

# Theological Reflections on Confessional Lutheran Involvement in Neighborhood Renewal

*An Exercise in Two-Kingdom Theology*

By Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison  
PRESIDENT, THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD



# Theological Reflections on Confessional Lutheran Involvement in Neighborhood Renewal

*An Exercise in Two-Kingdom Theology*

by

Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison

President, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod



The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod  
1333 S. Kirkwood Road, St. Louis, MO 63122-7295  
888-THE LCMS (843-5267) • [lcms.org](http://lcms.org)

## THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON CONFESSIONAL LUTHERAN INVOLVEMENT IN NEIGHBORHOOD RENEWAL

---

The problem of housing in America's decaying inner cities is a deeply spiritual one. Its depth is not easy to grasp without experiencing it firsthand. It is also a problem that begs to be addressed by the church (particularly local parishes) as a corporate body. In what follows, I hope to challenge the reader (particularly the reader who dares in all humility to submit to the full authority of the divine and inerrant Scriptures, and who dares in this day of doctrinal nihilism and relativism, to confess an unvarnished "*quia*" subscription to the Lutheran confessions), to reconsider the church's role in the life of the inner city. I am fully convinced that these very Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions propel the church as Church headlong into the chaotic exigencies of city life, and this precisely for the sake of the Gospel, and thus to give the devil the boot.

In what follows I will provide a description of my own experience of the church's involvement in neighborhood renewal. I shall also do my best to put this experience within a theological framework. The reader will be the judge of just how successful that effort may or may not be. Though I will refer to these experiences and impressions in the first person, I want to state up front that there were many other dedicated people involved in the particular housing effort of which I was a part. Without them, the project would not have existed, succeeded nor continued to succeed as it has.

I was dragged into the issue of neighborhood renewal quite by surprise. I don't recall one particular moment early in my pastorate at Zion Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana's most troubled neighborhood, where I decided that Zion must attempt

to make a positive impact in the physical neighborhood about it. (That neighborhood is part of the poorest census tract in the State of Indiana.) But I do recall early on becoming completely aware that the struggle of space, of housing, of livability, of functioning community and neighborhood was above all a deeply spiritual issue. For the Gospel does not prosper in chaos. The devil loves chaos. The triune God's first recorded creative act was to bring material existence into being, and to create order and beauty out of what was formless and void. The collects, which plead for peace and order in the world that the Gospel might prosper, became particularly meaningful. There were some forty dilapidated, vacant homes and commercial buildings within a two-block radius of the church. And that material decay represented much more than mere economic or physical malaise. Those buildings represented lives, lives without plans; people living from moment to moment; owners not investing in community, in continuity; renters burdened and buffeted by aimlessness, the struggle to survive; and in the worst cases, lives in the grip of chaos.

I vividly recall requesting permission from Zion's church council to begin purchasing properties. "We have no money to do this, but I would like permission from this body to begin buying properties in this neighborhood." Quizzical expressions gave way to humorous resignation (What's to lose?) as I unveiled a plan to approach donors outside the congregation for assistance in purchasing the properties. I had worked out an agreement with a local Neighbor Works Corporation (a not-for-profit housing entity) to hold title to the properties, which would later be disbursed and traded to the best ends between that very not-for-profit, Zion Lutheran and St. Peter's Catholic Church (the third partner in our triumvirate of neighborhood "hellrazers").

## WHERE SIN IS ALL IN ALL

And it really was a matter of “raising hell.” Over the next few years I (and the neighboring Roman Catholic priest, John Delaney, and later his successor, Phil Widmann) managed to crawl over the entire neighborhood (and in my case, through every single building) to assess value, find owners, then cajole the city to condemn or demolish. The first demolition was a particularly notorious “crack house” across the street from St. Peter’s Catholic Church. The buildings of this once clean-cut, working class German neighborhood had, over time, been rented to death. Owners, mostly white (but often black), invariably from outside the neighborhood, acquired the properties over time, hacked larger homes into three-, four-, and five-plex apartments, and proceeded to extract rental dollars from the community while allowing the homes to disintegrate. Once a roof failed to be repaired, financial usefulness was soon over. Then came tax dereliction and abandonment. Addicts would cut out the copper piping to be sold to support the habit. Unoccupied homes would be broken into, scavenged (not infrequently by “reputable” sellers of antique accoutrements) and left open to the wind and rain. These homes were occupied intermittently by vagrants — most often the mentally ill, prostitutes, addicts, and others.

A particularly poignant, yet far from uncommon scene on the second floor of one home remains in my mind. There lay a few old couch cushions with a baseball bat on the floor at the side. I remember particularly one home, where a squatter, obviously suffering mental illness had lived. All rooms were literally filled, sometimes to four - and five-feet deep, with objects from charities for the poor. Used toys, mounds of clothing, kitchen utensils, blankets, Bibles, literature from the Jehovah’s Witnesses, pornography, drug paraphernalia, human excrement, all combined with the rotting building to make what became for me a most familiar stench. Oh, yes, and rats.

On the block north of Zion Lutheran we had, with the greatest difficulty, acquired the last of several homes to be demolished. As they went down and basements were filled in one by one, the rats made their way through the sewer system to the half-vacant Roman Catholic school building across the street. The church janitor recounted that when he opened a door to a sub-basement compartment of the school, “The rats parted like a herd of buffalo.” The exterminators arrived and the next day the rodents were carried out by the five-gallon buckets full. Despite chasing these vermin off Lutheran territory and off to Rome, we were never accused of a lack of ecumenical spirit! Cooperatio in exter-MIN-is!

