

6-1967

June 1967

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Recommended Citation

Kretzmann, O.P., "June 1967" (1967). *Campus Commentary*. 58.
https://scholar.valpo.edu/campus_commentary/58

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campus commentary



June, 1967

Dear Brother:

I did a real dumb thing a few weeks ago. (Voice from the rear: "That's no news. Get on with your story.") Well, what I did was to read the issue of *The Lutheran Witness* devoted to expressions of opinion on the topic "What Synod Needs" meaning what the letter writers wanted from the New York convention. **The results were a magnificent mixture of nonsense and wisdom; but it is probably true that the letters represented a fair sampling of synodical thought without the usual sociological applesauce.**

Where I was even dumber than usual was in reading these letters while keeping an ear cocked for the latest reports on the fracas (war) in the Middle East. Almost immediately I developed a case of acute spiritual schizophrenia. There seemed to be absolutely no connection between the suggested tasks of synod and the strange—or not so strange—things I was hearing over my radio. Oh yes, there were occasional flashes of insight or understanding that 1967 is not 1910, but basically there was far too much ignoring of this fact beyond all other facts. History is being forged out of the raw material of raw facts. But we seem to be standing on the sidelines wringing our hands.

On the other hand—and here my schizophrenia took another turn—not one letter—not one single one—said that we should stay as we are. This is remarkable. **Many of the good letters reflected the fact that we are moving toward a "theology of change" which will be vastly important, even decisive, in these ominous years. What is good and what is bad? Which change is helpful to the church and which is not? What must be resisted and what can be welcomed? Of course, if you stay with fundamentals, the whole answer is Hebrews 13.8.**

There can be no doubt that humanly speaking the future will see a great struggle between the technological view of our years and the apocalyptic. The voices of technology tell us that science will lift us into a gadget heaven, and the apocalyptic voices point out that we are hearing the whip of God's judgment whistling over the universe and the sweep of His garment is like the roar of great waters.

* * *

I have found that many brethren face the New York convention with both joy and concern—Joy not only over past God-given achievement but also over the massive challenges which an impatient God has hurled at us. The concern of these brethren stems from the fact that we are in danger of trying to decide matters which really belong under our study lamps at home or in a thousand Winkel-conferensen where brother speaks to brother around the stove in the church basement, and not before the forum of blase New York newspapers. United we stand; divided we shall not fall (the Holy Spirit is still around) but we shall stumble badly in the glaring light of mass communications and the blinding light of a God who will not wait on our stumbling forever.

* * *

So—could we possibly make this a "brotherly convention"? More than ever before? Moving mightily under our ancient and imperative heritage? **Theophilus, who is a proud delegate, told me a few days ago that whenever a brother will say something with which he violently disagrees, he is going to say: "He is my brother" sotto voce ten times before rushing for the nearest microphone. "For," says Theophilus, "he really is my brother, and on the day of the last convention he and I will be standing on the same side of the great gulf with no badges except the red one given on Calvary, both of us under the Cross, both saved at a cost a billion times greater than all the Ebenezers of church history." I must say that Theophilus does not often talk this way, but he had this written out in his little red CPH book.**

* * *

That reminds me. No doubt there will be much discussion of our latest "Ebenezer." All the experts—preachers, professors from colleges and seminaries, all of us who cannot even visualize \$1 million (33¢ for every man, woman and child in Chicago and suburbs is as close as I got)—will agree that it is our brother's fault and not our own that we are not doing as well as we should. Brother Zeitgeist, we say,

has become Pelagian, Manichaeic, or crypto-Calvinistic in his preaching and I, perfectly pure in doctrine, must forthwith consign him to Sheol with all possible dispatch. Because he is such a heretic I cannot join him in collecting a few shekels for a missionary praying in a hut in India while we are debating in an air-conditioned ballroom in New York.

