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# The Primary Mission of the Church and Its Detractors

Erwin J. Kolb

Herman Gockel, well known Missouri Synod lecturer and author, used to tell the story of the pastor who prepared his confirmation class for their public examination with memorized responses. One of the questions he asked each year, in German, was this: “Warum sind wir Menschen denn hier auf Erden?” (“Why are we here on earth?”) The robot-like response was this: “um in den Himmel zu kommen” (“in order to go to heaven”).

If that be true, why are we still here? God ought to take us to heaven as soon as we are baptized or come to faith. Then we should be sure to get there. But God does not do that. He leaves us on earth because He has something for us to do here for Him.

I do not know how apocryphal that story is but, assuming that some Missouri Synod Lutherans were trained in that type of thinking, it is no wonder that we find a pervasive “maintenance mentality” in our church body. A young pastor said to me recently after working several years to lead his congregation into some outreach activities, including a pre-school to serve his community, “I did not realize how deeply rooted the maintenance mentality is in our older Lutherans.”

People ask me, “What will it take for the Missouri Synod to again become a growing church?” I simply say, “We must focus on our primary mission.” That involves two things, first to understand what the primary mission is and secondly to organize our activities with the intention of accomplishing it.

That may sound very simple. In reality it is a very difficult thing for us. The primary mission is often confused by what I call detractors from our primary mission. The purpose of this presentation is to look at the primary mission and then to look at the detractors. By “detractors” I mean the things that take our attention, our energy, and our resources away from the primary mission.

## *I. The Primary Mission Is to Save the Lost*

We are accustomed in recent years to hear that the primary mission of the church is to make disciples of all nations, according to the Great Commission. But that statement is often diluted as we shall see later. I choose to start talking

about the mission with the simple statement of Jesus, which is very difficult to dilute or confuse, "I am come to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

#### A. *God Sent His Son to Save the Lost*

Several years ago, NAME developed a document entitled "A Theological Statement" which suggested, "The purpose of God's missionary activity is expressed in John 3:16-17." It pointed to the sharp contrast between "perish" and "condemn" and "save" and "eternal life":

For God so loved the world that He *gave* His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not *perish* but have *eternal life*. For God did not send His Son into the world to *condemn* the world, but to *save* the world through Him.

In addition to describing His mission with the words "to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10), Jesus said "I have come not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). The Apostle Paul says, "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15).

#### B. *Jesus Sent His Disciples to Carry on His Mission*

The mission of followers of Jesus, or His church, is the same as His. He said, "As the father has sent Me, I am sending you" (John 20:21), and He stated in His prayer to the Father for the church, "As Thou didst sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18). The Great Commission formalizes that mission in the most complete way we have in the Scripture (Matthew 28:18-20):

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

To commission someone is to "entrust them with a task and give them the authority to act in one's stead." There are four verbs in the Great Commission. The imperative is "make disciples" and the supporting participles are "go, baptize, teach." Jesus was emphasizing that the purpose for which He came and which He extends to His followers is to "make disciples" or "save the lost."

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### C. God Sent the Spirit to Enable the Mission

Not only did God send His Son to bring an estranged world back to Himself by removing the sin which separated it and then sending His church to tell the world that it was reconciled, but He also sent His Spirit to enable that mission. The Spirit, who is sent from both the Father and the Son, was sent to fill those who were to tell the message in order to “teach” all things (John 14:26), “to remind” the apostles of “everything Jesus said,” to “testify about” Jesus (John 15:26), and to give power and boldness to them (Acts 1:8; 4:31).

The Spirit works not only in the heart of the witness, however. He works also in the heart of the prospective believer to prepare that heart and then to create faith (1 Corinthians 12:13). Without the Spirit the mission could never be accomplished, but with the Spirit it can and will be done!

### II. Some of Our Language Dilutes the Mission

There has been some objection to the use of the term “primary mission,” even though we have used it often. “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles” of 1972 speaks thus Article II:

We believe, teach, and confess that the *primary mission* of the church is to make disciples of every nation by bearing witness to Jesus Christ through the teaching of the Gospel and administration of the sacraments.

The CTCR document entitled “Evangelism and Church Growth” uses a different word—objective: “According to the Scriptures, the Christian church has *one objective* in all of its mission efforts—to make disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ” (page 8).

In addition to the word “objective,” other statements use these words: “goal,” “task,” “activity,” “function,” and “purpose.” Confusion sets in by a careless or imprecise use of these terms. An example is a paper on the unity of the church which makes this statement:

Believing, teaching and confessing the Gospel according to the Holy Scripture becomes *the one essential task* of the church and *the one God-given means* for seeking and finding true Christian unity. In other words, *the primary mission* of the church can be described as the faithful use

of the means of grace. External unity in the church is not an end in itself, but serves *the primary task* of the church.

