

14. Evangelism

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The Commission on Evangelism of The American Lutheran Church states that evangelism has the fourfold responsibility of:

- Preaching the Gospel that men may be *won* for Christ;
- Preaching the Gospel that men may be *kept* for Christ;
- Preaching the Gospel that men may be *recalled* to Christ;
- Preaching the Gospel that men may be *sent forth* for Christ.

If we look at the statistics of Lutheran churches for the past year, we discover that we have not been doing these things very well. On August 24th, 1970 the Lutheran Council in the USA published some figures indicating that in 1969 the Lutheran bodies of the U.S. suffered a net loss of 24,381 baptized members. About the same time the US Census Bureau published some preliminary figures on the 1970 census findings, and indicated that the population of our nation increased by approximately 1,600,000 souls last year. America is growing while our Lutheran Church is declining.

To dramatize the situation, let me point out that every 24 hours, the population increases by about 4,400 souls, but in that same period of time the membership of our Lutheran churches is declining by some 66 souls. To dramatize it even further, we can look at our watches and see that it is now 20 minutes after 2:00. By the time it is 20 minutes after 3:00, the population of the US will have increased by 180 souls, but the membership in our Lutheran bodies will have decreased by almost 3 persons. We are not doing well in evangelism.

A few years ago our staff published a manual for pastors and congregations entitled *Evangelism In Crisis*. It is an appropriate title, because evangelism is in crisis. It is in crisis because of the mobility of population. When men move to and fro, evangelism becomes difficult. It is in crisis because of the explosion in science and technology. As man increases in knowledge, he becomes sophisticated and believes that he can get along without God, and evangelism becomes difficult. Evangelism is in crisis because of the trend towards affluence and luxury. When men become lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God, evangelism becomes difficult. Primarily, however, evangelism is in crisis, because our theology is in crisis.

THEOLOGY IN ACTION

T. A. Kantonen in his book, *The Theology Of Evangelism*, reminds us of the fact that "Evangelism is the living expression of a church's doctrinal theology." In other words, evangelism is theology in action, and if your theology is out of kilter with the truth of God's Word, then your evangelism efforts are going to be out of kilter with God's purposes.

It is for this reason that the Statement Of Purpose for this Congress on Loyalty to the Scriptures and the Confessions clearly states that we are not here only to be unified in the Spirit to the Holy Scriptures, and to the Historic Confessions of the Lutheran Church, but we are also here "that we may go aggressively forth and preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all the world." Our role is not to sit here like a bunch of Little Jack Horners, sticking our thumbs in the Scriptures to come up with some nice orthodox plumbs, so we can pat ourselves on the back and say, "My, what good little boys we are." No! We are here to pledge ourselves to the Scriptures and the Confessions in order that we might be on the right track with the task that God has given us — the task of evangelizing the world.

One reason that the church is having problems in evangelism is because there are so many who are not sure what the mission of the church is. Last year the LCA made a study to determine why it was losing members, and it came to the conclusion that at the local congregational level, problem number 1 was "Uncertainty of purpose." That church body is not the only one which has this problem. I have been to meeting after meeting, workshop after workshop, in which we have gone round and round on the question, "What is the mission of the church?"

The ALC is to elect a new president within a month, and the "Lutheran Standard" sent all the candidates a list of questions to answer. Question No. 1 was, "In your opinion, what is the mission of the church?" Ten to fifteen years ago we didn't have to ask ourselves this question, because we knew what the mission of the church was. God's Word, and the Confessions of the Church had made that mission clear. We knew that our basic task was to GO and PREACH THE GOSPEL OF SALVATION. We knew that our task was to take the message of Jesus Christ to all the world, in order that men might hear and be saved, and in this way the Kingdom of God would be advanced.