We must face it. With "Ebenezer" we began to hit directly into the cancer of a materialistic, affluent world. In this world—and we are in it—money speaks more powerfully than ever before. The love of it is the besetting sin of our age. Two thousand years ago when St. Paul had financial problems (he had to send to Troas for an old cloak) he would make a few more tents and go on for another six months. Today, even if all of us were expert tentmakers, we could not possibly balance the budget. We must ask God's children—all of whom have shoes—to give Him a dollar or more for each year of life. It is all very simple until they come to me and I say: "Not a cent until the professors at Saint Springlouis do what I want them to do."

In one way the word "Ebenezer—hitherto" has an ominous sound like the sound of the closing of a book. "Hitherto"—but what comes after that? Is it possible that "hitherto" really means for us "hitherto and no further"? Perhaps the apocalyptic, eschatological bell should be tolled here too—"Hitherto"—a great church that was so supernaturally pure that it became proud of its great gifts from God and slowly became sterile and cold? **On a recent day, heavy with rain and foreboding, Theophilus stopped by, threw a letter on my desk and said: "Perhaps it is the weather; perhaps it is the fact that my delegate allowance for the convention is so small that I'll have to eat two meals a day at that hamburger joint on Sixth Avenue that you were telling me about. I gotta be going. Since 'Ebenezer' with its dollar for every birthday, Sauerbraten is getting younger every day. He is at least 70, but he is down to 61 now; and if I don't stop him cold, I'll have to baptize him all over. You know, those 'Ebenezer' boys are too evangelical. In cases like Sauerbraten's they should have a double fine for each year that he is lying about."** Theophilus slammed the door, and I opened the envelope. The letter inside read as follows:

Dear O. P.,

Like the dutiful delegate that I am, I have been reading, word by plonking word, the reports, resolutions, memorials, and overtures in the Convention Workbook of the 47th Regular (?) Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The section that really grabs me is the one on Retirement and Pensions—possibly because when it comes to financial statements I am confident of my hermeneutics, possibly because the subject matter is becoming more and more "relevant" and "existential" for me as the years slip by. But, of course, I know that the section that I ought to get a hammerlock on is the one on theological matters, so **I have been assiduously studying the various overtures to "reject," "reaffirm," "take steps," "deal with," "declare," and "instruct."**

This is heavy work, O. P. The prose is turgid, at best, and hardly parsible in some cases. But what makes it really heavy going is that I keep having to fight the instinct to toss it all aside as irrelevant, immaterial, and inconsequential to the real work of the Church in our day. **I am a parish pastor. My job is to bring the bare rudiments of the Gospel to people who still have to be convinced that God loves them. I have never had occasion, at a sickbed or at a funeral or at a marriage or in counseling a potential suicide, to go into the question of the historicity of the Book of Jonah or the meaning of yom in Genesis 1-3. I'm not saying that these are not matters that should not engage the attention of the professional theologian. But a Synodical convention is not an assembly of professional theologians. It is—or at least I think it ought to be—an occasion where we plot strategy for getting the Gospel out to a world which has heard precious little of it. And that world includes our own congregations.**

I guess I am bothered also by the fact that in this section with its heading, "Theological Matters," there seems to be a noticeable lack of theo-logy (i.e., talk about God). We talk about Scriptural interpretations and doctrinal aberrations and the defects of other theological traditions, but we don't talk much about God. So, to correct this deficiency, I have been working on a little something which I have been thinking of presenting **as an unprinted memorial.** I would appreciate your reaction to it. **Here it is:**

WHEREAS, all the earth worships God, the Father everlasting; and

WHEREAS, to Him all angels cry aloud, the Heavens and all the powers therein; and

WHEREAS, to Him Cherubim and Seraphim continually do cry: "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of Sabaoth: Heaven and Earth are full of the majesty of Thy glory"; and

WHEREAS, the glorious company of the Apostles praise Him; and

WHEREAS, the goodly fellowship of the Prophets praise Him; and

WHEREAS, the noble army of Martyrs praise Him; and

WHEREAS, the holy Church throughout all the world acknowledges Him—the Father of an infinite Majesty; His adorable, true and only Son; also the Holy Ghost, the Comforter; be it therefore