This statement makes *the primary mission* of the church the use of the means of grace and equates the terms “essential task” and “primary task” with the “primary mission.” In a document reviewing the “Mission Affirmations” this statement is made:

In accord with Christ’s commission, we affirm that our church must hold before the eyes of its people the never changing fact that *the primary goal and function* of the church is to bring men to faith and obedience to His will.

Here the terms “goal” and “function” are equated. To avoid confusion our terms must be clear. I understand and use terms in this way:

“Mission” means being sent to accomplish a work for someone else.

“Objective,” closely related to mission or goal, points to what is to be accomplished.

“Goal” is similar to objective but focuses more on immediate results to be accomplished.

“Purpose” is close to both mission and objective.

“Task” is what needs to be done to accomplish the mission, objective, goal, or purpose.

“Function” is the normal, proper activity of the church.

We may think of an analogy. When Jessica McClure was stuck in the well, thousands of people tried to rescue her. What was their mission: save the life of Jessica McClure. Their objective or goal was to bring her up out of that hole. The task or activities were to dig, to get air down to her, to fasten something to her to bring her up.

The mission on which Jesus sent His church is to seek and save the lost. The goal or objective is to see people come to faith in Jesus Christ, to be made disciples. The task or activity is to use the means by which a person is saved, the gospel, to baptize and then to teach. The functions are the normal activities of Christians as they do the above, such as worship, nurture, witness, service, and fellowship.

### III. *Some Detractors Weaken the Priority*

I see three “detractors,” as I call them, which weaken the priority given to the primary mission, to seek and save the lost. They could also be called sidetracks, dilutors, or confusers. According to my dictionary a “detractor” “takes away,” a “sidetrack” “moves away from the main track,” a “dilutor” “makes weaker,” and a “confuser” “renders indistinct.” My point is that they can move our attention, our energy, and our resources away from the primary mission.

#### A. *Confusing a Function of the Church with the Primary Mission*

All of the functions of the church—worship, nurture, witness, service, fellowship, or however many one may list—are the normal, proper way in which Christians, who make up the body of Christ, exist and live together. Just as the human body exists by the functions of eating, walking, talking, and the like, so the body of Christ exists by these functions. And all of them have both an inreach purpose, which serves and supports the body, and an outreach dimension which relates directly to the carrying out of the Great Commission. We may look at each one briefly.

##### 1. *Worship*

It is normal and natural for Christians to praise God as Creator, Savior, and Lord, to participate in the sacraments and hear the gospel preached. This nurtures and builds up the body of Christ. The outreach dimension is that the believers are motivated and equipped to reach out to unbelievers that they might be baptized and join in the praise of God. The formal worship of the church must assist the primary mission, not merely serve the body itself as an end in itself.

##### 2. *Nurture-Education*

Despite the reasons for doing it, the King James Version of the Bible did a great disservice to the church when it translated the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) as “teach all nations,” because this allowed the church to make education the primary mission. Some congregations still today see the mission as maintaining a school or educating the children.

Teaching is a part of the Great Commission, but that follows after a person becomes a disciple. The first goal is to make a

person a disciple by baptism. When this has been accomplished, then Jesus adds (verse 20) "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." The primary mission is to give birth to the baby. Nurturing it follows.

### 3. *Witness*

Witness as a function is what Christians do. They talk about their faith, about what the Lord is doing in their lives. The confessions call it "the mutual conversation of Christians" which God uses to help build the body and strengthen it. The outreach dimension is to speak that Gospel to the lost that they might be saved.

### 4. *Fellowship*

On a flight back from Oakland (California) to St. Louis (Missouri) this spring, I met a Chinese lady who was an architect going to a conference on building prisons. I discovered that she was brought up in the Roman Catholic Church and was sending her children to a Roman Catholic school. When I asked whether she ever considered going back to church, she said that she was angry with the church for putting the mass into the vernacular and taking away the traditional Latin. Her reason was that, when it was in Latin, all the nationalities could become one. The burden of my witness to her was that it is in Jesus Christ that we are one, neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, but all one in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:28).

The church is one in Jesus Christ and it expresses that oneness in different ways, as an inreach dimension. But there is also an outreach dimension. Jesus prayed, "May they be brought into complete unity to *let the world know* that Thou didst send Me and hast loved them even as Thou hast loved Me" (John 17:28).

In summarizing the general teachings of the Church Growth Movement the CTCR document mentioned above equates all of these functions with "the means by which the goal (or the primary objective) is reached." It then explains (*italics added*):

Sacred acts such as worship on Sundays, studying God's Word, social action, Christian fellowship, nurture in Christian living, and even verbal witnessing, important and God-pleasing as these are, must not become ends in

themselves. . . these are *not the church's primary objective*.

