

## **“The First and Highest Work of Love”**

What follows are thoughts I have accumulated over time in thinking about, reading about, and engaging in evangelism: what it is, how it should be done, how it could be best be done, how it should not be done, what is and what is not effective, what we have done or are doing that perhaps strays from sound Lutheran theology, where we have missed the boat, etc. Everything here has been shared several pastoral study groups and many individual pastors. It has been favorably received. But there may still be a number of appropriate suggestions and constructive criticisms.

### **An Evangelism Mindset**

It is important to remind ourselves and our hearers of two things: “... the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.” (Matt. 7:13). And, “God so loved the world.” In other words, we and our members need to be instructed regularly that hell is very real for our neighbor, and that Christ was given over to death for our neighbor. “Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.” (John 4:35). We need to carry this with us when we walk out the doors of the church, have coffee with our church-less parent, watch a sports game with our neighbor, or find ourselves in a conversation with a complete stranger.

I start out with a word on the Public Ministry and the Universal Priesthood. After that, I have divided this into two parts: what has hindered evangelism and what will or might help. In putting this together, I have tried to keep in mind doctrines that are directly or indirectly connected to evangelism.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Public Ministry and the Priesthood of All Believers** (see 1 Pet. 2:9)

Sometimes there is tension regarding who is to be involved in evangelism, to what degree, in which situations, and with what authority. The pastor has no choice; he is “to do the work of the evangelist” (2 Tim. 4:5). At the same time all Christians will be put in various situations and have several vocations in life where either they *can* and sometimes *should* evangelize (it may not be a matter of “if” they should communicate the gospel, but “how”). See Acts 8:1-5; Rom. 10:14-15; 2 Tim. 4:5; Luke 10:16; 1 Pet. 3:15; Col. 4:4-6.

Martin Luther has some straightforward words on evangelism and the Universal Priesthood.<sup>2</sup>

We have no other reason for living on earth than to be of help to others. If this were not the case, it would be best for God to kill us and let us die as soon as we are baptized and have begun to believe. But he permits us to live here in order that we may bring others to faith, just as he brought us. (Am Ed 30:11)

Therefore when St. Peter says here: "You are a royal priesthood," this is tantamount to saying: "You are Christians." If you want to know what kind of title and what kind of power and praise Christians have, you see here that they are kings and priests and a chosen race. But what is the priestly office? The answer follows: "That you may declare..." A priest must be God's messenger and must have a command from God to proclaim his word. You must, says Peter, exercise the chief function of a

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<sup>1</sup> The Historical Fall, Man's Depravity, The Person and Work of Christ, Justification, The Work of The Holy Spirit, The Means of Grace, Law & Gospel, The Theology of The Cross (vs. The Theology of Glory), The Priesthood of All Believers, The Public Ministry, Apologetics, The Sufficiency, Inspiration, Inerrancy, & Efficacy of The Word, Vocation, Adiaphora, Natural Knowledge of God, Natural Law, Truth. Also AC IV, V, XII, XIII, XIV, XVIII; FC II, and others.

<sup>2</sup> These quotes come from a class taught by Prof. Erling Teigen at Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary, maybe in 1981.

priest, that is to proclaim the wonderful deed God has performed for you to bring you out of darkness into the light. And your preaching should be done in such a way that one brother proclaims the mighty deed of God to the other, how you have been delivered through him from sin, hell, death, and all misfortune, and have been called to eternal life. Thus you should also teach other people how they too, come into such light. (Am Ed 30:64f.)

The first and highest work of love a Christian ought to do when he has become a believer, is to bring others also to believe in the way he himself came to believe. And here you notice that Christ begins and institutes the office of the ministry of the external Word in every Christian; for he himself came with this office and the external Word ... In this way, the Lord desires to say: you have now received enough from me, peace and joy, and all you should have ... Hence I send you into the world as my Father hath sent me; namely that every Christian should instruct and teach his neighbor, that he may also come to Christ. By this no power is delegated exclusively to popes and bishops, but all Christians are commanded to profess their faith publicly and also to lead others to believe. (Lenker 11:359)

## **I. CHALLENGES, SHORTCOMINGS, ROADBLOCKS, ERRORS, MISUNDERSTANDINGS, AND FAILURES**

Some of the following apply specifically (or more so) to the called and ordained servant of the Word (pastors and missionaries), but most apply to the Priesthood of All Believers. I will try to clarify this distinction along the way.

**“Church Growth” Can Be Satanic.** Of course, we want our congregations to grow, or at least continue to survive. But we are to have this godly goal for one reason only: that we and others can abide in Jesus’ word and thus be his disciples, know the truth, and be set free (John 8:31f.); that we and our neighbor can be sanctified by the truth, his Word (John 17:17). But what is hard for us to swallow is that the effectiveness of the Word upon the heart has nothing to with us. We are simply called upon to be faithful in preserving and proclaiming the Word (1 Cor. 3:6). And if after being faithful our congregations do not grow, we miserably linger on, or we even die and go out of existence, so be it. God forbid this would happen to us, but “not my will, but yours, be done.” (Luke 22:42). Jesus said this.

A common problem is when church growth is divorced from or overshadowed by something other than this goal of saving people, or when we believe that one’s conversion to Christianity and preservation in the faith depends on something other than the Holy Spirit working through the Word. For example, if the goal of growing the church is even slightly budgetary, or appearance, or even mere continued existence, then we have missed the boat and are not being guided by the biblical understanding for evangelism. Or if the reason to grow *is* to save souls, but the *effective* means (that is, what ultimately and really causes or creates a faith that saves) includes or is assumed to be something other than the Word (like some program, event, personality, reasoning, activity – see several of the topics below), we, again, are guilty of a faulty church growth mentality. We are not in this for glory or success or prestige or looks or comfort – congregational or personal. The history of the church *is* one of growth – millions and millions coming to faith here, there, and everywhere. But it also a history where “steeple are falling; crumbled have spires in every land” (ELH 211), where a land that once basked in the comfort of the gospel, now goes through a famine of hearing God’s words (Amos 8:11). “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!” “*Jesus, you are not supposed to suffer and die.*” “*Peter, where did you get this idea?*” “Get behind me, Satan!” (Matt. 16:22-23).

