-Pauline dialectic of Law and Gospel as the blue-ribbon commission referred to above did. To begin with, Paul's thought itself was thoroughly eschatological, as J. Christiaan Beker has forcefully argued. Further, we must be prepared to hear the Word not only as it comes to us through the eschatological proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom of God as we know that message in the Synoptic traditions but also through its expression in Pauline theology.

All this allows us—no, requires us—to say that the being of the Church is essentially an eschatological being. In this world the Church lives under the cross, surely, but always in anticipation of the coming Kingdom whose firstfruits are revealed through the resurrection.

WHAT THIS eschatological emphasis can lead us to, then, is not something less than the Two-Kingdoms ethic of traditional Lutheran theology but something more: three kingdoms! As the Church gathers around Word and Sacrament to celebrate the mighty deeds of God—past, present, and future—the Church celebrates above all the Kingdom which is to come, which is the *telos* (the goal), of both the Kingdom on the right hand (redemption) and the Kingdom on the left hand (creation).

We know, then, where it's all going! Even though we see through a mirror dimly as we survey the coming Kingdom, even though we see all things in this world under the "eschatological proviso" of the cross, we *do* see, enlightened by the Word and inspired by the Spirit. In faith and in hope we have experienced a foretaste of the things to come.

This, therefore, is the eschatological witness of the Church: to manifest and to proclaim in word and deed, under the sign of the cross, the Kingdom which is to come, whose way has been prepared by that cross and proleptically realized by the resurrection. We are called to be a city set upon a hill, a city that cannot be hid. This is our eschatological witness as the *koinonia* of Christ manifested to the world through both evangelism and loving service, in word and in deed.

To this thought I now add the biblical theme of stewardship: that we are to be wise as serpents as well as innocent as doves. As opportunities arise for maximizing our witness through loving service, we will as a matter of course seize upon those opportunities as moments in which we can witness the more in word and in deed to the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

The Gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven gives us the eyeglasses, so to speak, to see where the eschatological rule of God is being manifested in the world around us (creation) as well as within the Church (redemption), since there is one eschatological rule of the one God who has been disclosed to us as the one Lord of the two kingdoms. With our eyes thus focused we can then proceed to get where the—divine—action is both within the Church and beyond the Church.

EXAMPLE: Since the Kingdom of Heaven will be a realm of *shalom* where the lamb will lie down with the lion, the Church will naturally want to identify itself here and now with the peacemakers of this world. Another example: Since the Kingdom will be a realm of radical social upheaval where, according to the Magnificat, the lowly will be exalted and the hungry will be fed, the Church will naturally want to identify itself here and now with the forces of this world that are working for justice for the hungry.

It is on this very point that the report of the blue-ribbon commission collapses. It teaches us not so much that we should relate to the realm of creation with an eschatological perspective but rather that we should link up the Church to the order of creation with an almost secularized, intramundane perspective: that we should use our mundane *reason* when we work in this world and join with other people who are using their mundane *reason*. This sounds incontestable, since no one, surely, wants to be irrational.

But that doctrine presupposes the medieval existence of a static, hierarchical society where using one's

reason had very specific social meanings.

Further, the reference to reason as the connecting link between Church and society fails to consider the modern social sciences that by the use of reason (!) have shown that reason is never neutral. Reason is always *somebody's* reason, somebody who belongs to a certain social class. Reason in a sinful world is, in other words, always ideological.

SO CHRISTIANS, as they join with others in service to the world, need to act from an *enlightened* reason, reason inspired by the hidden workings of common grace in the Kingdom of creation or by the revealed manifestations of special grace in the Kingdom of redemption. If we do only what *we* assume to be "rational," we may well end up on the side of the oppressors.

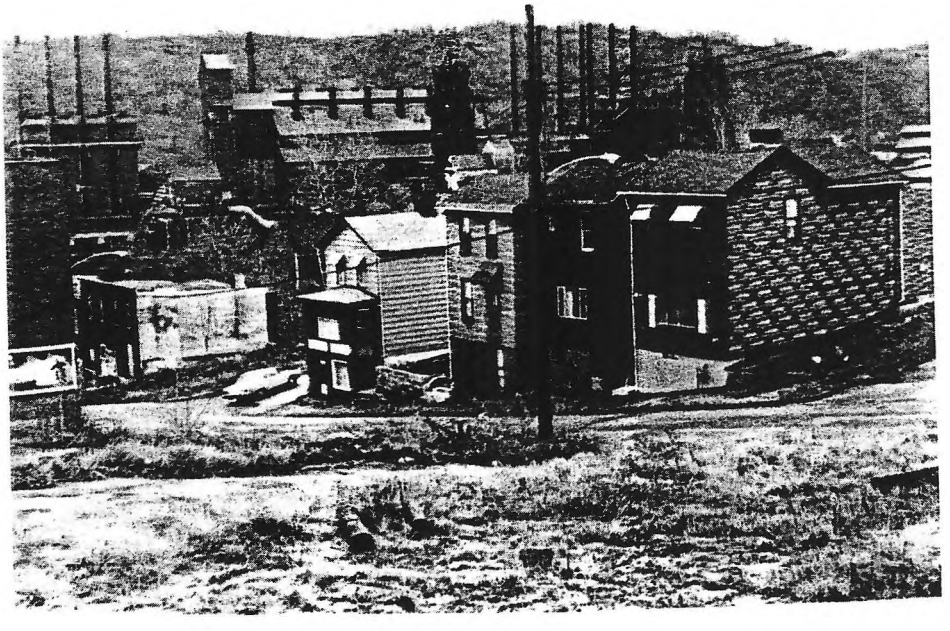
Whether within the Church or beyond, then, the criterion for what that Kingdom is and what it requires of us will always be eschatological and not merely "rational" in the sense used by the report of the commission. We know what God is up to in the world of creation because we know where God is leading the whole process. Informed by that vision, we will take the risk of "getting where the action—God's action, as best we can discern it—is" in the world, joining wherever possible with people who, often (if not always) unknown to themselves, are already there serving that same Kingdom.

Now, a very effective way for the local congregation to do that is to support and to participate in grassroots community organizing. This is the stewardship principle. Organizing, as we know it in many—not all—cities across America today, allows us to maximize all at once several values of the Kingdom: human dignity, human equality, human and ecological interdependence, and basic human justice—what the World Council of Churches has called "a just, sustainable, and participatory society." Organizing, properly construed, helps people help themselves communally to realize in some foreshadowed way, however dimly, reflections of those values that will only be fully realized when the Kingdom finally comes once and for all with the dawning of the new heavens and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.

One can even claim Luther's support, at least in part, for this kind of theological approach to organizing. In his words, "God would have civil government become a prefiguration (*Vorbild*) of the true blessedness of his heavenly Kingdom."

The most popular alternative to this direction, one well known to us throughout the Christian centuries, would be to focus *all* our *diakonia* energies on service to individuals (philanthropy). This might be called the hospital approach to loving service in the world. In itself it is surely a valid expression of the Church's stewardship of love. But in a time when God is giving us Americans the historic opportunities to do much more, service to individuals *alone* might be appropriately regarded as a failure of eschatological nerve. I urge, therefore—also and all the more so—the organizing approach to loving service in the world.

It is sometimes said that it is better to teach a hungry person how to fish than to give him or her a fish. This is a good maxim for the stewardship of love; but it is still better to call on that person to join together with his or her neighbors in order to explore how they all might work together to form a fishing cooperative. Such truly communal process can empower persons and upbuild a global society that is more just, more sustainable, and more participatory than the world as we know it today.

That is organizing. And that is a real—and a theologically mandated—possibility in our time in our society. ■

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