Now, however, because our theology is in a state of confusion, many are confused as to our mission. The liberal theological trend has so bewildered the church that many of us honestly asking, "Just what are we supposed to be doing?" When I talk about this confusion as to mission, I think that I should clarify one point, and that is that I believe that both those who are of a liberal persuasion, and those who are of the more conservative persuasion have one common aim here. Both want to advance the Kingdom of God. So basically, we must say that the confusion really is not so much on the matter of mission, but on the matter of message and method. Just as there are some who wonder what they are supposed to do for God in the world, so there are some who wonder what they are supposed to say. As one man put it: "The situation in the church today is somewhat like the moments after a funeral. You know you ought to say something, but you aren't exactly sure what." That pithy question of the Bible now comes to mind here, "If the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself for battle?"

Having stated that theology determines the direction of evangelism, let us see how this works. Let us see how evangelical theology leads to evangelical evangelism, and how liberal theology can lead to an evangelism that is anything but evangelical.

Take the matter of neo-orthodox theology, for instance, and see how it leads to an evangelism which is really not evangelism. Neo-orthodoxy holds to the position that God's revelation of Himself is personal, not propositional, i.e., God reveals Himself by His personal acts in history, and not by any propositional revelation of Himself in the Bible. Therefore, it is claimed that the Bible is not a book with the inspired Word of God, rather it is merely man's record of his experiences with God's activities.

This philosophy leads the neo-orthodox person to reason something like this: "If I am going to help man to know God, then I must help man to experience God's activities." Listen to the words of a liberal, E. A. Aubrey: "Experience precedes theological formulas. In other words, religious experience is more fundamental than theology. Therefore, in order to understand the theology we must go to the experience behind the theology. So also, if we are to assist others with their understanding of God, we do not come to them with formulas, but rather we do what we can to enable them to experience Him."

It is this pattern of thought that causes many to put the emphasis on the Christian being "Christ's Presence" in the world. To emphasize what Jesus *did*, rather than what Jesus *said*. They believe that we successfully evangelize only by acting like Christ, so that through this men might experience God. They play down the Word, and the preaching of the Word, as necessary methods of advancing the Kingdom. They emphasize social action as the primary method of evangelization. They say in essence, "If man can know

God only through experiencing God in action, then we as God's Co-Workers, must help Him to act." This means — not preaching — not telling — but getting involved where God is involved. It means being where the action is. Sometimes it means getting involved violently, so that others can experience God more quickly and more decisively, and thus we can bring about the Kingdom of God more rapidly.

The New Testament makes it clear, however, that while Christ did act, he also had a message for the world. Our task is to proclaim that message. We are to "Go" as He said, and "Preach" and "Teach" the "Good NEWS." Evangelism deals with a message, the announcement and proclamation of that message. God's Word is efficacious: "It shall accomplish that for which it hath been sent." The WORD by the power of the Holy Spirit gets the job done. The great patron saint of our church, Martin Luther, had implicit faith in the Word of God getting things done. In fact when someone asked him how he was able to accomplish so much he replied: "Well, actually Melancthon and I sat and drank our beer, while God's Word wrecked the Pope." (This is not an admonition to "Go and do thou likewise".) But Luther did put a great reliance on the ability of God's Word to accomplish that which God promised it would accomplish. Today, evangelical evangelism must rely on the same promise of God, that His Word "Shall not return void." We must advance God's Kingdom with that Word.

Of course, this does not mean that there are no deeds to go along with that Word. Actions, and activities, and the personality of the evangelist are tremendously important. In his book, *Evangelism And The Sovereignty Of God*, J. I. Packard says: "You cannot speak God's Word effectively to a man until you have established a relationship with him in which he feels that you respect him, and are concerned about him, and are treating him as a human being, and not just as some kind of case." The evangelist is concerned about the whole man. He remembers that the same God who said "GO" also said "GIVE." He also remembers that the Lord who said "SHARE" also said "SPEAK." Evangelism is not done in a vacuum. It is done only in an atmosphere of genuine love. The evangelical evangelist must project an image of total concern.

You can go and talk to a man about Jesus Christ, about his need for the Savior, but in our society that man knowing that you represent the church (St. Luke's, St. Mark's, Trinity) is going to look over your shoulder at your church. He is going to look at the Missouri Synod, at the ALC, at the LCA, and at the Christian Church in general; if he doesn't like what he hears or sees, he isn't going to pay much attention to what you say about Jesus Christ. On the other hand, if he likes what he hears, and likes what he sees, then he is going to pay more attention to the Word you bring him about Christ. Image is important.