I am not trying to be gloomy about evangelism (and it will get better). But my point is even good, sound, confessional Lutheran churches, laymen, and pastors can easily fall prey to bad church growth thinking. In fact, I think we all do. No, I know we all do. It’s all around us in American evangelicalism, and it’s in us by virtue of our inherent self-righteousness.

**Fear of Man and Lack of Love for the Lost.** This is a sanctification issue that affects both pastor and layman. As long as we are in this world, as long as Satan exists, and as long we are stuck with our flesh, this will be an issue. It is harshly rebuked by Christ (Matt. 10:26-33). The thing to be aware of is not only the existence of this failure, but also whether we excuse or justify it, or repent of it (as poor Peter eventually did after the courtyard fiasco).

**Barely on the Radar Screen.** The realization that one's next-door neighbor or co-worker or even good friend or family member is living without Christ and heading toward hell does not seem to be of concern at times, or even understood. I am perhaps being sinfully judgmental here, but it is hard to avoid this assessment as I observe others (and myself, if I am in an honest mood). Even among us good conservative Lutherans, I get the sense there is greater concern regarding the numerical growth of a congregation than a concern that our lost neighbor is lost and needs to repent and come to faith in the Son of God.

**I Don't Know What to Say.** Join the club. At the same time this can be used as an excuse to avoid saying what could be said or should be said. If we can say the Apostles Creed, if we can quote John 3:16, if we can read Romans 3 out loud (or other sections of the Bible), if we can say "your sins are forgiven for the sake of Christ", if we can explain who Christ is along with a basic outline of what happened to him and what this all means; if we can hand them the Gospel of John, a Bible, a tract, or a good Christian book, we can evangelize. Further preparing ourselves and members to evangelize will help and increase confidence, but when we unnecessarily excuse ourselves by saying something like, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent... I am slow of speech and of tongue" (Ex. 3:10), there's nothing like an honest confession of sin followed by absolution. It is also helpful to know that saying something (even if it is not totally accurate) is probably almost always better than saying nothing at all.

One more thing: my personal experience, but an experience well grounded. I try to remember to pray as I am discussing Christianity with an unbeliever or sceptic: "Lord, help me to know what to think and what to say." I am sometimes amazed at what I end up sharing. This, of course, is not divorced from study of God's Word. "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." (2 Tim. 2:15). By God's grace, meditation and prayer work very well together.

**Not Wanting to Pull the Trigger.** I can be somewhat good at undermining false worldviews, explaining the person and work of Christ, objective and subjective justification, defending true doctrines against false doctrines, and using apologetics. But, for whatever reason, "repent and be baptized" or "repent and believe the gospel" seems to be beyond my level of comfort at times. Maybe it's my confidence in the power of the gospel, or maybe it's my objection to decision theology, or maybe it's my fear of man. Maybe others don't have this problem, but I do at times. It seems a number of non-Lutheran churches and preachers are not as afraid to pull this trigger, telling the sinner to repent, even though they may do it with a poor theology in the background. I am kind of jealous.

**Operating Under a Definition of Evangelism That Is Too Broad.** There are certain activities that are called evangelism, but at best are indirectly connected to evangelism or can create a situation where evangelism can occur. I think this is an important distinction to keep in mind. Congregations that sponsor events, activities, and programs such as pre-school, carnivals, picnics, a moms' group, food banks, clothing drives, or even invites to church (via mailings, social media, door-to-door flyers, etc.) are not doing evangelism *per se*. The hope, of course, is that evangelism and/or catechesis occur at some point. But my concern is that actual evangelism can become equated with these things rather than sharing and confronting our neighbor with the heart of God – the sending of his Son who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, was buried, and rose *for us and our salvation*. Again, the distinction is important. Too many

denominations and theologies associate evangelism and mission work with some sort of community engagement or social/temporal assistance (a *social gospel*), rather than salvation from sin, death, and hell. Real evangelism can be risky. Endeavors by a church that deal with temporal things, though perhaps worthy, charitable, and require a good amount of congregational time and effort, are usually pretty “safe”. They will hardly be seen as offensive to anyone. The danger is that such efforts may unintentionally sooth the conscience, giving the impression that these things are the mission of the church when in fact her mission is to proclaim an unpopular and offensive message. No one will be hated for feeding the poor or establishing a pre-school. Preaching and sharing Christ crucified on the hand can be dangerous (1 Cor. 1:22-23). We can, and maybe should, do the former, while never forgetting our primary mission, no matter what the cost (look the Luther quotes above).

**Gimmick, Bait & Switch, and 1<sup>st</sup> Article Outreach.** Here’s the situation as I see it: Gimmick outreach is using entertainment or fun things in order to get people to come to the church and eventually join. Bait & Switch is luring them to church by offering them something they might want or like, but the real motive is to get them to become members. The two are pretty much the same thing. As you can tell by my name calling, I am greatly cynical. There is something wrong here.

On the other hand, I cannot and should not automatically condemn these activities. There is something I call 1<sup>st</sup> Article outreach. Basically, this is where a congregation seeks to meet neighbors’ needs as described in Luther’s explanation to the 1<sup>st</sup> Article and the 4<sup>th</sup> Petition to the Lord’s Prayer<sup>3</sup>. It might be food, shelter, clothing. It could be childcare or basic education. It could be protecting the life of the unborn (unwed mother counseling, providing maternity clothes, etc.). And it could be something that satisfies the aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, or even “fun” needs and desires that are a part of us as human beings who are created in the image of God (using the broad sense of “image of God”).