Resolved, that this 47th Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod praise God and acknowledge Him to be the Lord; and be it further

Resolved, that this convention acknowledge Jesus Christ as the King of Glory, the everlasting Son of

the Father, who took upon Himself to deliver man by humbling Himself to be born of a virgin and who, when He had overcome the sharpness of death, opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers, and who now sits at the right hand of God in the glory of the Father; and be it further

Resolved, that we pray the said Lord Jesus Christ to help His servants, whom He has redeemed with His precious blood; and be it further

Resolved, that we beseech Him to make us to be numbered with His saints in glory everlasting; and be it finally

Resolved, that we implore Him never to let us be confounded.

Any comments?

* * *

Comment: Theophilus beat it for the door before I could stop him. Personally, I think he is getting too high and mighty for my theological taste. He's beginning to sound like Ezekiel and Daniel, with overtones of Isaiah and the Revelation of St. John. I like Theophilus pretty well, but the arrogant assumption that he is on the same plane with Isaiah and St. John is too much for me. He should go back to the committee on credentials. Besides, he would never get the resolution passed. There are some commas missing and there are some dangerous words such as "fellowship" which would have to be changed to agree with the Synodical Handbook. **Such universalistic phrases as "all the earth worships God" will also have to be amended.**

No, Theophilus, this time you are out in left field near the exit. I must confess that I have heard the words of your resolution somewhere (in a hymn, I think) but **there has always been a vast gulf between the theology we sing and the theology we practice.** Grandma Himmelhoch may understand your resolution because she is close to the place where such strange sentiments are actually believed. But Deacon Sauerbraten and Brother Zeitgeist will not understand them, and both are delegates. So why don't you get an attack of acute appendicitis in July, stay home, and listen to the "Gloria" from the "Mass in B-Minor"?

Theophilus really haunts me these days. Almost every other time the door of the office opens Theophilus is standing there looking forlorn. The other day I was sitting at my desk trying to look important and busy when the door burst open and Theophilus stood there in his Spring outfit—a frayed shirt, baggy pants, and a jacket (about a size too small) which I had seen several days before in the window of the Presbyterian Resale Shop. The total effect was one of a certain forlornness. His attitude, however, was far from forlorn.

"**Do you remember,**" he asked in what struck me as a proud, arrogant tone quite different from his usual diffident manner, "that my circuit has elected me a delegate to the New York Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in July? And do you know what that means? It means, my lowly brother, that a couple of roles have been reversed. Hereafter there will be no more patronizing cracks about me in those yellow sheets of yours—not if you've got anything you want done at New York. I will have a red badge and I intend to enjoy every perquisite that goes with it, including the pleasure of feeling your tug on my sleeve when you want to get one of your pet projects onto the floor of the convention. Red Power!"

It seemed a shame to cast any kind of shadow over Theophilus' brief moment of glory, so I said nothing. In three short months, I reminded myself, the tumult and the shouting would have died and Theophilus would be one of those captains and kings who have departed for the obscurity out of which they had come. Meanwhile, why not let him have his fling?

Actually, I didn't have long to wait. Almost in a moment Theophilus seemed to shrink six or seven inches and the hair which had seemed to bristle like a porcupine's needles when he came in fell limp and disorganized across his thinning scalp.

"It's no good, O. P.," he mumbled. "You can give a man a red badge, but that doesn't make it the Red Badge of Courage. I guess there is some honor in being a delegate to Synod, and maybe even a little power. But neither honor nor power means much if you don't know what to do with it, and I don't. Ten years ago, I would have. I thought I had the answer to all of the questions we were batting around then and that we will still be batting around next July in New York. But the answers haven't held up, and I am not so sure that the questions they were supposed to answer were even the right questions.