### SEEING IS BELIEVING?

Luther tells us in the *Smalcald Articles* that “hereditary sin is so deep a corruption of nature that reason cannot understand it. It must be believed because of the revelation in the Scriptures” (SA III.I.3). But these experiences were the closest I had come to seeing what must be believed. No socialist, no liberal ideology, no mere “systemic” evil, no hyper-individualist conservative palaver could explain the reality and totality of sin’s effects upon a community. Sin was in all and through all. The addict suffered mental illness and addiction because of the horrendous sinfulness of a hopeless family situation, which produced the ultimate *curvatus in se* individual. The myopia of the beggar who would one moment spout, with utter apparent conviction, Bible verse after verse and profess Jesus, only to steal any merchandise left unguarded, bore witness to individual sin run amuck. There were always two-bit, would-be inner city land “tycoons” who inevitably refused to sell a vacant, horrendously dilapidated property merely because someone wanted to buy it, only to hold out with interminable and utterly un-civic-minded consciousness in order to pocket a few extra bucks. There were suburban whites who (racist views perceptible or nearly so) would shun any involvement with “that church,” “those people” or “that neighborhood.” And there were neighborhood

blacks that would have nothing to do with a white pastor trying to bring good things to their very neighborhood. City bureaucrats genuinely wanted renewal, yet always wanted much more than what was reasonable for the penny-ante commitments made.

The system allowed black neighborhoods to go to hell (literally), allowing dilapidation, dereliction and atrocity to persist year after maddening year, which, if occurring in a suburban neighborhood, would be dealt with in a matter of days or even hours. One particularly difficult property remained vacant, windows and doors open, throughout my entire five-plus year pastorate, only to be brought down months after my departure. I viewed it as my “thorn in the flesh” in Pauline terms. It was the very home I beheld when I came to believe such a reality was in fact insane — and I was not, for wanting to do something about it. I had heard suburbanites and others with no understanding of the complexities of the situation, and most often harboring deep-seated resentment and racist views, say, “You’re crazy, pastor. Those people will destroy anything they get.” No. I stood on the sidewalk in front of that house and nearly shouted, “I’m NOT crazy! That is crazy!” I called code enforcement to complain about the building. “Are the windows broken out on the ground level, or only on the upper level? If they are open only on the upper level, we can’t do anything about it.” “That’s crazy!” I verily shouted to the poor woman over the phone. THAT was crazy! Not me. Such insanity produced residents unwilling to commit — numbed into civic inaction by years of neighborhood neglect — seeing racism behind every bush, and verily driving well-meaning white city officials, initially intent on bringing initiatives for improvement, running for the safety of the (white) suburban hills.

In short, sin brings sin, and chaos. Chaos feeds on and perpetuates sin on all sides. But then there is Christ. And where Christ is, there is the church (*Ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia!* — Ignatius).

And where Christ and His church are, there is mercy, life, light, love and determination.<sup>1</sup>

### MERE PRAGMA?

There is a pragmatic argument for the church involving itself in neighborhood renewal. I won't spend much time on it because we know well that pragmatism is in the very air Americans breathe, and quite often the same pragmatism is the enemy of New Testament truth. Pragmatism finds a willing bedfellow in the *theologia gloriae* (more later on the *theologia crucis* and an inner city parish). That is not to say a church involved in housing must not be pragmatic! Quite the opposite! But I know full well the pragmatic argument cannot carry the day in our attempt to provide a *theological rationale* for the church's participation in neighborhood renewal. As a result of Zion's participation in its neighborhood, numerous positive developments occurred and continue to occur. Forty dilapidated buildings were brought down. Some 25 new homes (from 1,200 to 2,400 sq. ft.) have been or are scheduled to be constructed — all for home ownership (the ONLY hope for neighborhoods literally rented to death and plagued by public housing efforts of past decades). The Allen County Public Library will soon break ground on a new African-American emphasis library branch, across the street from Zion. Next door, the Urban League will soon break ground for a new headquarters, which will boast marvelous educational facilities for youth, job training and the elderly. Both facilities will occupy property I acquired on behalf of Zion. The once rat-infested Roman Catholic school building has been acquired by a firm which is investing \$9 million in order to turn the facility into

---

<sup>1</sup> The words Ignatius (d. 112 A.D.) wrote to Polycarp regarding doctrinal faithfulness may also be applied to the persistence of love of the Christian in the midst of the most challenging of life's circumstances: "Stand firm as an anvil which is smitten. The task of great athletes is to suffer punishment and yet conquer. But especially must we endure all things for the sake of God, that he also may endure us" (III.1). Ignatius proceeds immediately to link diakonic love to right doctrine: "Let not the widows be neglected..." (IV.1). *The Apostolic Fathers*, Loeb Classical Library vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 273.



senior apartments. Meanwhile, Zion Lutheran will break ground in spring 2003 on a \$2 million parish hall, to replace a much smaller administration building. The new structure will match the graceful gothic lines of the magnificent old German Gothic church.

(A parish might do any number of theologically questionable things in the name of “outreach” after all.) Confessional Lutherans need solid theological rationale for such activity. For finally all these results (including new member acquisition) might have been accomplished by any other secular or non-secular institution in similar circumstances, doing something “positive” in the city.