What is the difference between Gimmick/Bait & Switch and 1<sup>st</sup> Article outreach? I would say that Gimmick and Bait & Switch outreach can easily cheapen or water down the true gospel *and* calls into question the integrity of a congregation and its members. 1<sup>st</sup> Article outreach could easily become Gimmick or Bait & Switch. So here is what might help. First, a church should make sure they understand that any 1<sup>st</sup> Article activities in which it engages, are not evangelism *per se* (see above), even though they may result in evangelism. Second, any such activities must be able to “stand alone”; they should not be viewed *merely* as a means to an end. That is, they are done simply because such activities are of value and benefit to our neighbors, regardless of what becomes of them. We love heathens even though they wish to continue down the path to hell and show no interest in the true Jesus. After they use us, we may have to offer them the other cheek, give them our cloak, and walk another mile with them (Matt. 5:38-42), all the while hoping and praying that God will lead them to repentance and faith. God himself sends rain on the unrighteous, simply because he loves them regardless of their final destiny (Matt. 5:45).

**Magical Incantation Approach.** When actual evangelism does take place, there can be a misconception on how and when the Holy Spirit works. Simply quoting Bible verses can be seen as sufficient or all that is needed because of the power of the Word, almost making Bible passages magical. There is a truth here, of course, for sometimes one simple exposure to the gospel is all that is needed. But I believe what can be overlooked is how and how long the Holy Spirit chooses to work. The same can occur with evangelism “outlines” when used.

**Hit and Run Approach/First Impressions.** Along with the above point, there can be a lack of appreciation and awareness of the long-term commitment that may be required when working with the

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<sup>3</sup> “...everything needed for this life.”

unchurched and unbelievers. I kind of like the “hit and run” approach, but this is not good. For as Paul taught, “love is patient...and endures all things”, and then he goes on to demonstrate this by going from house to house (1 Cor. 13, Acts 20:20f.). The same can be said with an overemphasis on first impressions. We often hear, “Your church was so friendly,” which is wonderful (though we sometimes hear the opposite, justly or unjustly). It can be somewhat natural to be friendly and welcoming upon first acquaintance and to visitors when they walk into a church. But we have to keep in mind people of any religious persuasion can do this as well. First impressions are very important, but they are not to be the primary and clearly not the only thing. Merely being welcoming would make it too easy, and we could falsely pat ourselves on the back when they say to us, “You are such a friendly church!” There is and has to be much more to loving our unbelieving neighbor with the gospel.

Two books bring this point out well. One is *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*, which describes the conversion of a die-hard Muslim in part because a Christian friend remained a friend over time while engaging him in meaningful discussion and debates. The other is *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, an amazing book by a former radical lesbian professor who became a Christian due to the patience and persistence of a Reformed pastor and his wife who, like the friend in the book above, challenged her while loving her unconditionally, for more than a day, week, and month. We cannot expect the unchurched, heathens, and unbelievers to listen to the ultimate and undying message of Love if the messengers hardly demonstrate such love themselves. Pastor Larry Wentzlaff demonstrated a simple and persistent love while in Arizona. He regularly would call (weekly, monthly, or every 6 months) a list of unchurched he had some sort of connection with. This was an eye-opener to me. Simple, and persistent.

**Church Doors as Evangelism.** “If we can just get them through our church doors.” This is not wrong and is actually very commendable. There is much merit to this and no one should be deterred from encouraging this. But what can be forgotten is: “We need to get them through our *home* doors” (or us into *their home* doors) where love can be more readily demonstrated in our other important and daily vocations.<sup>4</sup> In other words, loving our neighbor who is not a Christian or is a Christian who is searching may require love and words beyond the church building. We understand this, but we need to understand this better. Some are more gifted than others at doing this (Rom. 12:6-8). But the hospitality directive is given to all Christians (Rom. 12:13), as is the command to feed our enemy (Rom. 12:20).

**Worship Services as Evangelism.** Wherever the gospel is found, there also is the Holy Spirit. He can and does work when and where he pleases (John 3:8). And, hopefully, there is no clearer and no more predominant presentation of the gospel than in a worship service. So bring ‘em in. However, the worship service is first and foremost designed for worshipers, i.e., Christians. It assumes certain things, things only they may understand. 1 Cor. 14 (:6-38) is perhaps the best commentary on this. There Paul says, for the sake of both the believer and the “unbeliever” (or the “outsider”, vv. 16, 22), clarity, orderliness, decency, and the created order are to be observed. But no matter how well all these are done, there remain teachings and practices that will be difficult for the outsider to grasp (like church furniture, dress, gestures, certain words, absolution, closed communion, music, etc.). And that’s okay. For what is part and parcel to most of these is they reflect we are entering into a different realm, we are entering into the presence of the almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth, in a manner that the eye cannot see and the mind cannot conceive (1 Cor.2:9f).

Again, this is a great opportunity for evangelism. But it should not be considered the only or even the primary setting of evangelizing. There are just too many foreign things that are left unexplained and there are usually limited opportunities to ask and answer questions (assuming questions would even be asked).

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<sup>4</sup> In Lutheran theology and history, *home vocations* include most of those outside of the church, such as neighbor, parent, sister, plumber, friend, doctor, student, teacher, etc.

Plus, there are those things like closed communion that are easily misunderstood and misinterpreted, not to mention that the gospel itself is offensive. The point is this: we should not count on the worship service to do the job that may best be done in other settings. Worship is worship. It is not the setting where we have the opportunity to “become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.” (1 Cor. 9).