"**Maybe this is not the time to be looking for answers at all. Maybe we ought to be trying to frame the right questions.** Maybe we should be asking why we keep the whole machine running at all. Maybe we should be asking what kind of a lump it is that we are supposed to be leavening. Maybe we should be asking what all of our liturgy, all of our rites and ceremonies, all of our holy language have to say to this **Now Generation** that couldn't care less about 'the heritage of the past' and the 'two-thousand-year-old tradition' that have meant so much to you and me. Maybe we should be asking why so few of us Red-Badge types have black faces or Spanish names or any of the visible evidences of malnutrition. Maybe we should be asking how we can brag at our class reunions about how we goofed off when we were students, and then set ourselves up as judges of those guys who have spent a lifetime doing theol-

ogy. **Maybe we should be asking why it is that we can lower the boom on some poor layman who joins the Elks so he can get a drink on Sundays and do nothing about 'brethren of the cloth' who vilify our leaders and try to turn our fellowship into a police state."**

"Theophilus," I said, "remember what Damon Runyan wrote years ago: 'A guy that goes around asking questions just gets a reputation for asking questions.'"

"Yeah," Theophilus replied, "I guess so. But don't you forget what Reinhold Niebuhr wrote at about the same time: 'There is nothing as irrelevant as an answer to a question nobody is asking.'"

And with that he shuffled out to prepare for his brief moment at the Summit.

* * *

Shaking of Head Section: I have been watching the preparations for the observance of the 450th year since the Augustinian monk walked down the narrow streets of Wittenberg full of fallen leaves to the Schlosskirche in order to nail a document on the heavy oak door. He knew that on the next day—the Day of All Saints—the farmers from the surrounding "Doerfer" would head for Wittenberg for a beer, a mass, and the latest news. These holiday crowds would surely see the unusually large bit of paper on the door and decide to read what it had to say. The young Augustinian knew, of course, that few would read all the 95 statements he had written in an agony of rebellion and love for the truth; but he knew also that if they would read only the first five they would know what the shooting was all about. The monk nailed his scrawled notice on the door, muttered a prayer, and turned to the setting sun. It was growing dark, and there would be need for more light.

Now after 450 years (four and one-half centuries) many millions of us on a much later pilgrimage are trying to remember what the monk had on his mind. At this time and distance from the little German town and the fledgling university trying hard to compete with the august Erfurt, this will be an enormous task. Now in 1967 many of the hundred million words that will be said and written will be irrelevant, blind and hurt by the slow dark stain of the centuries. **We shall attempt to see Martin Luther through twentieth century eyes, and we shall surely fail to understand him. He can be seen clearly only through the timeless eyes of God. Only as God sees him can we see him, loyally, critically, and intelligently.**

Perhaps it is this which worries me about the preparations for the 450th anniversary of the lonely walk of the hesitant monk. Our plans for remembering are so complete, so brilliantly organized, so thoroughly worked out that we cannot possibly fail. There will be the proper number of headlines, radio programs and (if we are lucky) television notices momentarily rivaling the news from Viet Nam.

Yet Theophilus and I feel strangely uneasy. Are these momentary things a modern echo of the kingdoms of the world which our Lord saw during the forty days in the desert? I really do not know but Theophilus insists that the Evil One, when he has no other recourse, persuades the children of Light to organize these things. Once it is organized, he says, you can sit back and wait for the inevitable result. The Committee on Arrangements will quarrel with the Committee on Program, the Committee on Music will be at mortal odds with the choir director, and the clergy will differ on the choice of a speaker. He must be, many will insist, "safe," a follower of Erasmus rather than a disciple of the belligerent monk. Of course, it is never said that way. We shall sing his hymns for their melody but not for their meaning.