#### A LUTHERAN PARISH WITH SOUL SO THAT SOULS DO NOT PERISH

A confessionally Lutheran parish will not sell its soul to improve its neighborhood. *What profit a Lutheran parish if it gains the whole neighborhood but loses its soul?* The soul of the Lutheran parish is Christ. The presence of Christ in a parish’s life is outwardly evident in what the Lutheran Confessions repeatedly describe as “marks” of the church: “... that is, Word, confession and sacraments” (*Ap. VII&VIII.3 et passim*). While the “who” of the church on the subjective side is hidden (membership in the church is a matter of faith in Christ, which is a reality unseen), the “where” is evident and knowable. There are an altar, pulpit and font at Hanna and Creighton Streets in Fort Wayne (which also happened for many years to be the demographic “bull’s eye” of crime, drugs, murder and poverty in Fort Wayne). For faith is engendered by and gathered about Christ, that is, in “the pure teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the Gospel of Christ” (*Ap. VII&VIII.5*). Helpful in recognizing the priorities of a Lutheran parish’s life and mission is the order of the *Augsburg Confession*: 1. God; 2. Sin (man’s dilemma); 3. Christ (God’s solution for the dilemma); 4. Justification by Grace through Faith; 5. The Office of the Ministry (as delivery of Gospel and Sacraments, i.e., the application of justification!); 6. Good Works.

Thus the priority of the Lutheran parish remains perennial in applying the divine remedy for sin — the Gospel preached and the Sacraments dispensed — and this done by the office given to deliver precisely these gifts. “. . . for we know that our confession is true, godly and catholic. We know that the church is present among those who rightly teach the Word of God and rightly administer the sacraments” (*Ap.* XIV.3f). It is precisely for the sake of the Gospel surety that the Lutheran Confessions limit the public administration of the Gospel and Sacraments to those men legitimately called and ordained (*CA* XIV, *Ap.* XIV.1), who act in Christ’s stead at the behest of the church. “They do not represent their own persons but the person of Christ, because of the church’s call, as Christ testifies (**LUKE 10:16**), “The one who hears you hears me”” (*Ap.* VII/VIII.28). All this clearly sets the emphasis for the office of the ministry as well. The chief and essential functions of that office dare not be set aside while the pastor becomes a junior developer. The general New Testament and confessionally Lutheran freedom in structuring “external” or non-essential tasks performed by those in the office of the ministry is quite helpful here. For as strong as the Lutheran Confessions are in emphasizing the “marks” as the central reality of the church’s life, and the office of the ministry’s responsibility for the administration of the marks, they do bear witness to churchly tasks also beyond the administration of these “marks.” The church’s role in diakonic (addressing physical need!) tasks is precisely in view here.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> C.F.W. Walther quotes Chemnitz at some length, where the latter states that the issue of diakonic work (alms) was from the beginning a part of the office of the apostle (thus the office of the ministry). Chemnitz asserts that the earliest church instituted “grades and orders of the ministry of the Word” so that the greatest service be rendered the church. Johan Gerhard lists among the tasks of the office also the *cura paupertatis* or care of the poor. See Ioannis Gerhardt, *Locorum Theologicorum Tomus Decimus Tertius* Locus XXIV, Caput VI, Sect. II (Tuebingen: Cottae, MDCLXXV), 114–15.

## ALMS FOR THE POOR — THE CHURCH'S CORPORATE LIFE OF MERCY!

At first glance it may seem as though the Lutheran Confessions do not acknowledge a “corporate life of mercy” of the church. Much, nay, nearly all of the fodder of theological dialogue regarding works, alms, etc., is directed only at the individual Christian (for instance, *Augsburg Confession* Article VI on Good Works).<sup>3</sup> *Augustana* VII finds the unity of the church in precisely the Gospel and Sacraments and nothing else. Confessional Lutherans, of course, interpret this “gospel” in terms of the full dogmatic content of the gospel as explicated in the articles of the Formula of Concord. There is no “gospel reductionism” here, nor is the gospel reduced to any “nutshell.” “We believe, teach and confess the word ‘Gospel’ means the entire doctrine of Christ which He proclaimed personally in his teaching ministry and which his apostles also set forth ...” (*Ep.* V.6). It is common (since the Prussian Union of 1817!) to describe Lutheranism as a “confessing movement” within the church catholic, but as often as it is used, this description gets confessional Lutheranism wrong. First, such a definition tends to suffer the affliction of a theology of glory, prone to overlook doctrinal truth in order to “see” the church’s unity, rather than to believe its unity, though hidden by division and error (which requires public separation precisely for the preservation of the “full” and sacramental Gospel!)<sup>4</sup> It also overlooks the fact that the Lutheran Confessions view the church of the Lutheran confession as “church,” and moreover, the best expression of the church catholic<sup>5</sup> (while freely and liberally recognizing that the church is found wherever the Gospel and sacraments are found).<sup>6</sup> Confessional Lutheranism is to find its expression in confessionally Lutheran churches, not in movements. Such a self-definition has

---

<sup>3</sup> *Ap.* IV.353 *et passim*.

<sup>4</sup> S.D. VII.33.

<sup>5</sup> *Ap.* 2:51; *Ap.* 7/8.10; *Ap.* XIV.3.

<sup>6</sup> See the Preface to the *Book of Concord* (Tappert), 11.

been and continues to be promoted by moderating Lutherans who have ceased to insist on the clear dogmatic definitions (and church dividing boundaries!) of the *Formula of Concord*, or of the *Augustana*, for that matter. But back to the issue at hand.

