

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 65:1

January 2001

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Doctrine and Evangelism

Alvin L. Barry

One of my favorite biblical themes is faithfulness and outreach. In fact, at the 1995 convention of our Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod I held up both of these words, "faithfulness" and "outreach," for the Synod to bear in mind as it moves into the future. Those who had been at the previous convention, in 1992, no doubt recognized that the two words were simply a paraphrase of something I had already said: "Keep the message straight, Missouri! Get the message out, Missouri!"

In 1998 the Synod in convention took a bold step. It resolved to spend three years in intensive preparation and the next ten years, the first decade of the new millennium (2001-2010), in extensive outreach with the gospel. This effort has been gathering steam under the title, "Tell the Good News about Jesus." Telling the good news, of course, is evangelism. Telling the good news about Jesus inevitably puts us into the realm of doctrine. Therefore this paper is entitled, "Doctrine and Evangelism." It is really just one more way of playing that one same violin string: "faithfulness and outreach," keeping the message straight and getting the message out.

Prolog

I do not like to be negative, or to begin with a minus point. But a terrible idea has been afoot in Christian circles for a long time. It has taken many different forms. If our Synod is to carry out its resolve to tell the good news about Jesus, we must face this idea head-on and correct it. The terrible idea is that doctrine and evangelism do not mix, that they are related to one another like water is related to fire. Perhaps you have heard it said, "Are we concerned about doctrine, or are we concerned about people?"

Concern about doctrine has at times suffered in the name of evangelism. Someone has shared with me an observation made by Richard Hofstadter, a professor of American history at Columbia University. He wrote that in the middle of the nineteenth century, theological discussion in most church bodies "was subordinated to practical objectives which were conceived to be far more important. The peculiar view or practices of any denomination, if they were not

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considered good for the general welfare or the common mission enterprise, were sacrificed to this mission without excessive regret. And the mission itself was defined by evangelism." This meant that, as many looked at it, "the bond that held most denominations together need not be a traditional, inherited, confessional bond."¹ Concern about doctrine was sacrificed to what people were convinced was the cause of evangelism.

There is another side to this matter, exemplified today by pastors and others who spend so much time on the finer points of theology – or at least on what they think is indispensable to such fine points – that they take no opportunity to tell the good news about Jesus to the unchurched. They run out of time, for they allow themselves to run out.

I am reminded of one churchman who said it would be good for theologians to swap places with frontline missionaries for a while. But of course, pastors and laypeople in congregations cannot afford the luxury of overspecialization. Those on the front lines have to be concerned about both faithfulness *and* outreach, doctrine *and* evangelism, confession of the truth *and* confessing the truth. Thanks be to our good and gracious God, this is exactly where the Scriptures equip us all to be.

Doctrine and evangelism are wedded in the history of the early church. This union lies embedded, for example, in the book of Acts. Let no one put asunder what God has joined together!

I like to recall that two events stood out as so important in the church of the apostolic era that each comes up three times in Acts. First is the conversion of Paul, which is described in chapter 9. Paul repeats it when he defends himself in chapter 22 and again in chapter 26. The other event is the conversion of Cornelius' household. Acts 10 gives that account. Peter, who preached to Cornelius and his family, tells the story again in chapter 11 and mentions it once more in chapter 15. These two incidents provide a powerful a clue to the message of Acts. They also say something about the church's faithfulness and outreach, not as an "either/or" proposition but a "both/and."

¹Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1963), 83-84.

Mission to the Gentiles

The conversion of Paul and the story of Peter and Cornelius share several features. The first is mission to the Gentile world. Mission to the Gentiles had been there from the very beginning in the apostolic church: "You will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). One encounters a lot more Gentiles than Jews when going to the "ends of the earth."

But for many people it proved hard to support the idea of Gentile missions enthusiastically. There were several reasons, but let us not overlook plain old-fashioned prejudice that says, "Do we have to let *them* in?"

In some subtle and in some not-so-subtle ways, the Lord had been nudging the church toward the Gentile world throughout its early days. He moved the church dramatically forward through the outbreak of an intense persecution upon the stoning of Stephen. Christians started spreading out from Jerusalem, telling the good news wherever they went (Acts 8:4). At first they were talking about Christ only with Jews, but that was about to change.

Acts 8 goes on to tell of Philip proclaiming Christ to the Samaritans and baptizing them. They were delighted to hear the message. That is, they responded in faith. Yet the Holy Spirit did not come upon them, at least not in any visible or outward way, until Peter and John arrived from Jerusalem and could see what was going on (Acts 8:14-17). Then the Holy Spirit was outpoured in such a way that they could tell. The apostles could go back to Jerusalem and say, "This is the right move. It is okay to reach out to Samaritans." The Lord was nudging His people further and further in the direction of the Gentiles, but they had not altogether made it yet.