By the way, a few months ago I got stuck on a paragraph in a Roman Catholic journal which has some strange relevance to our own time. The Author describes the beginnings of the Reformation. He is, of course, especially interested in the approach of the Roman Catholic theologians to the controversy with the Augustinian monk. The following paragraph, I think, is not only relevant but a very accurate reflection of what was going on:

"Men made ready for debate with lists of errors. John Eck, a theologian (by no means a negligible one) and a champion of Catholicism at the beginning of the Reformation came in 1530 to the Diet of Augsburg at which the Emperor was hoping to unite the two contending parties. Master Eck brought a list of 404 errors which he had found in Luther's teachings. But men did even better later on. The lists grew longer. There was that good Franciscan of the sixteenth century who called himself 'Ardent Flame' who had discovered not merely 400 errors in Martin Luther but 1400! On the opposite side of course, similar lists were compiled; indeed there were whole books of lists. **Nobody wondered about what Luther was really trying to say or what had inspired the Reformation, the internal coherence of the spiritual import of the movement; no, they simply made lists of all the errors—partial, real or supposed.**"

"Inevitably the results were fatal: both sides could only harden their opposition. Argument with anyone simply to win finally culminates in upholding indefensible positions, if the matter is closely examined. The positions are defended because one has begun to argue, and that is all there is to it." **Contemporary journals, please copy!**

* * *

Change of pace

Now to a totally different matter—from the Reformation to a retarded child. If you find a connection—and there is one—your theology is very sound. Do you vaguely remember that several years ago I wrote a brief note about the strange blessings which come to a family with a "retarded child"? At the time I

received a number of letters from brethren who had had the same experience, either in their own families or in their congregations.

Now I have seen it, too. You have never heard of Beth Looman and you probably never will again. She lived less than nine years. Shortly after her birth her parents were told that she was "retarded" and would always be a child. Immediately she was surrounded by great love—of her parents, her older brothers and everybody else around her. She responded with a gay affection that drew older, wiser (?), and more cynical people to her like a strangely powerful magnet. Here was clearly one of God's own little ones, destined to live forever in the warm and total light of baptismal grace. Every time I saw her I would find myself mumbling nostalgically, "Except ye become as little children." She died at nine o'clock last night as joyfully and quietly as she had lived these 2600 days. I am sure that God will see the new small angel in the first row. She will be there because above and beyond all the strange sounds that God hears he will want to hear her happy voice.

The academicians who carried her little white coffin up the aisle toward the altar seemed to know that they were being greatly honored by their task, more than by all the degrees they had earned. I sat by the window in the corner where the warm spring winds whispered and thought again of the hard saying: "Except ye become as little children." Many of us have never believed it; some of us try once or twice a year, perhaps on Christmas Eve or at the Easter Vigil. All the rest of our brief time we join our wayward world in living by intelligence, power, success, security. Strangely, however, when this "child-likeness" appears, we recognize it as a signal from another world. Strangely, too, it appears in the very lowly and the very great in the Kingdom—the Beths at the one end of the spectrum and St. Augustine or Luther at the other end. Beth and St. Augustine would understand each other at the most awesome depths of divine pity. They may not be able to discuss theological problems but they can sing together and to the listening ear of an understanding God their voices harmonize like nothing else in the world or in heaven.

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Useless Information Section: Recently I had occasion to look briefly at the concept of authority in the church. I have become somewhat concerned about the vagueness of the idea in our own communion. I turned first to the Synodical Handbook but found it theologically thin and vague. The Roman Catholic approach, of course, was much more definite. I found this:

"The Code of Canon Law adopted in 1904 consists of 2414 canons divided into five books dealing respectively with: First, General Rules, Canons 1-86; second, Persons—Clerics, Religious Lay People, Canons 87-725 (notice how the figure goes up); three, Things—Sacraments, Sacred Places and Times, Divine Worship, the Teaching Authority of the Church, Benefices and other Non-Collegiate Ecclesiastical Institutions, Temporal Goods of the Church, Canons 726-1551; four, Procedure—Trials, Cases of Beatification, Canonization, Procedures in Certain Matters or in Applying Penalties, Canons 1552-2194; five, Crimes and Penalties, Canons 2195-2414."

Shades of Matthew 5.