The Lutheran Confessions, at several points, bear evident witness to the fact that confessional Lutheranism continued and should continue the church's corporate life of mercy. From the following texts, I maintain, it is clear that the Lutheran Confessions recognize the corporate churchly responsibility of addressing diakonic need. Notable are the following passages (underlining added for emphasis):

*“Consequently the church cannot be better governed and maintained than by having all of us live under one head, Christ, and by having all the bishops equal in office (however they may differ in gifts) and diligently joined together in unity of doctrine, faith, sacraments, prayer, works of love (operum caritatis; Werken der Liebe), etc.”* (SA II.IV.9).

*“We feel the same way about every work done in the most humble occupation and in private life. Through these works Christ shows his victory over the devil, just as the distribution of alms by the Corinthians was a holy work (1 Cor. 16:1) [and also a corporate work of mercy in Corinthians! M.H.], a sacrifice, and a battle of Christ against the devil, who is determined that nothing happen to the praise of God. To disparage works like the confession of doctrine, afflictions, works of charity [officia caritatis], and the mortification of the flesh would be to disparage the outward administration of Christ's rule among men”* (Ap. IV.192f).

*“Though once upon a time they were schools of Christian instruction, they have degenerated as from a golden age to an iron age, or as the Platonic cube degenerates into*

*bad harmonies which, Plato says, cause destruction. Some of the richest monasteries just feed a lazy crowd that gorges itself on the public alms of the church*” (Ap. XXVII.5ff).

“... *the churches should not recognize them as bishops. They themselves should remember that riches have been given to bishops as alms for the administration and profit of the churches, as the rule states, ‘The benefice is given because of the office.’ Wherefore they cannot possess these alms with a good conscience. Meanwhile they defraud the church, which needs these means for support of ministers, the promotion of education, the care of the poor, and the establishment of courts, especially courts for matrimonial cases. ... Peter predicted that there would be wicked bishops in the future who would consume the alms of the churches for luxuries and would neglect the ministry. Let those who defraud the church know that God will require them to pay for their crime*” (Tr. 80–82).

These texts clearly recognize and assume that the church’s life of mercy (i.e. public alms) is a normal, corporate reality of its life, and this quite aside from the nature of church/state relationships of the 16th century. Where the confessions speak negatively of “poverty” and the system long established to provide for the “impoverished,” in view is the vow of the medieval monk (poverty, chastity, obedience; See Ap. XXVII Monastic Vows). According to Medieval Roman theology, self-assumed poverty was beneficial unto the meriting of salvation for the one who assumed such “self-chosen” works, and beneficial unto salvation for the Christian who provided alms for such individuals.<sup>7</sup> This medieval preferential option for the poor was decidedly rejected by the Reformation.

---

<sup>7</sup> See Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

Luther, in no uncertain terms, condemned such self-chosen poverty as an affront to the Gospel of Christ. For the poverty desired by Christ was precisely a spiritual poverty, i.e. repentance.<sup>8</sup> Luther also treated the topic at length. He asserted that poverty in and of itself certainly left one no more or less holy. The truth of this reality is quickly evident to anyone who has worked on the street in America's inner cities. Luther in fact viewed the maladies common to today's inner cities as the rule of the devil's kingdom:

*“... this petition [but deliver us from evil] includes all the evil that may befall us under the devil's kingdom: poverty, shame, death and, in short, all the tragic misery and heartache of which there is so incalculably much on earth. Since the devil is not only a liar but also a murderer, he constantly seeks our life and vents his anger by causing accidents and injury to our bodies. He breaks many a man's neck and drives others to insanity; some he drowns, and many he hounds to suicide or other dreadful catastrophes. Therefore there is nothing for us to do on earth but to pray constantly against this arch-enemy. For if God did not support us, we would not be safe from him for a single hour” (LC. Lord's Prayer, 115).*

The Lutheran Confessions, then, do in fact recognize and even suppose the church's corporate life of diakonic mercy, though the details of that *diakonia* are not expounded at length. The tradition of the “common chest” administered by the church was dealt with by Luther at length for the Christians at Leisnig.<sup>9</sup> This tradition persisted as is evidenced by the “church orders” of the Reformation and Post-Reformation periods.<sup>10</sup> These expressions of diakonic mercy are completely in accord with the Lutheran Confessions.

---

<sup>8</sup> “The abandonment of property is neither commanded nor advised in the Scriptures. The poverty of the Gospel (Matt. 5:3) does not consist in the abandonment of property, but in the absence of greed and of trust in riches. Thus David was poor in a very rich kingdom” (*Ap.* XXVII.46).

<sup>9</sup> “Ordinance of a Common Chest,” in *Luther's Works* vol. 45 (St. Louis: CPH) 169ff.

<sup>10</sup> Lindberg, *op. cit.*, 128.

## HOUSING AS *DIAKONIA* IN THE AMERICAN INNER CITY

At the end of the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, the Lutheran Confessions acknowledge and accept the church's corporate role of mercy. This text also clearly indicates something of the situational diversity of *diakonia*. While the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments forever remain the church's heart and soul, chief gift and task, the church remains diakonically engaged in love in a way that coincides with its ever-changing contemporary context.

“They [false bishops] defraud the church, which needs these means for the support of ministers, the promotion of education, the care of the poor, and the establishment of courts, especially courts for matrimonial cases. . . . Peter predicted that there would be wicked bishops in the future who would consume the alms of the churches for luxuries and would neglect the ministry” [*elemosynis ecclesiarm abutantur ad luxum neglecto ministerio; Almosen zu ihrem Wohlust prauchen und das Ampt verlassen*] (Tr. 80–82).