Conversion of Paul

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus proved to be quite a moment for mission to the Gentiles! For this Saul, eventually called Paul, was going to become the apostle to the Gentiles. When God told Ananias to baptize Saul, He added, "This one is My chosen vessel to carry My Name before the nations" – the ἐθνῶν in Greek, the Gentiles (Acts 9:15).

Many have pointed out that Paul was the thirteenth apostle. Until then the number had been twelve. Judas was replaced after he killed himself,

then there were twelve again: twelve apostles, like twelve tribes in Israel, each descended from one of Jacob's twelve sons (Acts 1:23-26). But now, in the New Testament era, the gospel would go out everywhere, spilling over far beyond the bounds of Israel. There were no longer twelve apostles, but thirteen.

Number thirteen, Paul, was going to be prominent in telling the good news about Jesus to the Gentiles. Faced by an angry mob in Jerusalem, Paul later recalled that this was exactly what the Lord had told him shortly after his conversion: "Go, I will send you far off to the Gentiles" (Acts 22:31). "Not to the Gentiles!" the crowd must have thought. These words of Jesus obviously made quite an impression on Paul himself. He wrote to the Ephesians, who were mostly Gentiles: "But now in Christ Jesus, you who were *far off* have been brought near in the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13). They had been brought near when someone like Paul took the saving message of God's word to them.

The Master planned that Paul would be apostle to the Gentiles, and by His grace Paul threw himself into this calling with great vigor. He wrote about agreeing with the so-called "pillars" of the Jerusalem church—James, Peter, and John—that he (Paul) and his associates would go to the Gentile world (Galatians 2:9). He wrote the Romans, "I am the apostle to the Gentiles and I magnify my ministry" (Romans 11:13). This same Paul, once anxious to travel to faraway cities persecuting Christians, was now eager to go to distant places like Spain in the service of his Lord and for the proclamation of the gospel. No question about it, the conversion of Paul was filled with implications for mission, especially to the Gentiles.

Peter and Cornelius

The conversion of Cornelius' household had similar import. Cornelius was a Roman, an army officer. He was not a Jew. His family was not Jewish. They were Gentiles, Romans. Perhaps they were God-fearing Romans, but Romans all the same. They were not distant cousins of the Jews who had gotten religiously mixed-up, like the Samaritans. They were not proselytes, adult converts who had come into Judaism.

Many factors might have initially tempted Peter to say "No" to an opportunity to visit this Roman centurion's home. When Cornelius' messengers went to fetch Peter, he was at the seacoast city of Joppa. Some centuries before, another messenger of God named Jonah had boarded a

ship from that same city and sailed out into the Mediterranean Sea because he did not want to go to the Gentile population of Nineveh (Jonah 1:3 and following). Now here was Peter, also a messenger of God, and the question arises all over: would he get on a ship too? Would he also try to run?

He would not, in part because God had prepared Peter with a vision in which the Lord told him to eat animals that were unclean under the ceremonial law (Acts 10:10-13). Later, in case Peter harbored any nagging doubts, he discovered upon reaching the home of Cornelius that an angel had told Cornelius in a vision to send his men to get Peter at Simon the Tanner's house in Joppa (Acts 10:30-33). These were the men who arrived just after Peter's vision ended (Acts 10:17-18).

Once again, mission to the Gentiles emerges as the theme. As his time with Cornelius unfolded, Peter noticed that the Holy Spirit was outpoured on this Roman household in the same way He had been outpoured on the Christians in Jerusalem at Pentecost. Peter said, "The Holy Spirit fell on them, just as also upon us, at the beginning" (Acts 11:15). He added, "God gave the same gift to them as to us" (Acts 11:17).

Application

Sometimes we are prone to say, "If only we were more like the first-century church." But we are like the first-century church. We also say, "Do we have to let *them* in?" Do our congregations readily accept people of all backgrounds?

In individual hearts and minds, we also ask: "Do we have to let *them* in? If we do, what kinds of problems will we have?" We believe that God loved the world, but we find it hard to think that he loved certain "undesirables" and that He wants us to share our love with them as well as the blessings of salvation. We also need to get the message about mission to the Gentiles. It is a good thing this message is repeated so often in Acts.

This is not a matter of giving ourselves a pep talk. For, in the end, it will not be pep talks that cause the outreach that has been going on for centuries in the history of the Christian church. This kind of effort cannot be sustained for so long a period of time on pep talks. There is something about the gospel message itself that simply will not stay contained. It reaches out to all people, no matter who they may be, and draws them in.

Justification by Grace, for Christ's Sake, through Faith

Besides mission to the Gentiles, there is another big point in common between the two stories that are repeated so often in Acts, the conversion of Paul and that of Peter and Cornelius. It is really the "other side of the coin" of mission to the Gentiles: justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith.