* * *

Gripe Section: This year I have become secretary and thus far the only member of a new and important society. It is called the SAML, "The Society Against Messing around with the Liturgy." There has been some question about the name of the new organization. It could also be SMDML, "The Society for the Maintenance of the Dignity and Majesty of the Liturgy." Under either name the society can fill a significant place in post-Vatican II Christendom.

Surely it is not necessary for me to point to the need of such an organization. Since 1965 the brethren—both Roman and non-Roman—have taken the Vatican Council's schema on the Liturgy as the signal to get on their blind horses and gallop off in all directions. Most of them, I must submit, headed for a certain kind of worship—called variously "popularization, participation, bringing the liturgy to the people where they are" (no matter where they are), colloquial, the language of the marketplace and the music of the discotheque.

The result of all this has been the worst mess since Peter tried to talk Greek at Pentecost. We now have everything in the "vernacular." **Item: The stately greeting, "The Lord be with you," "Dominus Vobiscum" has now become "I hope that God may be with you" and the faithful respond: "And you, too." (I have printed proof before me.) Item: Never use "Thou" and "Thee." This is obsolete and therefore hard for our third grade mentalities to understand. So we must address the Lord God of Jehovah, King of kings, and Lord of Lords just as we address a newspaper boy or our cleaning lady: "You." The ancient prayer "Blessed art Thou" becomes "Blessed are You."**

All of this hit me hard at Christmas time when I used the TV set to see several masses, Protestant services, and some strange "religious" services out in the far corner of left field. One of these latter was a "service" in which every point the preacher emphasized was followed by a saxophone **obligato glissando fortissime**, or a "Scherzo for a Saxophone Tuned to Heaven." It was not only horrible; it was blasphemous. The Word was not enough; it had to be reinforced by an alto sax. I discovered then that to worship Christ the King, I must now employ the music of Basin Street and cater to the taste of "sincere" beatniks and mini-skirt teenagers.

To return to my subject: Does all this "popularization" of the liturgy (I don't know if it is even that) really do anything except to increase the contempt of the inhabitants of left field? Certainly it does not reach the poor and lowly of heart. They know that God "is Someone Other" and yet so majestically near that they must bend the knee and be respectful.

So I think we are on the wrong track. In the liturgy of the Church, in Word and Sacrament, God comes to man and man responds to God. Must this majestic, solemn encounter be staged in the language of the street? Must I say "You" when "Thou" would be much better—"Thou" Who art holy, ineffable, alone and redeeming, to Whom I come as a beggar and outcast—"Thou" for Whom the morning stars sing together now and forever.

Summa Summarum: You can become a charter member of this great society. All you have to do is send in a postcard and you will receive a membership card.

P. S. Did you notice at Christmas time that not one of the new translations of the Christmas Gospel can even remotely touch the majesty, beauty and rhythm of the King James' version? Some of the changes are downright silly; e. g. "Mary, his espoused wife" becomes "Mary, his engaged wife." This is not only a bad translation but it conjures up all the shabby and shoddy overtones of the modern meaning of "engagement."

P. P. S. And don't ever let them touch the ancient Collects.

P. P. P. S. No, I am not opposed to all liturgical reform (not that it matters), but it must be a real improvement; something that raises our dialogue with God to the **mysterium tremendum** of creation and redemption.

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And that's all for today. At the beginning of these yellow sheets I expressed the hope that the New York convention would be a "brotherly" one. Now one more possible slogan: "Look Westward, Brother . . . to the Far East." The course of the Gospel has always been westward. Momentarily it has passed—except for a few lonely outposts—in San Francisco, Seattle, Los Angeles and San Diego—and Hawaii. Is our generation ready to take the last great leap? Three months ago a good friend took me to a high hill overlooking the westering sun setting in the Pacific. It was really going down and a dark chill fell over the place where I stood. It could have been the last time, but it was not. His hour had not yet come.

Faithfully yours,

O. P. Kretzmann