

Theology for Mercy

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PREFACE

Dear Friends,

In 2001, when I was called to serve as the head of LCMS World Relief and Human Care for the Missouri Synod, there was a rather significant gulf between those in our beloved church body who thought “social ministry” was a very important thing for the church to do, and those who thought the church should really not do any of it. The old human-care manual gave a single verse as the theological rationale for my new department—a department which through the first decade of the 2000s would dole out some \$90 million in program and funds on behalf of the LCMS to people in need. That single verse was John 10:10: “I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly.”

I soon became convinced that the traditional theological underpinnings for “mercy,” the New Testament word that we began to use for our work, were much more profound and expansive in the Bible. I also came to see that the New Testament church carried out profound missions of mercy, and that, in fact, all the great stewardship texts of 2 Corinthians 8–9 were Paul’s way of encouraging giving to the corporate act of mercy by aiding the mother church in Jerusalem. Indeed, the heartfelt and often noted “compassion” of Jesus in the Gospels veritably explodes through Paul’s amazing mercy work.

Soon I began to note that writings of the early church, Luther and C.F.W. Walther were all full of significant references to the role of church, pastor and laity in mercy to believers *and* to the community around them. I noted, too, that each main topic of Christian theology has a mercy dimension. I was convinced that with a better theological foundation, the church’s work of mercy could be deepened and broadened, both theologically and practically, and become a force for healthy unity.

I began to share these thoughts with board members, and they pushed me to think more deeply and in ways that I'd not considered. Kurt Senske and Bernie Seter were especially significant in the process. What came of it all is the document you have before you, *A Theology of Mercy*.

I hope you find this little study helpful. I hope the biblical and confessional witness spurs individuals and congregations on in sharing Christ's love through the clear Word of the Gospel and in deeds of love. For as our Lutheran Confessions state: "The Church can never be better governed and preserved than if we all live under one head, Christ. All the bishops should be equal in office (although they may be unequal in gifts). They should be diligently joined in unity of doctrine, faith, sacraments, prayer, works of love and such" (SA II IV 9).

Demonstrating Christ's mercy in the profound knowledge and confession of His fulsome truth is ever timely. And it is *exactly* the prescription for many—especially millennials, who are wired to long for profound things, provided they are connected to profound acts of love and mercy. Hurricane Harvey reminds us again of this.

Let's love for the sake of Christ, the Church and her young people, and the world. I was delighted when the LCMS in convention in 2004 commended this study to the church. It is as relevant as ever at this moment.

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THEOLOGY FOR MERCY

Love, care and concern for those in need (diakonic mercy/love) are actions motivated by the Gospel, when faith (*fides qua creditur*/the faith by which we believe) apprehends the righteousness of Christ and His merits (Augsburg Confession IV, VI) unto eternal life. The Gospel thus laid hold of produces love. Love seeks and serves the neighbor.

Love for the neighbor, while an action mandated by the law of God, is a reflection of the very being of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (1 JOHN 4:7). This love finds its source and motivation in the deep Gospel matrix and totality of the true faith (*fides quae creditur*/ the faith which is believed). Thus:

- **Diakonic love has its source in the Holy Trinity. The Son is begotten of the Father from eternity.** The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. Such begetting and procession are Trinitarian acts of love expressing the communality of God. In these acts the Triune God, from eternity, and in time, has found humankind as the object of divine love and mercy (JOHN 3:16; LUKE 6:36; 1 JOHN 3:16–17; JAMES 3:17). Diakonic love reflects the very being of God.
- **Diakonic love is born of the incarnation and humiliation of Christ.** In Christ the eternal God became man. Such identity occurred that Christ might have mercy upon His “brothers” (HEB. 2:17). Christian service of the neighbor finds its source, motivation and example in Christ’s incarnate, redeeming, atoning, active love (PHIL. 2:1–11).
- **God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”** (1 TIM. 2:4). A biblically and confessionally faithful theology of mercy clearly confesses that “the Father has decreed from eternity that whomever

He would save through Christ, as Christ Himself says, ‘No one comes to the Father except through me’ (JOHN 14:6), and again, ‘I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved’ (JOHN 10:9)” (Solid Declaration XI, 66). This fundamental truth of the Bible, that there is no salvation outside of faith in Christ and His merits, animates the church’s work for those in need. If this is not so, such work becomes merely secular, and may be performed by any entity in society.

