

Those Troublesome Mission Affirmations

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Of all the doctrinal resolutions of the Missouri Synod which we are to “honor and uphold,” none gives me more trouble than the one I’ve been asked to write about – The Mission Affirmations. Not that I can’t affirm them. I can and do, passionately. But the Mission Affirmations demand more than affirmation. They demand to be enacted. That is where I slip. So does my congregation. So does my Synod. Why?

The Mission Affirmations explain why. They explain why we aren’t being God’s mission as we should: “. . . Our individual and corporate self-centeredness . . . has caused us to regard our local congregations and our Synod as ends in themselves and . . . to give self-preservation priority over God’s mission.”

Let me cite an immediate example of how our synodically self-centered priorities keep us from mission. This little piece I’m writing is barely meeting the deadline. It almost didn’t get written at all. That by itself would have been no tragedy. But the reason for the tie-up is revealing.

At the last minute all activity here at the Sem was suddenly immobilized, for the umpteenth time this year, by yet another crisis. Whenever this happens our major mission priority on this campus, educating half a thousand young men for the ministry, suffers drastically. For what? For another kind of priority, a demand for proof. Proof of what? Proof of our fidelity to Synod’s historic position.

And isn’t Synod’s position what the Mission Affirmations remind us – to be Christ’s mission to the church and the world? Yet as far as I know, we are not being charged with neglecting that. Yet that’s what’s happening now. Thousands and thousands of man-hours, thousands of dollars, sleepless nights, and shortened lives are distracting us from Christ’s mission – all of it, presumably, for the preservation of the Synod. Yet even as self-preservation, let alone as the mission of Christ, that course seems doomed.

This same anti-mission self-centeredness has many faces – for instance, in my congregation. It is a dear congregation with a dedicated pastor. Yet this year again we’ll probably “make our budget,” if we do at all, only by renegeing on our commitments to “outside giving,” meaning anything which does not immediately preserve our congregational self. Item: we are still paying off a debt on our own building but only by reducing our mission to the world’s and our city’s poor and unchurched.

What makes us most uneasy, I suspect, is that we sense our false priorities are already too inherited, too built-in to be changed. This self-centeredness lodges not only in the privacy of our own sinful hearts but in the very public institutions which have come down to us and which shapes, our Synod and our congregation included. Our self-preserving priorities have determined our budgets, our job descriptions, the people we must answer to, and the ones we must ignore – indeed the very options which are still open to us at all. Our selfishness is organized beyond our power to dis-organize it, almost as though someone were saying to us: The church which your hearts (and your ancestors’ hearts) desired is all the church you deserve. Now live with it!

But to live with those consequences – I mean really live! – requires, first of all, that we die. We must die together with all our distorted priorities. The Biblical word for such dying is “repent,” the word which the Mission Affirmations revive. “Resolved, that we repent of our . . . self-centeredness.” I do not, nor do most of the people I know, accept the fiction that the present situation in our Synod can be blamed on only one or two people. We have the leadership which all of us deserve.

Too often in our Synod and in our congregations we have been like spoiled children, blessed beyond imagination by a fond Father and yet so fearful of losing what we have that we dread to risk it on others. Witness our timorous relations with other Christians. Such fearfulness makes us patsies to alarmists and to paternalistic protectors.

But now if we yearn to be free of the oppressive consequences of our old self-centered priorities, then we face the one mortifying alternative which the Mission Affirmations dare to recommend – repentance.

Yet such dying is humanly impossible – especially for a proud church body like ours – unless beyond our dying there is the prospect of real life. Without that, as the Reformers knew, no one can successfully repent. But there is such a life. That we know, too, thanks to our predecessors who shared the mission of Christ with us and who taught us in turn to teach it on, and to live off of its Lord, our Sender, as we have. For His dying is the only dying we need not fear to join, resulting as it surely does in our rising with Him.

But then the real false prophets in our midst, if any, are those who shrink from calling us – all of us and themselves – to die, to repent for fear that, if we really did abandon our self-pervations, we might not survive. Instead such prophets prefer to settle for a few select scapegoats, a few to die for all of us. But however we may deserve them, we do not need leaders like that. What we do need, all of us together, is to be so enlivened by the mercy of God in Christ Jesus that we can bear to die out on all else and spend ourselves in our Lord’s mission.

That great boon, the Lord be thanked, is still in our midst – for example, in those troublesome Mission Affirmations.

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