The Apostle Paul recognized this. He tells us again and again that the Christian should have godly love, that he should be sober, and honest, "so as to give our enemies no chance of speaking evil of us." Anyone who communicates the Gospel, therefore, must be concerned about his deeds and his actions and his love to the world. The evangelist must do good, he must show "brotherly love to all men." This means not only putting off the sins of the flesh, but it means letting the Spirit develop His fruit in your life — the fruit of joy, peace, gentleness, and so forth.

Having a winsome spirit is important. Alice Twilly in her book, *That Ye May Have Love*, tells of a certain lady who was always evangelizing, always going about telling people of the Lord. She says this lady had an impeccable character, so to speak. For instance, she was never known to swear — but she was the kind of person who makes everyone else swear. So personality, actions, attitudes are important for the effective communication of the Gospel. Basically, however, we must rely on God's Word as the primary tool in evangelism, because it is that Word and the proclamation of that Word that brings a man to faith, because it is that Word that has the power to convert.

It is definitely the "Sword of the Lord" that cuts into the heart of man. It is *His* instrument for advancing *His* kingdom in the World.

"THE GOOD WORD"

Evangelism is done with "Good News," not just the Word, but the "GOOD Word." The truth of God's Word is absolute, but truth is not always "Good" news. The Word of God brings an absolute message, but it is not always a message of good news, because news can be classified as "good" only in the light of a "bad" situation, or in contrast to news that has been "bad." The statement that God forgives sin through the blood of Christ is an absolute truth. However, this is good news only to the man who is suffering from guilt. It is good news only to the man who is agonizing for forgiveness. To others it may simply be news, news that is interesting, news that is provocative, but not necessarily *good* news.

Jesus said: "They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick." God's Word, and the Confessions of the Church, tell us just how sick man really is. The first five chapters of Isaiah describe the horrible sickness of God's people in those days. Romans 1 and 2 describe how sick, morally sick, man is without God. The Confessions make it clear that all humans are born in original sin. They are born without any love for God, and without any fear of God, and the naturally consequence of this is that man is totally corrupt and is therefore condemned to eternal death. That's a pretty bad picture, a very gloomy picture, and it is a picture we must paint of man. Into this dark picture, into this gloomy scene comes the good news of God's love. "Herein is the love of God made manifest, that even though we were sinners, Christ died for us." God has a word, a good word for the world, that tells us there is a wonderful healing, a marvelous cure for the sickness He diagnoses in another part of the Scriptures. So it is, that our Lutheran Confessions have always insisted that the Law, and the preaching of sin as sin is necessary. Man cannot see any need for a Savior, he cannot realize his need for Christ, and the Cross, and the Blood until he recognizes his lostness. So we have to present the bad picture, as well as the good picture. There must be Bad news in our proclamation as well as Good news.

The liberal theologian doesn't see it that way. He has a message of good news for the world alright, but it is good news that announces, "Don't worry, things are not as bad as you have heard they are." The liberal believes, "There is no such thing as original sin. Man is, of course, not perfect, but with a little effort he can improve himself. He is on his way to becoming fully human. And the world will get better and better, if we work at it hard enough." He also says: "There is no judgment of God to come after death," "There is no hell," and "No being is lost for eternity." Why does he say that? He says it because he believes man can only know God through experience. If man can know God only as God acts, and man observes those acts of God and experiences Him through His actions, then the way for man to be drawn to God is through pleasant experiences. Negative experiences would only drive man away from God. "You can draw more flies with honey than with vinegar," he feels.

So the liberal theologian theorizes that if we want man to know God, we must help man to experience only the positive, only the pleasant. Talk of repentance, or sorrow for sin, or obedience, or believing the absolutes of Scripture, is simply unthinkable, because all of these are unpleasant experiences that call for a change of heart, a change of mind, surrender to God, and submission of the whole being to God. So we cannot ask man to think about being converted, or to change his way of thinking or his way of life, because to ask him to do that is painful. As much as possible, the liberal theologian avoids asking man to change to meet God's absolutes, instead he adjusts the absolutes of God so that man will have an easier time accepting them.