At the same time, worship gives both the pastor and members the occasion to step up to the plate and offer explanations (e.g., a worship explanation handout) or sit near guests for assistance, if wanted.

**Maybe Contemporary Worship Services Are Better at Evangelism?** Several things could be said here, but I will limit myself to the point mentioned above. We want people to see that we are human, and that Jesus is too. But there is much, much more. When we worship, we are entering into a different world, into the presence of the Almighty and All-Merciful. What is lacking in contemporary worship is *reverence for an awesome and fearful transcendence* (Is. 6:1ff.), for contemporary worship emphasizes casualness and being personally comfortable.

We should remember that we teach and confess not only by our words, but our actions and dress and décor as well. In other words, there is *substance* (*what* is taught) and there is *form* (*how* it is taught, like the order of service, how the pastor dresses, his mannerisms, the kind of music, etc.). Both of these teach and both confess. The form of contemporary worship teaches and confesses a casual sort of Christianity,<sup>5</sup> very similar to what is found in the evangelical and mega churches where a reverent fear is about the last thing that would come to mind. This can happen in a good traditional service as well, but it is not “built in” as it is in a contemporary service. When we look like the watered-down, sacramental-free, American evangelicalism type of worship (even though well intended), we inadvertently give it a stamp of approval, making the message of amazing grace something less than amazing.

**“Evangelism Is the Pastor’s Job.”** When the Priesthood of All Believers is not grasped, when it is ignored or not taught as it should be, there can be tremendous pressure upon the pastor, and guilt. This is especially true if evangelism is viewed merely as activities, events, and programs that could be sponsored by a congregation, and not the message of Law and Gospel, sin and grace, and truth at odds with the world and culture: “Pastor, why aren’t we doing a community VBS, mailings, canvassing, etc. to get people to come and join our church?” Again, such things are not wrong and may be wise to do. But they can also distract from and should never be done at the expense of what is truly evangelism and a layman’s vocational opportunities.

**“Don’t Let Them Know We Are Confessional Lutherans Until They Get to Know Us.”** I know of some Baptist churches that have utilized this principle with success (i.e., they experienced growth in membership by removing “Baptist” from their church name). Again, there is something here that makes sense and ought to be implemented, somehow. But removing “Lutheran” from the sign out front and from other places where it normally would be found is not a good idea. It verges on dishonesty and the Bait & Switch approach mentioned earlier. We should carefully consider questions such as: What is the downside of removing or hiding the word Lutheran? What would or what might we end up losing or compromising? Are we revealing an embarrassment of our Lutheran (and, therefore, biblical) heritage? What is happening to “Here I stand”? Would our members and prospects be given the impression that that by which we have identified ourselves for centuries is no longer important? That we value timidity over courage, or deception over being forthright? I find it a bit ironic that this is being done around the time we celebrated the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation.

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<sup>5</sup> A good example of this casualness is what President John Moldstad calls “untuck-it preachers”, who appear onstage with their shirts intentionally untucked.

We would be rightly upset with a cult that would hide its name from members of ours to try to proselytize them. We would even think the same of a Baptist, Catholic, or Pentecostal group if they were purposely hiding their identity to the same end.

No one should be hit over the head with the Lutheran Confessions when he walks into a congregation. But I believe there is a difference between honestly identifying ourselves in our church name (and other public venues) on the one hand, and explaining to an individual certain biblical truths based upon where he is at on the other hand. With the latter, the word “Lutheran” does not have to be a part of the discussion. “All things to all men” is very important. But so is a public confession before the world. The name “Lutheran” may scare off some and in a sense hinder outreach and evangelism. But the answer is not hiding our confession in the manner of non-denominational churches and even some Lutheran churches of our fellowship.

**One Size Fits All.** 1 Cor. 9:19-23. This is important. I can get stuck in an apologetics mode. But my visits to a food court mall where I was wearing my clerical collar with a sign on my laptop that invites people to have seat, show me that each situation is quite unique. Some require apologetics, but there are some where I simply absolve in the name of Jesus Christ.

**“Who Am I to Judge?”** This is the new cultural mantra that applies to just about everything. But it is a common tactic of Satan. I know of situations where Christians make the case for salvation in Christ, but then snatch it away from and deny its truth to an unbeliever by implying that Jesus may not be the only way, saying something like, “But only God can judge.” The word “judge” is usually mentioned, and the impression is either given or taken that it would be wrong for us to tell someone that, without Jesus, he is going to hell. These days we are so afraid to offend, to suggest or imply that what the non-Christian believes is false, condemned, and really bad. But that, of course, would put us at odds with John the Baptist, Paul, Peter, and Jesus himself. They clearly would not have appreciated today’s “enlightened” non-offensive approach and mindset.

**What Has Truth Got to Do with It?** We live in world of anti-truth; there is no real truth, only personal or social construction of truth. Postmodernism has cemented this into the thinking of many. And it has trickled down into the churches and lives of Christians. Even though no one *lives* as if there is no transcendent truth, many *think* that it is true that there is no truth. As a result, all religions and beliefs and lifestyles are viewed as equals, and anyone who says otherwise is quickly labeled a bigot, etc.

But it is my sense that a door is wide open here, for even though by nature we rebel against the truth, we are designed to need it, long for it (Eccl. 3:11), and (by grace alone) grasp it. This is especially true because we have been bombarded by a relativism (the belief there is no real and transcendent truth) that is driving many crazy; they long for a truth because they are being inundated or besieged by something that is so clearly false and despairing and futile. Jesus, especially in John’s Gospel, cannot say enough about the essentiality of truth, he himself being the truth (John 14:6). We cannot truly evangelize without saying (albeit with love and tact), “Where you are coming from and what you believe is false, but this *Jesus* really existed and what is taught about him is historically reliable and the inspired records are really true – true for you, true for me, and true the entire world, for all ages.”