Hermann Sasse many years ago described this churchly, diakonic flexibility as something not of the essence of the church's being but nevertheless as something essential to the church's life:

*There have been times when the church took care of the entire educational system and when the ecclesiastical deaconate helped preserve society. There were times when the church retreated from these spheres or when state and church encountered each other and therefore a legal regulation of the relationship was necessary. . . . There are indeed essential functions, which remain those of the church, namely, the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. But the church also exercises accidental functions. Among these are the fulfillment of organizational tasks in the area of the formation of laws and the domestic side of ecclesiastical life (diakonate or the maintenance of the ecclesiastical*

*organization) of which we have spoken. The church would also remain church if it finally did not exercise these functions, although their continuing neglect would finally destroy the church because it is at once a spiritual-corporal organization.<sup>11</sup>*

It is precisely here in my opinion, that the realm of neighborhood renewal/housing fits in confessional Lutheran theology. The church has a corporate life of mercy.<sup>12</sup> This life of mercy is not a constituting reality of its life, it is rather a constituent reality of life. The marks of the church (Christ!) guarantee the church's presence and life. What Luther stated about the individual can well be applied to the church as a whole: "There is a beautiful agreement between faith and good works; nevertheless, it is faith alone which apprehends the blessing without works. And yet faith is at no time ever alone" (S.D. III. 41). Luther speaks in corporate terms, touching on concern for the needs of people as a natural consequence of the Gospel:

*"... for by God's grace our churches have now been so enlightened and supplied with the pure Word, the right use of the sacrament, with an understand of the various callings of life, and with true works, that we do not ask for a council for our own sake, and we have no reason to hope or expect that a council would improve our conditions. But in the dioceses of the papists we see so many vacant and desolate parishes everywhere that our hearts would break with grief. Yet neither the bishops nor the canons care how the poor people live or die, although Christ died for them too" (SA Preface, 10–11).*

---

<sup>11</sup> Hermann Sasse, "Church Government and Secular Authority" in *The Lonely Way, Selected Essays and Letters*, Volume 1 (1927–1939), translated by Matthew C. Harrison et alia, 226–27.

<sup>12</sup> For a much fuller biblical treatment of this point see Matthew Harrison, "The Church's Role of Mercy in the Community" in *Lutheran Forum* (Christmas/Winter 2002), 12ff.



## ISN'T HOUSING A CIVIL ISSUE?

Two institutions remained in the Hanna/Creighton neighborhood: A liquor store and the church(es). All others (groceries, drug stores, furniture store, hardware store, etc.) were gone. So it is in the chaos. The devil is not happy until he has successfully destroyed all institutions and all order and replaced them with chaos. Meanwhile, institutions of chaos thrive. I heartily defend, with full Lutheran gusto, the freedom of the Christian to make sanctified use of alcohol. However, the liquor store, which remains in the neighborhood, is of duplicitous ethical value. Its clientele is made up of an intolerably high number of addicts. When government checks are delivered on the first of the month, business booms. When a “bootleg” house (selling alcohol illegally and on weekends to addicts) was finally condemned and demolished, the store took a financial hit. The home (a constant focal point of drugs — I witnessed cocaine sold openly at this residence) was the perennial hangout for the most severely mentally ill and addicted (often one and the same). I regularly met and “conversed” with individuals who could do little more than ramble in disconnected syllables of gibberish. The home was of course also a focal point of crime, theft, sexual misconduct, etc. Most crime in the neighborhood occurred en route to or from the “burn barrel” constantly alight in the rear of the home.

I spent nearly six years trying to get rid of this home and its negative activity. The owner did not live at the address and was making money from the nefarious activity. The police were disinclined to deal with the property (the elimination of vagrancy laws and the closing of state institutions has left police with little ammunition for dealing with such venues). When I informed the police (stationed only a few blocks away) of the illegal nature of the weekend business at this residence, I was directed to the State Excise Agency. Why? The Fort Wayne Vice Squad did not maintain weekend hours. The State Excise Agency had jurisdiction over illegal alcohol matters, but their office was in Indianapolis, and

they would have to get a black agent to do overtime on the weekend to go undercover on location in order to document and prosecute the activity. Dead end. All the while I was stopping by the “barrel” at regular intervals, offering assistance to anyone who might be ready to go a different direction in life. “When you want to get serious about your alcoholism and go a different direction, you come up the hill to that church up there and see me. I’ll help you. Jesus has something better in store for your life than this.” That comment was often met by the angriest derision I experienced at any time of my ministry.

I went back to my friend Gary at Fort Wayne City Code Enforcement. By the time I had left the parish I knew Gary, his shoe size, the name of his wife and children, grandkids’ names, etc. (not really, but nearly so!). Gary — a gem of a human being — was one of those innumerable mid-level, non-political city bureaucrats who actually got things done, and on a shoestring, while being yanked around by the politicians. “Pastor Harrison, just tell me what buildings you want down and I’ll do my best to get them on the next bid package.” He would hire contractors to take down five or 10 or 20 derelict homes at a time. After six years of incessant negative activity, finally the home was condemned, and demolished — but only after my work there was done. The “burn barrel” as I disaffectionally called the residence, was *theologia crucis*, my “thorn in the flesh to keep me from becoming elated.”

Imagine what having that residence and liquor store within a block or two did to property values, neighborhood morale, confidence, quality, etc. Imagine the harm to all those lives, those children who grew up in proximity. Had Zion Lutheran any role in dealing with that particular problem, or for that matter the broader neighborhood ills? Obviously, my answer was and is, “yes.” But how does this fit with the doctrine of the two kingdoms?

