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An Evangelistic Ministry

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I COUNT IT A PRIVILEGE to be able to speak to you who are about to enter the office of the professional ministry of the Church. I want to say congratulations and wish for you an exciting and meaningful ministry. There is only one way I know by which you can have that kind of ministry, the kind that I'm sure you are dreaming about here tonight, and that is by making it an evangelistic ministry. I say this on the basis of my experience of fourteen years in the parish ministry, nine years on a synodical campus, and now two in a synodical office, together with the testimony of hundreds of pastors with whom I have talked in every part of this country and Canada. Those pastors who are enjoying their ministry, who are excited about their work, are those who have an evangelistic ministry.

Let me tonight briefly share with you four things that describe this evangelistic ministry as I see it.

1. *Evangelism must be first*

First, evangelism must be first; it must have top priority. But I had better define what I mean by evangelism, for I find that in the church everyone makes his own definition of evangelism and some of those definitions are as broad as pastoral theology. By "evangelism," I mean: "offering the good news of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ to those who do not have it, and urging them to accept it." That must take priority; it must be the overriding theme of all that I do in my ministry.

The problem is that we find it easy to say "yes," to the great commission, to say in words that evangelism is top priority, but in practice to get sidetracked on other concerns. It happened at New Orleans and we passed a resolution repenting over that fact. Then we passed resolutions asking our administrative leaders from the president on down, as well as the congregations of the Synod, to give evangelism first place. Perhaps we speak so much about it because we haven't really done it as a church. The record of our growth figures certainly reflects that failure. In 1972, the latest year for which figures are available, the number of adults baptized or confirmed was 25,276, which was the lowest in 20 years. Forty-three percent of our congregations that year confirmed or baptized one or no adults.

We often get sidetracked by substituting function for goal. A pastor told me last week of a vicar who said his interest was counseling. He wasn't going to get involved in evangelism. Counseling is important. Worship and education are important. The church as the body of Christ needs to be nurtured and built into a strong body. But counseling, workshop, education are functions of the body as it

lives and grows. They are not the purpose and goal. Why do we want a strong body? Why do we exercise our physical bodies, eat the right foods, and keep them healthy? So we can sit back and say, see what a healthy body I have? We want the body to be healthy so we can do a job, and God gave His body, the church, the job he wanted it to do—"Be my ambassadors, my instruments, my witnesses to reach out to the world." That's the over-arching goal or purpose. Everything else that the church or the minister does must have that kind of out-reach dimension.

2. *Evangelism must be personal*

Evangelism must, secondly, be personal. Evangelism is offering good news to people, not just proclaiming it into space, without concern for a target. If the recent movements in the church are trying to tell us something—the Jesus movement, the charismatic, the small group Bible study, even the personal commitment in the Kennedy evangelism program—they are saying that people want personal attention. They want a Gospel that is applied to their individual and personal needs.

Dean Kelley in his book, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*, called the most significant religious book of 1972, shocked some churches by his research as to why churches grow. Some of the old-line denominations thought that for a church to prosper, it must be relevant to the times, be involved in social action, ecumenical, tolerant of other views, with lower standards to join, and few demands of its people. Kelley discovered that this is the way for a church to lose members. For a church to grow, it must have a message which it can speak with conviction to the spiritual and religious needs of people. People want a personal religion.

That kind of evangelism which is personal must begin with the pastor. In our impersonal society it is easy for the pastor to get so caught up in organization and administration that he too begins to forget people. Last fall I heard Rev. Edward Bertram speak at a mission to the ministers of the district-wide week of open house services held in Michigan. He has been a missionary in Taiwan for 12 years. Now he had been back visiting and speaking in various places in the United States. The pastors asked him to share his impressions of today's pastor. His first comment was that he was surprised at how impersonal so many pastors were. They wear masks. They live up to the image they think others expect of them, even in front of other pastors. Evangelism must be personal, beginning with the pastor.