What can and does often happen when the importance and essentiality of *truth* is ignored is that we end up trying to show people that Christianity or our congregation is merely *relevant* for a particular culture, or only rewarding for the here and now, or simply emotionally satisfying. We end up being viewed as a church that primarily brings individual or family fulfillment, providing programs that help people connect to one another. Again, such things are not wrong in and of themselves; some of them may be wise to do, and some are the expected result of gathering together as God’s people. But I am talking about priorities, emphasizing

the heart of Christianity, making sure we don't put the cart before the horse, and that we avoid a prosperity gospel and a theology of glory that says if you join here or become a Christian you will experience a glorious life here and now. But coming to faith in Christ and being a Christian is not about being directed to earthly pleasures here and now. It's about *truth* that first smashes us down and then lifts us up. When these other things, no matter how good or even necessary they may be, crowd out or overshadow truth, where truth is avoided or looked upon merely as one of many things a congregation has to offer, something is very wrong. Look at Jesus, the Son of God, during his ministry. There are plenty of conferences and workshops out there (even within our own fellowship?) that are intended to encourage evangelism or increase membership, but is *truth* rightly explained, emphasized, and encouraged? Is truth defended? Are we encouraged to share the truth so people begin to understand that it is in conflict with what they believe, with culture, and with false religions? Maybe it is. But I am not sure.

**Downplaying or Ignoring the Impact of the Law, Sin, Affliction, and Death.** There can be no conversion without a man being confronted by and realizing the effects of the fall upon him personally. The convert will never say of his conversion, "Oh, that was easy." The law is a hammer. There is nothing pleasant about being rescued from sin and hell. It is a death followed by life that comes by faith alone. I am not talking about some emotional thing (though that will be there),<sup>6</sup> but a reality based in the hostile and spiritually dead nature of man and the amazing and monergistic (God-alone) work of God. In other words, we should not expect our neighbor to have a nice, comfortable, easy jaunt from the Kingdom of Darkness into the Kingdom of Light.

**"We Will Take Transfers, But to Hell with Real-Live Heathens."** I was one time told by a member at a previous church, "We don't want those kinds of people here" (referring to poor, non-whites). Transfers (or conservative and confessional Lutherans who move into the area) are easy, and should be welcomed! But remaining in this comfort zone can be used to ignore going out to "the highways and hedges" mentioned by Jesus (Luke 14:23) or the mindset he commanded when he said, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you." (Luke 14:12-14). You might call this fault a subtle racism or discrimination. Some have wondered if home mission efforts have unintentionally encouraged this. We have recently seen our synod looking beyond its comfortable borders.

**The Inerrancy Assumption Approach.** We no longer have the luxury of a common cultural epistemology as was the case a number of decades ago and more, both here and in Europe. In other words, we no longer live in a society where the Bible is a recognized authority, in some ways, as it once was. Our era is more like the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century Roman empire where Christianity was the minority view, where Scripture had no recognizable authority in culture, and where apologetics was a common and necessary approach. When someone asks us, "How do you know what you say about Jesus is true?", it is not a good idea to say something like, "Because it says so in the Bible and the Bible is the Word of God." Beginning with or bringing into our discussion the belief that the Word is inspired and inerrant, does nothing for the one who does not hold such a belief. Saying "Because the Bible says so" is no different than saying "Because I say so" or "My pastor says so" or any other authority to which we might appeal. What *can* do something is engaging them where they're at (not where they are not at), being prepared to give a defense to anyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope that we have, and presenting the good news of Christ crucified and risen – the power of God for salvation (which happens to be found in the inerrant and inspired Word).

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<sup>6</sup> See our Lutheran Confessions, *The Formula of Concord*, "The Solid Declaration", II:54 & 70.



To put it another way, we do not begin with “the Bible is true”, but with the truths of the Bible (and evidence for those truths) needed to bring one to true faith. Hopefully they will at some point believe in both Christ and in the inspiration of the Bible.

**Apologetics Misused.** In the book *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*, Nabeel Qureshi (who passed away of cancer in the summer of 2017 at the age of 34) describes his intense inner battle regarding which religion is true. Apologetics played a major role, and in the end he could not deny the clearly superior evidence for Christianity over against Islam. However, this book also demonstrates the faulty use of reason – what is called the magisterial use of reason. He comes to faith in Jesus Christ, so the book implies, by his own reason, strength, and decision. In the book there is a curious avoidance of being dead in trespasses and sins and it fails to acknowledge a sinful nature that is hostile to God. His sincerity and reason appear to win him over. Faith is not presented as a gift, and the gospel itself, all alone, is not taught as the power of God for salvation, at least not as it should be.

The temptation for us Lutherans might be to throw the baby out with the bathwater – not using apologetics or evidence at all. But that is not scriptural. What is needed is a sound Lutheran understanding and use of apologetics (see below).

Also, this book gives the impression that unless one is highly intelligent and can make good use of his reasoning abilities, he can never grasp Christianity as true, which means the comfort of the gospel would not be secured by such a person as well. It assumes that everyone can be and should be reasoned into the faith by the use of apologetics. So much for infants and children and the senile and the comatose and those with lower IQ’s. “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:25-34) was the question of the jailor. God prepared him by the fear of death, not reason. Apologetics is clearly there in Scripture, but it must be used scripturally.