- **The Gospel gifts bring forgiveness, and beget merciful living.** Lives that have received mercy (grace!) cannot but be merciful toward the neighbor (love!). Thus the merciful washing of Baptism (ROM. 6:1FF) produces merciful living (ROM. 7:4–6). In absolution, the merciful word of the Gospel begets merciful speaking and living (MATT. 18:21FF.). In the Supper, Christ gives Himself for us, that we might give ourselves to our neighbor (1 COR. 10:15–17; 1 COR. 12:12FF, 26). “Repentance ought to produce good fruits ... the greatest possible generosity to the poor” (APOL. 12.174).
- **Christ’s mandate and example of love for the whole person remains our supreme example for life in this world and for care of the needy, body and soul.** Christ’s Palestinian ministry combined proclamation of forgiveness and acts of mercy, care and healing (LUKE 5:17–26). Christ likewise sent forth the apostles to proclaim the Good News and to heal (LUKE 9:2FF.). Christ mandated that His Gospel of forgiveness be preached to all (MATTHEW 28; MARK 16) and that “all nations” be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Christ also left His church a feast of His body and blood unto forgiveness, life and salvation. In describing the events of the last day, Christ noted the importance of mercy in the

life of the church (“As you did it to one of the least of these My brothers ...” [MATT. 25:40].

- **The church has a corporate life of mercy.** There is absolute support in the New Testament for acts of mercy, love and kindness done by individuals within the realm of individual vocation. Moreover, the Old and New Testaments clearly bear witness to a “corporate life of mercy” of the people of God. Indeed, “corporate” comes from “corpus” (body; i.e. *hoc est corpus meum*). Through the body of Christ (incarnate and sacramental; ROM. 6; 1 COR. 11–12) the body of Christ (mystical) is created. Thus “if one member suffers, all suffer together” (1 COR. 12:26). Acts 6 and the creation of the proto-diakonic office and St. Paul’s collection for the poor (ACTS 11:29; 2 COR. 8–9) in Jerusalem clearly bear witness to the church’s corporate life of mercy based upon these theological foundations.
- **The Lutheran Confessions explicitly and repeatedly state that the work of diakonic love (alms, charity, works of love) is an assumed reality in the church’s corporate life.** See Treatise 80–82; Apology IV.192f.; Apology XXVII.5ff. Moreover, the Smalcald Articles explicitly state that “works of love” (*operum caritatis*) are, along with “doctrine, faith, sacraments, [and] prayer,” an area in which the church and its bishops (pastors) are “joined in unity” (Smalcald Articles, II.IV.9).
- **The vocation to mercy is addressed to the church at all levels.** The vocation to diakonic love and mercy is as broad as the need of the neighbor (Luther). While the call to love the needy applies to Christian individuals as such (love your neighbor as yourself), the call to diakonic mercy is particularly addressed to Christians as a corporate community (church!), whether local or synodical, even

national or international (1 COR. 16:1-4; ACTS 11:28; ROM. 15:26; 2 COR. 8:1-15; ACTS 24:17).

- **Within the church, there is a multiplicity of diakonic vocations.** Within these communities individuals serve in diakonic vocations (pastoral concern for the needy, chaplain/spiritual care, deacon, deaconess, parish nurse, medical disciplines, the host of administrative and managerial vocations, etc.). These diakonic vocations are flexible in form and determined by need (ACTS 6). Within an ecclesial setting, their common goal is the integration of proclamation of the Gospel, faith, worship and care for those in need. The range of the legitimate disciplines of human care (First Article gifts!) may be used in the church's diakonic life to the extent that such disciplines/tools do not contradict the Gospel, and the doctrine of Holy Scripture. "Christ's kingdom is spiritual ... At the same time it permits us to make outward use of legitimate political ordinances of whatever nation in which we live, just as it permits us to make use of medicine or architecture or food, drink and air" (Apol. XVI.2).
- **The Church's work of mercy extends beyond its own borders.** In the New and Old Testaments, we see a priority of concern for those in need within the orthodox fellowship of faith in Christ. But just as the Gospel itself reaches beyond the church and is intended for all, love for the neighbor cannot and must not be limited only to those in the fellowship of the orthodox Lutheran faith. In following the apostolic mandate to "do good to all, especially those of the household of faith" the church's diakonic work will persistently address the need of those within its midst. The church's diakonic life will also reach beyond its borders according to the intensity of need confronted and level of resources provided by God (1 COR. 9:10-11; GAL. 6:10). The

church's missionary work will be a persistent arena for the expression of diakonic love and mercy. Diakonic love will often function as "pre-evangelism," and rightly so, so long as word (Gospel) and deed (love) continue to mark the missionary church's life at every stage. Strengthening and reaching out in love to Lutheran partner churches will be a priority. Reaching beyond these borders in love according to the intensity of need and opportunity (particularly in times of disaster) and in partnership with others is entirely appropriate, so long as motivations and expectations of the parties involved is clear. These matters are governed by theological/ethical integrity and evangelical freedom.