God's Word calls for a change in man, but people resist that change. They are like the young Air Force lieutenant I talked to one time. I asked him, "What church do you go to?" He answered by saying, "I don't go to any."

"Why not?" I asked. "Well," he said, "I guess it is because I haven't found a religion that fits into my life." I responded by saying, "But, Lieutenant, you have it all wrong. You are not to fit religion into your life. You are to fit your life into religion." That wasn't good news for that man, because it required a change in his heart and life, and he didn't want to make that change.

Liberal theology would say to him: "Listen, we have some good news for you. We've adjusted Christianity to that you can easily put it into your life. We have adjusted the Scriptures, and we have adjusted God. We have whittled away at them, and chopped away at them so that you can fit them into your scheme of things without any discomfort at all."

So liberal theology, which claims that man experiences God only through pleasant events, seeks to give man a message that is very acceptable. It doesn't ask that painful question, "Are you saved?"; instead it pleasantly inquires, "Did you know that you are saved?" It makes adjustments in the Word so that it can be acceptable to all.

Scripture says, "There is now, therefore, no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus." Liberal theology says, "There is now, therefore, no condemnation." Period. Scripture says, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Liberal theology simply says: "God so loved the World." To confront men with the need for Christ to escape condemnation, or to believe in order to have everlasting life, is to confront them with a distressing thought. So that distressing thought is eliminated. Man is told there is nothing to worry about. The future is rosy and bright, and salvation is assured. There is no need to undergo any painful soul searching about sin, or condemnation before God. The good news is "Relax, man, no need to get uptight. You've got it made."

This is the type of message to which Brother Weber made reference in his opening devotion when he talked about the danger of preaching designed simply to appeal to men. This is the type of "evangelism" that liberal theology produces.

Those of us who are conservative in our theology, who believe the whole counsel of God, must paint the picture darkly. We cannot promise man that this world is going to get better and better year by year. For the pall of sin hangs upon all of creation — "The whole creation groans and travails in pain" until now. 1970 — September the 2nd. But we also have the Word of Hope. The Good News. Out of the darkness a light has shined, Jesus Christ brings salvation, not the salvation of this world, but salvation for a world to come.

This is the message of "GOOD News." The task of the evangelist is to proclaim that Good News. He sees man, and all the world looking into darkness, with no joy, no hope. He doesn't go to him and say, "Things aren't really as bad as they look." Really the evangelist says in honesty, "Things are bad, but there is a Hope. A Savior. His name is Jesus Christ." He points the world to that Hope.

The task of evangelism is symbolized by a situation that happened to me at a Bible camp some years ago. Every evening we wanted to end our day with a different type of devotion. Someone had given the camp one of Thorvaldsen's statues of the Savior, where Jesus stands with His hands out, inviting, "Come unto Me." One of the pastors suggested that we take this statue out into the darkest part of the woods, and ring it about with electric torches, and leave them off until we gathered all the campers in a circle about the statue. Then we would turn on the lights to illuminate the image of Jesus, and then sing "Beautiful Savior." I had the task of taking a group of 8 or 10 to the devotion site. It was a very dark night, and we could not see our hands in front of our faces. As we stood there looking into blackness, suddenly we heard singing, "Beautiful Savior, King of Creation." We, however, had nothing to sing about for all we could see was gloom. Confusion reigned in our hearts and minds until suddenly someone whispered, "Turn around,

take a look." We did, and we saw this lovely image of our Savior. Then we too were able to sing, "Beautiful Savior."

Before we turned around, we had nothing to sing about. There was no joy, no gladness. But what a difference that turning about made, and we saw the image of our Savior. How thankful we were for the word, "Turn around. Take a look."

This is the task of evangelism. Go to the world looking on gloom, darkness, hopelessness, confusion, despair, and asking that world simply to "Turn around"; "Take A Look" at the only hope man has. If we can do that, we will indeed be bearers of good news, and we will fulfill that mission given us long ago.