We have now moved onto some very familiar "Lutheran" ground. Moreover, we have moved onto unabashedly doctrinal ground. To mix the metaphor a bit, if we have been digging about on these grounds to unearth the relationship between doctrine and evangelism in Acts, we have just hit a gusher!

Sometimes the wonderful doctrine of justification by grace lies so squarely beneath our noses that we do not see it. We become surprised when we find it welling up from the Scriptures in yet another place. But here it is, in Acts.

Justification by grace forms the basis for mission to the Gentiles. It is the only reason and the only means by which Gentiles could come into the kingdom with no strings attached. Only it can explain why a Saul of Tarsus would be welcome in the church of Jesus Christ. It is the driving force in our Lord's gospel call to all people.

Conversion of Paul

At times, Paul mused in his epistles about how much zeal he had maintained for the traditions of the ancestors and how good a Pharisee he had been by all conventional standards. By his own account, he was

circumcised on the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness which comes about in the law blameless. But the various things in which I was coming out ahead, I came to think of as one great big loss on account of Christ. Indeed, I go on considering them as a loss because of what surpasses them, the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord. On account of Him I have lost all things. I regard them as repugnant rubbish in order that I might gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness which proceeds from the law but righteousness through faith in Christ—the kind that comes from God by faith (Philippians 3:5-9).

The robe of righteousness Christ had prepared for Paul and that Christ had placed on him, the righteousness Paul received by faith, was better than any robe of righteousness he himself could fashion. No matter how zealous Paul was, how faithful, or how sincere according to the traditions of his ancestors, he would always fall far short of God's demands. Elsewhere he wrote that he had been "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent person," immediately adding that "the grace of our God overflowed with faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." Paul summed it all up: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am number one" (1 Timothy 1:13-15).

Any of us can say the same thing. It was not only in place of Paul, but in place of you and me that Jesus cried out upon the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). And it was on account of Paul, the blasphemer, the persecutor, the murderer, that Jesus said, "It is finished" (John 19:30) and died. It was on account of us as well.

Peter and Cornelius

But not only is the conversion of Paul about justification by grace. The story about Peter and Cornelius is too. Its emphasis on justification began already before Peter ever laid eyes on Cornelius. It started with Peter's vision. A sheet came down from heaven, the ceremonially unclean animals came out, the voice said, "Kill and eat," and Peter answered, "Lord, they're unclean." Then came the reply, "What God calls clean, don't go calling unclean" (Acts 10:13-15).

That point goes back to Jesus Himself, Who said: "It's not the things that go into a man that defile him. It's the things that come out of a man." Thus Jesus was declaring all foods clean (Mark 7:14-19). He would have to pay for saying things like that, not merely because people would grow angry at Him for saying them and eventually kill Him, but also because this was exactly what God wanted. Jesus went to the cross not because people put Him there, but because God did. He fulfilled the law in addition to paying for the sins of the whole world, your sins and mine too. No mere man could do it, but this was the Man Who was also God.

But it is not only in Peter's vision that justification by grace is taught in the story of Peter and Cornelius. It also comes in at the climax, when the Holy Spirit was outpoured on Gentiles who had been living all their lives without the Old Testament law. If salvation were by the law, they never should have received the Holy Spirit. But since they were receiving the

Holy Spirit, salvation is shown not to be by the works of the law. This was what Peter came to appreciate. He did not fail to note that the Holy Spirit descended upon his audience while he was speaking to them. There is an important rhetorical question in Galatians: "Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by hearing with faith?" (Galatians 3:2). The Gentiles in Cornelius' family obviously did not receive the Spirit by the works of the Law. They *did* receive Him by hearing in faith.

Application

Like the conversion of Paul, the story of Peter and Cornelius has justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith written all over it. Again, it is a good thing that these accounts are repeated so frequently in Acts. For it becomes too easy for us lose track of justification by grace. We slip into thinking, "It's too simple that way! Too easy! Too good to be true." But it is true.

This is the thing about the gospel message that will not stay contained. Since salvation is full and free in Jesus Christ, it is for everyone. Justification provides a basis for universal mission, evangelism to all people.