- **The church will cooperate with others in meeting human need.** *Cooperation in externals* has long been an expression describing the church's legitimate ability to cooperate with other entities (whether churches, societies, Lutheran, Christian or not) in meeting some human need. To cooperate in externals means to work toward common goals in endeavors, which do not necessitate, require or necessarily imply church fellowship (*communio in sacris*) or involve joint proclamation of the Gospel and administration of the Sacraments (worship). Such cooperative endeavors are entered upon often for practical reasons (e.g., lack of critical resources). But such endeavors are also often an expression of the belief (when entered into with other Christian entities) of the catholicity of the church (See Formula of Concord, Preface; Tappert, p. 11), as well as an expression of love for fellow Christians. Through such endeavors, the LCMS will often have opportunity to insist on theological integrity and the truth of God's word, and thereby make a positive contribution to ecumenical activities. Such endeavors may range from providing resources for a simple community food bank to the highly complex ecclesial and civil

realities involved in operating a jointly Recognized Service Organizations (RSO). Such endeavors must recognize legitimate doctrinal differences and provide for the requisite integrity of its partners.

- **The Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms grants broad freedom for the church to engage and be active in its community.** The church has a role in its community (local, national, international) by virtue of the fact that congregations and national churches are actually “corporate citizens” of their respective communities. As such, congregations, churches and Synod as a whole engage the community as corporate citizens of God’s “left-hand kingdom,” working toward worthy civic goals (good citizenship, just laws and society, protection of the weak, housing, etc.). “Legitimate civil ordinances are good creations of God and divine ordinances in which a Christian may safely take part” (Apol. XVI.1). As such a corporate citizen, the church has civic and political capital. In addition to encouraging its members to be responsible citizens, the church may from time to time speak with a collective voice on issues of great significance to society, particularly where the basic value of human life is diminished (e.g., abortion, racial injustice). “Public redress, which is made through the office of the judge, is not forbidden but is commanded and is a work of God according to Paul in Romans 13 ... public redress includes judicial decisions” (Apol. XVI.7). There have been times in the life of the church when it was the sole guardian and provider for the needy. In our day, the rise of the modern welfare state has shifted that (monetary) responsibility in large measure to the civil realm. But there is a large intersection of civil and churchly endeavor at just this point. Thus the church’s response to these issues is always mutating and nuanced. In these matters the church must

spend its capital wisely and sparingly. It must avoid both quietism and political activism. The former shuns the ethical demand of love for the neighbor (ignoring for instance, the ethical urgency of the Old Testament minor prophets), the latter may obscure the church's fundamental and perpetual task as bearer of the Word of salvation to sinners in need of Christ. Where the church loses sight of this proclamation of the Gospel, it thereby loses the very motivation for diakonic work (the Gospel)!

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would you define the term “diakonic love”? What other words or phrases might be used to mean the same thing?
2. Discuss how diakonic love is related to the following:
 - a. The Holy Trinity
 - b. Christ, the Eternal God who became human to redeem humanity
 - c. God’s desire for all to be saved
3. A Christian’s “vocation” is understood to be made up of the various places, or situations, into which God puts an individual Christian for the living out of his or her faith — e.g., family, community, career, society and culture. Acts of love and mercy are shown throughout the New Testament to be part of our Christian vocation (see 1 John 3:15-18, for example) as *individual Christians*. How do we know that the church also has a corporate life of mercy — that is, a responsibility to show love and mercy to others as the whole body of Christ on earth?
4. Discuss how the “vocation of mercy” is addressed to the church at all levels”.
5. Discuss the assertion that “as the Gospel itself reaches beyond the church and is intended for all, love for the neighbor cannot and must not be limited only to those in the fellowship of the orthodox Lutheran faith”. Describe some ways in which the Church’s work of mercy “extends beyond its own borders”.
6. What is “cooperation in externals”? Give examples of how The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod “cooperates in externals” with others by serving people in need.

7. How is the church to act as a “corporate citizen” in its community? What must the church avoid in its efforts to be a good corporate citizen? Why?

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