### **An Important Lesson from All This**

All these shortcomings described above, to the degree they are accurate, are simply revealing why we are and need to be Christians. The devil, the world, and our flesh are there daily, weekly, annually; they are there plaguing us as individuals, as a congregation, a synod, and the universal church militant; they are there in our vocations; they afflict the pastoral office and the entire Priesthood of All Believers. But the blood that was shed for sins was and is timeless and unconditional and all-encompassing and no respecter of persons, for it was and is the blood of the eternal Son of God. Here is where we rest.

## **II. WHAT IS NEEDED AND WHAT WE OUGHT TO DO OR CAN DO**

**Nothing, Kind Of.** In one sense, this is a good Lutheran answer: we plant, water, and then sit back to see what growth God all by himself brings about. Grace alone and faith alone, apart from works or any human effort of any kind. See also John 1:12-13.

**Back to the Bible and the Confessions.** Here are the doctrines that pastors and theologians (laymen can join in also) need to bring into a discussion and a correct understanding of evangelism: The historical fall, man’s depravity, law (revealed and natural), sin, affliction, and death; the claims by Christ, along with his sinless life, miracles, teachings, crucifixion and resurrection; justification; the sufficiency, inspiration, inerrancy, clarity, & efficacy of the Word; Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone; the proper use of apologetics; and more.

Some of the things we try today can be attributed to the development of new technologies and sanctified common sense. But whatever our endeavors, they must be guided by the doctrines mentioned above (see

also footnote 2). We should be asking questions about our evangelism efforts, such as: Are there any historical Lutheran and Christian precedents for or against what we are doing? Where, in our longer history, has something like this been tried before? Does this effort or approach interfere with or distract from any of these doctrines, or leave the impression with members or prospects that doctrines are less than what they really are? Is the something we are doing – the program, event, marketing, etc. – being given more attention, time, hype, or emphasis than the gospel message itself that we want people to hear?

Here's an example. At my previous church, there was (and is) an LED sign out front. We sometimes wrestled with what should be out there, but we realize it is a tool, a wonderful tool. But there was a time when we kind of thought, "This will bring people in!" (rather than the message of Christ somehow communicated personally by pastor or layman). There is also a temptation to have flashy stuff up there, which would easily cheapen our church and its message and make us look more like the business down the road that has something to sell.

**Evangelism Is Simple, and Hard.** The message is straightforward and simple. It can be said or communicated in a multitude of ways. It's about Jesus: who he is, what he did, why he did what he did, and what that means for the sinner. But it is hard in several ways. First, there will be some who want or require answers to difficult questions. We ought to oblige them, as much as we can and within reason. Plus, loving one's neighbor can take a lot of work and sacrifice, especially if we have to keep at it over the long haul. Again, "love endures all things." And then there is the hardship of possible persecution and even martyrdom. So we turn to Jesus for our comfort, encouragement, and example. See Matt. 10:24-25, 28-33.

**Developing an Evangelism Mindset.** This is how we started out this study, and it is worth repeating: It is important to remind ourselves 1) "... the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many." (Matt. 7:13). And, 2) "God so loved the world." In other words, we and our members need to be instructed regularly that hell is very real for our neighbor, and that Christ was given over to death for our neighbor. "Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest." (John 4:35). We need to carry this with us when we walk out the doors of the church and be ready.

**The Priesthood of All Believers and Vocation – Where We Can Best Love Our Neighbor.** There are studies that show when people join a church it does not have a whole lot to do with the pastor, but almost always with a connection they have with church members who know these people outside of the church. This perhaps confirms what we read, to some degree, in Acts 8:1 and 4. Pastors need to tell their members how valuable they are in this work and remind them of what Peter (1 Pet. 2:9) and Luther teach (see Luther quotes on p. 2).

**Convince Him That He Is Not a Christian.** It may not necessarily be wrong to assume the person we are talking to is a Christian. But it may be. We should not automatically give him the benefit of the doubt. I have done this only to find out that he has no concept of real Christianity. Add to this that the person himself may assume he is a Christian, when in fact he is not. And so, if a conversation proceeds with the notion that he is a Christian, when he is not, it will not go where it needs to go. The inability or unwillingness to say, "No, you are not a Christian" or, at least, "Whether you are a true Christian or not, I do not know", can prevent the evangelist from saying what he needs to say and the unbeliever from hearing what he needs to hear. Truth, including harsh truth, needs to take precedent over the feelings of others or the false and prevalent idea "we all worship the same God." To put it another way, real love needs to be the priority (see Mark 10:18-21). If we assume someone is a Christian without warrant, that could sooth our conscience when we don't say something, but it would be a false soothing.

**Always Be Prepared to Make a Defense to Your Neighbor Who Asks You, But Not to the One Who Does Not Ask You.** The apostle Peter wrote, "...in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, *ready*

at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” (1 Pet. 3:15, emphasis added). In other words, I do not have to go across the street, knock on the door of my neighbor, and say, “Let me tell you about Jesus so you don’t go to hell.” We do not have to do *that*. We have not sinned by not sharing the gospel with them. On the other hand, if that same neighbor or someone at work or school or wherever were to say to us, “Why do you believe what you believe?” or “I just found out I have terminal cancer and I’m scared”, then we are obligated somehow to answer and somehow to point them to the truth and Christ.

But even if our neighbor across the street never asks us anything about religion, it is not inappropriate to “put a stone in his shoe” with the hope that maybe he will ask us why we believe what we believe. If we never engage our quiet and seemingly content neighbor, we will never know where he stands in the balance of eternity and he may never hear the gospel. There are times to remain guilt-free, and plenty of times to own guilt because we have not done what we could have done when the situation has presented itself. We have the great example in the “little girl” who served Naaman’s wife (2 Kings 5:1ff.). See also Col. 4:5-6.