3. *Evangelism must be whole*

Thirdly, evangelism must be whole. Man is more than a body. He is a person with mental and spiritual, psychological and social needs as well as physical. Evangelism, that offer of good news, forgiveness, life and salvation, must take into consideration the whole man with all of his needs. It must deal with his life situation, without, however, forgetting the spiritual.

The church has been struggling with this for many years, the

tension between word and deed in evangelism, between traditional evangelism which emphasizes personal salvation and an evangelism which deals only with bettering the physical condition of people by seeking to change social and political structures. This is what evangelical Christians around the world see as the failure of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, and why they will meet in a separate congress on world evangelization this summer at Lausanne.

Take an illustration. In a bulletin of the American Friends Service Committee there was a description of the world as a global village of 100 people. Of these hundred people 70 are not able to read; 1 has had a college education; 50 suffer malnutrition; 80 live in substandard housing; 6 are Americans and those 6 control half the village income. That is all important and as Christians we are concerned about changing that scene. But what too many in the church have been afraid to add to that picture is that of those 100 in the village 73 would not know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and if that is true, the only thing I know for them is an eternity of hell.

Too long we have reacted to abuse on either side of this question and tried to put one side against the other. Rev. Schwarzen-truber, pastor of Bethesda Mennonite Church in Ward 19 in St. Louis, a changing community, tells of visiting an 80-year-old woman one day who complained of sore feet. He examined them and discovered open sores that had maggots in them. He asks "What shall I do? Tell her she must believe in Jesus, or wash her feet?" That's an unfair question. It is not either-or but both-and. We clean the dirty feet, but we also share the good news of abundant life here and now and forever.

4. *Evangelism must be for everyone*

So evangelism, we are saying, must be first, it must be personal, it must be whole, and now, the last point, adds that evangelism is not only the concern of the pastor, but of every Christian, every man, woman, and child who knows Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It is for everyone. Oscar Feucht in a new paperback emphasizes this in the title, *Everyman a Minister*. It is an explanation and application of the priesthood of all believers. Every Christian is a priest, we have said since the Reformation, who can read his own Bible and say his own prayers, but we need to apply that also to sharing his faith with others.

In *A Study of Generations* scale 21 dealt with evangelism. It used such questions as: In the last year how often did you invite someone to church, share your faith with a Christian or a non-Christian, give a tract, visit someone's home. The conclusion of the researchers was that half of the Lutherans in this country do some witnessing, but that only 10% do any considerable amount of it. As I read the book of Acts I get the distinct impression that all the lay people wherever they went shared the good news that they had. 100% then—10% now. Why?

When I ask that question of groups of lay people and let them discuss it in small groups, I can write two reasons on the blackboard that I know will appear on the top of any list they draw up. The same two reasons surface over and over. Those are: (1) fear of being rejected or being considered a fanatic; and (2) fear of not knowing what to say. The first one is related to a willingness to pay the price of being a committed Christian. The second one lies in the whole attitude of the church today toward the great commission.

Think of the average member of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod who has gone regularly to Sunday school, to church, and confirmation instruction. By the time he is 30 years old he will have had over 2000 hours of religion, formal religious instruction, and worship in addition to the Bible reading he had in home devotions and personal study. Now why is that person with over 2000 hours unable to share what he believes and what the church teaches? The fault must lie with the attitude that shaped the instruction and worship. We have sought to equip and build the body but have lost the purpose of doing it—to equip for witness. That is the task of the pastor or the teacher, that is the goal of worship and education—to motivate and prepare for outreach.

When your ministry captures that vision you will be able to experience the meaningful, exciting, happy ministry that I think St. Paul had. He summed his attitude up in the verse I want to leave with you as my text:

Acts 20:24: "I reckon my life to be worth nothing to me, in order that I may complete my mission and finish the work the Lord Jesus gave me to do, which is to declare the good news of the grace of God."