**DEMANDING ACCOUNTABILITY IS TO  
“HOLD THE CIVIL REALM IN HONOR.”**

Confessional Lutheranism asserts a doctrine of the “two kingdoms,” i.e. church and state. Each has its unique sphere of concern. Obviously the state — for numerous and complex reasons (race, racism, economics and many other socio-cultural factors) — is completely derelict and AWOL in broad stretches of most of America’s inner cities. I would like to dare to assert that it was proper for Zion Lutheran Church, often through its senior pastor, to step out into the “civil realm” for both civil *and* religious ends, for several reasons.

The Lutheran Confessions are most concerned that the two kingdoms not be “mixed.” Just as the Christian individual lives in two kingdoms simultaneously, so does a Lutheran parish. This is merely to acknowledge reality as God has established these realms, and to give honor to both realms. As the sole, or one of the strongest corporate “citizens” left in an inner city, the confessional Lutheran parish has a particular burden to lead in good citizenship. That does not in the least imply a mixing of the kingdoms, any more than a Christian individual might bear witness to Christ in the course of his/her professional vocation necessarily confounds the kingdoms (though that certainly may occur).

*“Therefore, the two authorities, the spiritual and the temporal, are not to be mingled or confused, for the spiritual power has its commission to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments. Hence it should not invade the function of the other, should not set up and depose kings, should not annul temporal laws or undermine obedience to government, should not make or prescribe to the temporal power laws concerning worldly matters ... Thus our teachers distinguish the two authorities and the functions of the two powers, directing that both be held in honor as the highest gifts of God on earth” (CA XXVIII.10ff).*

By participating in neighborhood renewal, a confessional Lutheran parish is not *eo ipso* confusing the kingdoms, any more than a citizen who attends church on Sunday or a Christian who votes. The Lutheran Confessions assert repeatedly that the civil realm is ordained by God, and participation in the civil realm by Christians is pleasing. It would be confusing the kingdoms if a Lutheran parish asserted that all who wanted to be good Christians must purchase property, or sell property, or participate in the assembly of some sort of “Christian” kingdom in the inner city, subject to the Bible and not civil government. While the church, through the office of the ministry (CA XXIII.9), preaches the Gospel and administers the sacraments, it also participates corporately in the civil realm, and is thus — quite literally — a corporate citizen of its community. Thus the legal name of Zion Lutheran Church is Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession ... INC! Incorporated! A legal body!

By participating in neighborhood renewal a Lutheran parish is merely serving God in the kingdom of the left. In reality, this is little different from a parish keeping proper legal records, filing wage records with the government, adhering to legalities having to do with property, fire codes, fencing, building codes, etc. “It is legitimate for Christians to use civil ordinances just as it is legitimate for them to use the air, light, food and drink” (Ap. VIII.50). Where government is derelict in any such duties, it is the sacred and God-given right, privilege and task of a Lutheran parish to raise the issue with Government and to begin to require, even demand accountability. In fact, denial of a Lutheran parish’s right and responsibility to participate to the full extent possible in neighborhood renewal is to fundamentally deny the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms: “a Christian may legitimately make use of civil ordinances and laws. This rule safeguards consciences, for it teaches that if contracts have the approval of magistrates or of laws, they are legitimate in the sight to God as well” (XVI.12).

Insisting that the local government provides for the basic legally appropriate services required for a decent, safe and peaceable life is to honor God's work in the kingdom of the left. Where the law is not being followed in a community about the church, it is the God-given responsibility of the church as a citizen of its community to insist on compliance. In such communities, the parish takes up a role of "chief citizen."

Over against the neighbor, the church has the right and responsibility to insist on the protection of the rights of citizens, equal treatment under the law, etc. In short, love compels the parish to step up to its responsibilities of citizenship. Much is required of those to whom much is given. In the case of derelict neighborhoods, the church remains one of the only citizens capable of major influence of public and private entities beyond the immediate community.

But is this then to leave the realm of diakonic care for the poor? No. Activities may and must be distinguished and defined. The action of a parish to become a leading citizen in neighborhood renewal, operating for decent and civil ends in the civil realm for the increase of civil righteousness (even done in cooperation with other citizens and entities, Christian or not, seeking similar ends) — insofar as it is action taken on behalf of the poor, the impoverished, the destitute and hopeless, is a diakonic task, tied as closely as possible with the church's worship life and proclamation of the Gospel. Often the destitute, the immigrant and the elderly do not have access to human services. The church often reaches out to such people, offering assistance, including the service of getting such individuals connected to available, legal and helpful government-funded social services, and services aimed at self-sufficiency and self-reliance. The service is provided while bearing clear witness to Christ. Is this a mixing of the kingdoms? Certainly not. It is loving the neighbor and helping the neighbor access the system for maximum benefit.

Another very concrete example of the church working with and within the realm of the state comes to mind. When elderly “Veterans of the Cross,” retired church workers (or their spouses) who are destitute, come to the attention of LCMS World Relief and Human Care, and Worker Benefit Plans, such individuals are first helped to make sure they are accessing local government human services to which they are legally entitled. Where need still exceeds income, church resources are provided to make up the difference. The one church works in the “two kingdoms.”