It also constitutes the most powerful tool to be used in evangelism. The message of justification by grace reaches out to people right where they are, dead in trespasses and sins, without hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:1, 12). It brings them in by showering upon them all the blessings our Lord bought at such a great cost. The apostles knew this, as did our forefathers in our own Synod:

The only means the apostles know to carry out the work that Christ has given them to do is the Gospel. They have a mighty confidence in the effectiveness of the Gospel under all conditions and circumstances; they face people who are friendly and are willing to listen, and they tell them the Gospel-story; and they face howling mobs, who drag them out to stone them, and they tell them the Gospel-story; the jailer who was narrowly saved from committing suicide, and the governor who for two years hopes to extort a bribe, and the king who feels uncomfortable and would rather not have

listened . . . and the adulteress who has almost forgotten how to blush, they must all hear the same story.²

Finally, the doctrine of justification by God's grace becomes a norm for evangelism within the larger setting of the normative Scriptures. I find it interesting that in the Acts 15 council, mission to the Gentiles was evaluated in two ways. Peter pointed out that it went hand-in-glove with justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith, and James showed that it was in accord with the Scriptures. So in our day, we can ask: in our various outreach efforts, are we remaining faithful to the great truth of justification by grace? It is too good to be true, but it is true! And are we standing on the Scriptures? There is no way we can consider the audience – not the message – to be sovereign.

Justification becomes the beating heart of all our doctrinal faithfulness to God, for it lies at the center of all our church's teaching. Luther, who knew a thing or two about this topic, said that justification by faith "is the chief point and cornerstone, which alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves and defends the church of God; and without it, the church of God is not able to subsist for a single hour."³ Or, putting the same thing another way, he said, "Where this single article remains pure, Christendom will remain pure, in beautiful harmony, and without any schisms. But where it does not remain pure, it is impossible to repel any error or heretical spirit."⁴

Epilog

In this article I have examined the two major events that are repeated in Acts, the conversion of Paul and the story of Peter and Cornelius. Both of these accounts have two central themes in common: mission to the Gentiles and justification by faith.

²Theodore Hoyer, "Missionary Forward Movement in the Light of the Book of Acts," *Proceedings of the Seventeenth Convention of the Southern Illinois District of the Ev. Luther. Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States assembled at Belleville, Illinois, October 15-19, 1934* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), 30.

³Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 58 volumes (Weimar, 1883-), 30 II:650.

⁴FC SD III:6, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 540.

Notice how Acts itself describes these events. The last time the story of Paul's conversion is told, Paul noted that God said He was rescuing Paul "from the people and from the *Gentiles*, to whom I send you [mission to the *Gentiles*] to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the authority of Satan to God, that they may receive *forgiveness* of sins and a share among those who are sanctified *by faith in me* [justification by faith]" (Acts 26:17-18). Elsewhere, after Peter told the story of the conversion of Cornelius' family, the Jerusalem church responded: "Having heard these things they were silent, and glorified God saying, 'God has also *given* [grace] the *Gentiles* repentance unto life'" (Acts 11:18). For his part, Luther observed that Acts "emphasizes so powerfully not only the preaching of the apostles about faith in Christ . . . but also the examples and the instances of this teaching, how the *Gentiles* as well as Jews were *justified* through the Gospel alone, without the law."⁵

To speak of the close connection between biblical, Christ-centered doctrine and vital, vibrant evangelistic outreach is relatively easy to do on the basis of Acts. It amounts to pointing out what fairly jumps off the page almost every time you turn one. The big challenge arises in our own minds and hearts. For recognizing the close relationship of doctrine and evangelism, of faithfulness and outreach, really calls upon us to refocus both our perceptions and our priorities.

Under the heading of perceptions, we need to be acutely aware that in the more than fifty years since World War II, the theology of evangelism in virtually every church body across our country has been influenced by the theology of the Evangelicals. It is a broad, but essentially accurate, statement to say that "The whole American Evangelical experience has become the primary evangelistic paradigm for Lutherans in North America."⁶ In reclaiming a Lutheran view of evangelism we will perhaps need to change the way we perceive the evangelistic challenge and the ways the propose to meet it.

⁵*Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 volumes, edited by J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986), 35:363.

⁶John Pless, "Liturgy and Evangelism in Service of the *Mysteria Dei*," *Mysteria Dei: Essays in Honor of Kurt Marquart*, edited by Paul T. McCain and John R. Stephenson (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1999), 226.

We are also invited to refocus our priorities. Looking at the history of the early church, it is impossible for us to come away with a smugly contented and self-satisfied attitude as regards the church and its role in the world. Acts tells us of a persistent, even pugnacious church that did not wait for the world to come to it. It went into the world with the gospel message, confronting unbelief and unbelievers with the sword of the Spirit, even in situations where everything seemed stacked against the evangelistic cause. Nor did the church wait until all its internal problems were solved before it reached out. In the process of outreach, the church learned a few lessons from the ascended Lord the hard way, lessons of patience and persistence.

Doctrines and evangelism definitely go together in Acts. I hope and pray that they do for us too, and that together they continue to shape both our Synod's perceptions and its priorities. For ultimately, the only good news we have to tell is the good news *about Jesus*. And what an opportunity the Lord has given us to tell it at the start of a new decade, century, and millennium!

As we tell this good news about Jesus, God will bless—richly and mightily.