**If You Cannot Speak Like Angels, If You Cannot Preach Like Paul (ELH 191).** We need to give laity a break. We pastors are not to impose upon anyone more than Scripture does. If they can’t do the intense stuff, they can “can lead the little children to the Savior’s waiting arms”, or they “can be like faithful Aaron, holding up the prophet’s hands.” We should not demand more from the mother who teaches and prays with her children at home. We are to commend all godly vocations (especially the less impressive ones) and all the good works performed within them, no matter how menial. And we should not elevate “church work” and outreach over changing diapers. What should be encouraged is an evangelism *mindset*, so when the opportunity comes knocking, we and our members are willing to direct them to the narrow gate. Again, Col. 4:5-6 and 1 Pet. 3:15.

**The Power and Sufficiency of the Word.** I think we who evangelize or we who want our church to do more evangelism can forget this more than we realize. “If I can just convince him” or “if I can show him that creation is not contrary to science” or “if my pastor were more personal” or “if we would sing more uplifting songs” or “if we could get rid of closed communion” or “if we would just try this method or program” or “if our pastor was younger” or “if we would do more marketing” or... There is some truth here. Yes, apologetics is about proof and convincing (see below). And 1 Cor. 9:20ff. speaks to an appropriate and evangelical accommodation and self-denial (“...I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some...”). And, unfortunately, we can interfere with the Word by doing things we ought not to do and by not doing things we ought to do. David’s adultery gave his enemies cause to speak against the truth with his adultery and murder (2 Sam. 11-12). The Christian who loves little misses the opportunity to point to, testify to, the truth of the Word and let his light shine (Matt. 5:16).

And yet we rest in and are comforted with the teaching that the Word alone is the efficient cause (that which actually effects or creates faith). Whew! This relieves pastors of much unnecessary guilt imposed upon them by certain members (and often themselves) who expect pastors always to do more or in a different way or insist we do a specific program, marketing strategy, etc. But laymen can also feel this pressing and humanly-invented guilt, so they, too, need to be reminded of this key doctrine. Rom. 10:14-17.

**The Sort of People Our Radar Ought to Detect.** C.S. Lewis wrote, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” (*The Problem of Pain*, chapter 6). We should especially be alert to the one who asks us something about our hope in Christ, the one who is weary and heavy laden, the one who feels the pressing load of sin, the one who is being pounded down and undergoing more than the usual afflictions, and the one who is facing death. These are the ones God is uniquely preparing to hear the Good News.

**Biblical Apologetics. Limited and What Is Not Off Limits.** Apologetics – the defense for the truth of Christianity – can be misused. But so can the Law, and we don’t therefore throw it out. There are limits to apologetics. But there are some non-limits as well. We should not be afraid of using apologetics in the way the Bible does. What do I mean? Apologetics has two sides to it. One is to undermine and demolish that which is false (consider how often Jesus and the apostles did this; also 2 Cor. 10:5). The other aspect of apologetics is to offer proof for the truth or Christianity, and even for the work and person of Christ himself. This idea of proof is where we get uncomfortable. But to say that there is proof for the truth of Christianity is not to say that the proof is what actually creates faith (the *efficient* cause, in theological terms). God has given man reason. It is limited, and it is fallen. But he still has it. And God uses it. The fulfillment of Old Testament messianic prophecies, the hundreds of miracles by Christ, the grand miracle of his resurrection, and the abundance of eyewitness testimony all serve as proof. It as if we are in a court of law. Apologetics testifies to, supports, and points to the truth of the gospel, and it is this gospel alone that converts the dead man. Like beautiful Christian artwork and music, apologetics is a God-ordained platter on which the gospel and the Bread of Life is served.

Apologetics can be used in the service of the law (to prove the other to be wrong in his unbelief or misbelief). And it can be used in the service of the gospel (John 2:11, 23; 20:30f.). In this sense, apologetics is neither law nor gospel, but can be of service to one or the other or both. One of the best examples of this is Thomas (John 20) where, when his senses were confronted with the physical reality of the risen Christ, he was both convicted and assured. Talk about proof. People can choose to and will ignore the evidence (John 12:37), just as they choose to ignore the Word (Luke 16:31). But we should not be bothered about offering proof (Acts 1:3), just as we should not be concerned about preaching the law. Both can be and will be misused and misapplied. We can’t help that. But what we can do is preach the whole counsel of God in which it is taught that neither our reason nor our works cause faith or bring us salvation.

**Get Married, Become One Flesh, Be Fruitful, Multiply, and Baptize All Those Kids.** Compared to immigrant Muslims, native Europeans are reproducing at a rate of 1.6 children/couple which will result in a Muslim majority within two to three decades. Americans have now for the first time also fallen below the fertility replacement rate of 2.1. We are now at 1.7. There is an unchallenged assumption, even among Christians, that the number of children a married couple decides to have is purely a matter of personal choice. Christian couples are likely not aware that the Bible has something to say about this. By raising this point, I am not suggesting that there are not valid reasons for limiting a family size. But there is this question: whatever happened to large families of five or more kids, and why? What a great way to increase (not to mention maintain) membership! Talk about a God-approved and designed church growth method. This deserves a thorough biblical study all by itself.

**Tell Him the Truth, about Sin and Jesus, and Love Him.** Peter tells us to defend, but to do so with gentleness and respect (1 Pet. 3:15). To put it another way, think of Jesus – brutally honest and at the same time brutally slain for us: loving us as no matter what, no matter who we are, no matter where we are at.