I suggest we would do well to note that the Lutheran two kingdoms doctrine is not the exact equivalent of “the separation of church and state” as has been defined in America by secularizing 20th century court decisions. In response to the pendulum swing of the ’60s in which the Gospel was redefined by some in political terms, and when it became popular in some circles to confound law and Gospel by asserting that “building houses is the gospel,”<sup>13</sup> a significant portion of the LCMS simply abandoned the social ministry playing field. To assert that something like neighborhood renewal or the construction of homes for the working poor should not be a concern of the church is a flat-out denial, not only of Christian love, but of the church’s life of *diakonia* for those in need, and in actuality a less than subtle denial of the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, which does not call upon the church to separate from the kingdom of the left, but to participate in it, not making laws or enforcing them, but cajoling the state to take up its God-ordained role. Doing so, the church serves a role in inner city chaos as “chief citizen” of the community.

#### THE ECUMENICAL CHALLENGE

One memorable day I was having a chat about the progress of the project with my very good friend, Roman Catholic priest John Delaney, who was pastor of our neighboring Roman Catholic Church.

---

<sup>13</sup> This proposition has been defended in my presence in the recent past.

*“My, your predecessor was conservative. He wouldn’t even do a joint wedding with me!”*

*I smiled. “Well, John, you know that’s basically LCMS canon law.” (I wasn’t disparaging the LCMS practice of not having joint worship, but trying to put the matter in terms he could understand.) But then I proceeded.*

*“John, you don’t really think I’m a ‘priest’ do you?” (As a faithful priest he confesses that ordinations without the alleged apostolic succession are invalid.)*

*“Well... no,” he said.*

*“John, you don’t really believe that when I absolve my people, that is a real priestly absolution, do you?”*

*Answer, “Well. No, ah.”*

*I continued, “John, when I consecrate the elements on the altar of Zion Lutheran, you don’t really believe that I distribute Christ’s body and blood to my people, do you?”*

*He replied again, “Well, no, Matt, but I believe Christ is spiritually present among you.”*

*Said I, “John, you deny everything from which I and my people live. How can I possibly stand before my people and conduct a service with you?”<sup>14</sup>*

I made my point. Our friendship and our working arrangement flourished.

Hermann Sasse, convinced Lutheran and dedicated ecumenist, often stated that there is more true unity of the Holy Spirit where Christians of differing confession are actually honest about their

---

<sup>14</sup> Note for instance the following from the Roman Catholic *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Ecclesial communities derived from the Reformation and separated from the Catholic Church, have not preserved the proper reality of the Eucharistic mystery in its fullness, especially because of the absence of the sacrament of orders...” *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Citta del Vaticano, 1997), 353.

differences than where differences are swept under the rug and ignored. He's correct.

Fresh from the seminary as a young pastor, I was insecure about many things. Who wouldn't be? Such insecurity can result in one of two unfortunate directions. A graduate may become exceedingly rigid, trying to cope with the numerous challenging circumstances one faces as a young pastor. Or, he may compromise the faith beyond the bounds of clear Lutheran confession. What helped me (in addition to the wise advice of an older, trusted circuit counselor) was the habit of translating the writings of Hermann Sasse every morning for an hour or so. Sasse was a true confessional Lutheran, absolutely committed to the doctrine and practice of orthodox Lutheranism, also that there should be no jointly led worship where there is no agreement on the Gospel and all its articles. And yet Sasse was thoroughly engaged in ecumenical contact and discussion. I decided early on to venture out to begin to get to know area clergy. I would stop by neighboring churches as I passed, and find the clergyman (or woman!) and sit down for a chat. I quickly discovered something. Coming through our LCMS seminary system, I had an education far superior to almost everyone with whom I had contact.

That early experience was important for what came next. Because of the neighborhood project, I was asked by Indiana District President Timothy Simms (eager, I think, to keep a “young Turk” busy and out of trouble!) to represent him on the Lutheran/Catholic Dialogue with the Fort Wayne/South Bend Indiana Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church. And I grew in surprising ways. I clearly recognized the many doctrinal problems of Rome, especially the synergism and lack of clarity on law and Gospel. But I also rejoiced when I heard the Gospel clearly enunciated as pure gift. And I did hear it, not as much as I would have preferred, but I did hear it. I did rejoice that there the text of the Holy Scriptures was read, there a real baptism claimed



children for Christ, and there the body and blood of Jesus were distributed to sinners. With Wilhelm Loehe I spoke a clear, tactful, respectful “No” to what was not true, but a clear, resounding “Yes” to everything that was true, no matter who said it or on which side. And I grew as a confessional Lutheran. Being in ecumenical dialogue forced me to understand who I was and answer the question, “Why?” I laid out just these contours regarding the nature of ecumenical dialogue at one area clergy meeting. The Roman Catholic Bishop (D’Arcy) leaned over to me afterward and said, “That is exactly my view on these matters. Would you write something up for our Diocese newspaper?” Of course, I was happy to do so.

In 1998 the then chief ecumenical officer of the Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Cassidy, was to visit Fort Wayne. It was the LCMS’s turn to host the meeting. The issue of worship arose, the committee knowing full well and respecting our position on this matter (people of conviction respect people of conviction). The suggestion was made that perhaps we could switch venues away from the LCMS to accommodate us. However, I suggested that we make the most of this ecumenical encounter. We would have it at the seminary, have a full dialogue on issues between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, invite the area clergy of the three communions (Rome, Missouri, ELCA) and end the event with a service of vespers in the seminary chapel. Per Missouri custom, my parish hosted the service, and I was the sole liturgist. We prayed for unity and humility in truth. I checked with both my district president and the LCMS president before proceeding. Later correspondence with Bishop D’Arcy and personal discussion with the Cardinal revealed that they were both very happy to accommodate us, not wanting us in any way to act against conviction. I knew full well this would be their response, for I had read the papal encyclicals of John Paul II on ecumenism and dialogue.<sup>15</sup> Here there is much said with which Lutherans

---

<sup>15</sup> See for instance *Ut Unum Sint* [That they may be one] in *The Encyclicals of John Paul II*, Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor (1996), 895ff.

will disagree, but there is also a great deal said about truth and doctrine which is true.