**For Pastors: Wear a Clerical Collar and Sit at a Food Court.** This is my only specific outreach suggestion to pastors. Two or three times a month for about three hours each time, I sat in the North Star Mall food court in San Antonio with my clerical collar on and a sign on my laptop that said, “Have a seat. Prayer requests. Questions Welcomed.” People would come to me. I didn’t have to go knocking on doors asking people if they want to talk about religion. I almost always had at least one person sit down to talk. Once I had a waiting line. Sometimes they want to engage in a bit of a debate, which is great. But most often they are afflicted in some way and are willing to at least listen to the good news about Jesus. I could write a book about the afflictions and ideas and beliefs these people brought with them to talk about. I only wish it had been closer to the church. This did not result in any members, and only four visited the church (two of

them came to our home for a meal and conversation). Some lived far away (an hour or more), and in many cases, they were faithful members of a church somewhere in or near San Antonio. So, no new members. But, so what? The bottom line, the important thing (Luke 10:42), is many of them left our time together having heard, and sometimes received, the comfort of the gospel. And just maybe, that little struggling congregation will be blessed with numerical growth.

There are undoubtedly other settings that would work. I tried coffee shops and McDonalds, with limited “success”. I thought about trying a bar that had an outside eating area. But I would say that the clerical collar by itself has started many conversations. One time while waiting for my car to be fixed, I was studying in a gas station food mart that had four small tables (my invite sign was *not* on my laptop, but I was wearing my clerical collar). I was focused on my reading when I sensed someone’s presence: a middle-aged man was standing *right* next to me with tears in his eyes, his 10-year old son at his side. I instinctively told him to sit down. He was Catholic and his family situation was very sad. I talked gospel, and when I found out he was faithful in going to Mass, I told him to remember what he would be receiving in the Eucharist on the coming Sunday and what that meant. It was perhaps the best I could do, especially considering I was quite a way from the church.

I would almost always hand out a business card and invite them to call me day or night. Sometimes I would get his or her name and contact information. Occasionally I would give them a book. I usually have in my backpack the *Gospel of John*, the *Small Catechism*, *We Believe Teach and Confess*, *What in the World Is Going On?*, *The Spirituality of the Cross*, and *Mere Christianity*.

**Create a Tag Team (or realize that it may already exist).** I meet people who have real needs that I am not equipped to help or for whom I don’t have time. It may be a young lady who poured out her heart to me at the mall or someone who needs a ride to church every Sunday, etc. I am not superman, I am not omnipresent, and I have a flock to care for. There are some situations I should avoid (e.g., meeting a woman in a regular or private setting). There are some people I talk with who would easily consume much of my time. I need help. I need to pass the baton. I need other wrestlers whom I can tag to continue the match, and who could likely do it much better. I know there are quite a few members who understand this and are willing. And there are likely many others who would be willing if they knew. And then there are others who need to come to this understanding and learn to be willing. At the same time, it needs to be kept in mind that gifts differ from member to member. See Rom. 12:6-8.

**The God Factor.** Our outreach coordinator, when he worked for our church in San Antonio, left flyers or cards at 1,000 homes. Nothing came of it. No one visited the church on Sunday morning. He made other similar attempts with the same result. Then, lo and behold, visitors would show up at the church. But it had nothing to do with anything he did or I did. We called this the God Factor. They just showed up. This is good for the soul. It does not justify doing nothing. But it is a good reminder that his ways are not necessarily ours. I would sure like a lot of attention, recognition, and praise from others for all my evangelism efforts and their visible results. He likes to humble us, and necessarily so.

**Pray.** Jesus said, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” (Luke 10:2). Paul said, “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison — that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.” (Col. 2:2-4). This is followed by these verses: “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” (5-6). In other words, we are not only to pray for evangelists and pastors, but as we pray we are asking that our speech, our

words, be wise, gracious, tasty (salted) when we respond to those who have questions or objections about true Christianity. I am amazed at how effective my prayers are, all by God's grace.

**Revamp Our Catechisms and Our Catechesis for Young and Old.** Answers to unasked questions are being dumped into the minds of our young people all the time, and they don't even know it, nor do many of their parents (and it is happening to them as well). Our present *Small Catechism & Explanation* attempts to deal with some worldviews and religions that are in conflict with the truth, but many false ideas and teachings are not given any attention. Young people are being bombarded by them left and right. And most often they do not know they are being given answers to extremely important questions that contradict their most important beliefs. We adults and parents often do not know this is going on. The most recent LCMS Small Catechism has made an attempt to include more worldview and apologetics information, but much more could have been done. Our synod has begun the process of rewriting our *Small Catechism & Explanation*, and it should be done with this in mind: be prepared to answer (1 Pet.3:15).

**Offer the Sacrament of the Altar Every Sunday.** There are many reasons to offer this sacrament more often. The reasons to be cautious about doing this need to be discussed, and hopefully every congregation will do so. But one of the reasons to offer it every Sunday is because of evangelism. Evangelism is a scary thing and a hard thing to do. It's like loving your enemy. Actually, it is loving your enemy. It's not easy. We need strength to do it. And we need comfort when we fail. The sacrament provides both. It is food for the soul. Evangelism is not something we can do in our strength or by our own will power. We need God's grace. It is difficult to imagine a congregation engaging in this important work as it should if we are not fed more regularly with this amazing and strengthening food. This is not to say the Lord's Supper is the only such means, but according to God's Word, the church at the time of the Apostles, the church that faced great opposition and was highly persecuted, and the church that nevertheless spread the Gospel courageously and constantly, was offered this sacrament whenever they gathered for worship (Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7, 11; 1 Cor. 11:17-20). I long for it and I would appreciate it.

**Final Thoughts.** There will be results according God's good timing and choice and location, and praise will also come. As Paul said in 1 Cor. 3: "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building." (vv. 5-9).

Much more could be said and there may be a number of things that I have simply overlooked or not said as well as I should have. But this is enough for now. It should produce plenty of thought and discussion.

Finally, I do not practice what I preach nearly as much as I should. God have mercy. And he does.

Sola Deo Gloria

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