When working at neighborhood renewal, it is necessary to bring as many players to the table as possible. Having the Roman Catholics involved is tremendously beneficial. There are many faithful Roman Catholics in all areas of the private and public spheres of city life. When this type of “cooperation in externals” begins (cooperation working together in areas other than Word and Sacrament), it is necessary to be clear and kind about expectations. It is also necessary for confessional Lutherans to be true to their public commitments to Scripture, Confessions and each other. For if we lose our fidelity and integrity, if we sacrifice the clear teaching of Holy Scripture, our efforts in the community may well be for naught, that is, of no finally lasting, even eternal significance. I very much enjoyed working with Rome. For they were willing to allow me to be Lutheran, and they allowed me to be honest to them and myself. For that I am forever grateful.

#### **CRUCE CHRISTI NOSTRA CORONA EST!**

Being part of an effort to bring about significant change in a very small and otherwise insignificant part of the world was the most invigorating and also the most maddening task I ever attempted. I began using a metaphor to pastoral work in the city: “Serve in the inner city and you will soon have the ‘glory’ beat out of you!” The issue of housing is enormously complex. It touches on all aspects of socio-cultural reality. As one progresses along the path, trying to make a difference, there are so many failures and disappointments that one is driven repeatedly to the cross. I was and am proud of our very fine accomplishments, but finally, it was all God’s grace. I was put in the right place at the right time. The parish was ready. The neighborhood was ready. The partners were ready. That moment does not exist for all LCMS parishes. In the midst of all the challenges, I found the greatest solace and consolation in the very gifts I had been called to distribute from

Zion's altar, font and pulpit. Far greater than anything which occurred in that limited neighborhood project was the reality of sinners, black, white, rich, poor, receiving Christ's forgiveness Sunday after Sunday.

I pray these cogitations, personal reflections, and theological thoughts will be a blessing to those who stumble across them. I've learned much since my days at Zion, especially about the process of organizing larger housing efforts, community organization, federal funding, etc. And via my current vocation, I've been privileged to be involved with much larger projects. But I have never felt more intensely the honor and privilege to serve Christ and His people than when I stood before His saints to give His gifts on Sunday, and then ventured out during the week as a representative of Zion, and of Christ and of confessional Lutheranism, to make a difference in one community, opening doors for the Gospel, bringing light to darkness and order to chaos, that the Gospel might flourish.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

---

1. What is meant by the phrase “church as Church?”
2. We read, “The Gospel does not prosper in chaos. The devil loves chaos.” Can you cite personal examples to support this statement?
3. What things does the Church bring into a neighborhood, and from what source?
4. How could a parish’s improper involvement in community affairs damage the church’s ministry? Hint: review the list of priorities taken from the *Augsburg Confession*.
5. How does Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms help a congregation get involved in its community?
6. In order to work better with other churches, should we “tone down” our Lutheran identity?

## ALSO IN THIS SERIES

---

*All Become One Cake: A Sermon on the Lord's Supper* by Martin Luther

*Answering the Why Question: Martin Luther on Human Suffering and God's Mercy*  
by John T. Pless

*The Church is a Mercy Place!* by Matthew C. Harrison

*The Church's Role of Mercy in the Community* by Matthew C. Harrison

*Clergy Mental Health and the Doctrine of Justification* by Robert D. Preus

*The Contemporary Debate on Homosexual Clergy* by Armin Wenz

*Fight, Work, Pray! Luther on the Lord's Supper and Care for the Needy*  
by Martin Luther

*Löhe on Mercy: Six Chapters for Everyone, the Seventh for the Servants of Mercy*  
by Wilhelm Löhe

*Man of God: Take Heed Unto Yourself* by Bryan Salminen and David Maier

*Mercy and the Lutheran Congregation* by Theodore Julius Brohm

*Mercy from the Heart* by Oswald Bayer

*Mercy in the Early Church: The Gospel of Love and Charity* by Adolf von Harnack

*Mercy in the Old Testament* by Reed Lessing

*On Almsgiving* by Martin Chemnitz

*On the Duties of Ministers of the Church* by Johann Gerhard

*One Loving God: Two Hands—Saving and Caring* by the Commission on Theology and  
Inter-Church Relations of the Lutheran Church of Australia

*Ordinance of a Common Chest* by Martin Luther

*Sanctification and Charitable Works in Lutheran Theology* by Matthew C. Harrison

*Theology for Mercy* by Matthew C. Harrison

*Toward a Theology of Mercy, Vol. 1&2* by Peter J. Brock, Jason M. Gehrke,  
Mary Moerbe, Samuel P. Schuldeisz

*The Twelve and the Seven in Acts 6 and the Needy* by Norman Nagel

*The Vocation of Every Christian: Life in Christ as a Holy Calling*  
by Jacob A.O. Preus III

*Walther on Mercy: Selections on the Pastoral Office, the Congregation  
and the Church's Corporate Diakonic Life* by C.F.W. Walther

*What Does it Mean To Be a Lutheran in Social Ministry?*  
by Matthew C. Harrison