Since these functions are not the primary mission, they should not become ends in themselves or be allowed to focus so much energy or attention on themselves that they detract from accomplishing the primary mission.

#### 5. Service

Service is also one of the functions of the church. It is part of the life of good works for which God created it (Ephesians 2:10). Jesus gave to the church what has been known as the Great Commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength". . . "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31). But the Great Commandment should not be equated with the Great Commission or detract from it. The "Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles" puts it like this:

Other necessary activities of the church, such as ministering to men's physical needs, are to serve the church's *primary mission and its goal* that men will believe and confess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Evangelism and social responsibility must go together as partners. Jesus demonstrated that in His ministry as He preached the gospel, fed the hungry, and healed the sick. His words explained His works and His works authenticated His words.

Service, like the other functions of the church, also has both an inreach and an outreach dimension. The church taking care of its own is the inreach dimension. The outreach in that it reaches out to the needs of all people in the world. The directions and the examples of the Scripture demonstrate this pattern. The members of the church after the experience of Pentecost immediately sold all of their possessions in order to care for fellow-members (Acts 2:44-45). Scripture does not say that they immediately went out and fed all of the hungry beggars in the city, although they did some of that.

In the great judgement scene in Matthew 25 where all people are gathered before the throne of Jesus and are divided into the sheep and the goats, Jesus says, "inasmuch as you did it to the least of these *my brothers*. . ." Who are the brothers of Jesus? The Scripture clearly tells us that whoever does the will



of the Father is the brother of Jesus. The word "brother" can be used in a broad sense to include all people, for we are all human beings, we are all made by one Creator and have one Lord, but the Scriptures focus on the "brother" who is a fellow-believer, one who has been adopted into the family of God (Galatians 4). Paul emphasizes that we should "do good to all people," but he adds, "especially to those who are of the family of believers" (Galatians 6:10).

Service in terms of caring for the needs of people in the church and in the world is a legitimate and valid function of the church. But it must not detract from the primary mission, to save the souls of people for eternal life, not to care for their bodies on earth. The CTCR document entitled "Evangelism and Church Growth" suggests that efforts to expand the church's mission to "include social and political aims" "must be rejected as contrary to the central Biblical mandate." While it agrees that "the church should be involved in the social, economic and political struggles of the underprivileged and oppressed in their efforts to seek justice and equal rights," it says that "the church's mission efforts must always be to proclaim the Gospel which alone can make lost sinners wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ" (page 9).

#### B. *Making the Means the Primary Mission*

The Lutheran Church has always emphasized that faith is the sole work of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3). "Faith comes from hearing the message" (Romans 15:10). I have read many convention resolutions which begin, "Whereas the *primary mission* of the church is to preach the Gospel to all nations. . ." or "Whereas the Great Commission tells us to preach the Gospel to all people everywhere. . ." These kinds of statements reflect an underlying tendency in our church to make the means the mission. We emphasize so strongly the place of the means of grace, word and sacraments, which Walther calls the "infallible marks" of the church, that we elevate them to the primary mission when they are the *means* by which we accomplish the *primary mission*.

One other way this detractor is expressed is to say, "My mission is to preach the gospel. The rest is up to God." That is at best inaccurate and deceptive. God uses people not only to sow the seed but to reap the harvest. They are His instruments. It is as if the farmer were to say, "I will sow the

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seed and let God bring in the harvest.” The farmer’s goal in sowing the seed is to have a harvest. He cannot cause the seed to grow but he works his soil, cultivates it, cuts out or sprays out the weeds, prays for rain or irrigates it with water and, when it is just right, he brings it in. This is the attitude that St. Paul reflects when he says, “My heart’s desire and prayer to God is that they be saved” (Romans 10:1).

Sometimes the Scriptures focus on the preaching of the gospel, which is the means, and at other times the harvest, which is the goal. In Acts 20:24, where St. Paul talks to the elders of the church at Ephesus when he meets them at the seacoast town of Miletus, he says, “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the *race* and complete the *task* the Lord Jesus has given me. . . *testifying to the gospel* of God’s grace”(v. 24). The “race” might be thought of as “the mission,” as the TEV translates, and “task” focuses on the means, for which the TEV uses “work.” In this verse Paul emphasizes the means, “testifying to the gospel,” and he adds “preaching the kingdom” (v. 25).

In 1 Corinthians 9:19-22 Paul stresses very strongly not the *means* but the *mission*—to save souls. Four times Paul says that he seeks to relate to the people around him in order to “win” them. Then he says, “I become all things to all men” in order that “I might save some.” He equates “win” with “save.” God does the saving but Paul also says “I...save.” God and Paul are partners. They have the same mission, to save the lost. God gives the seed of the Gospel, Paul sows it, God makes it grow, Paul brings in the harvest. Paul is the instrument which serves God. The sowing, however, is never an end in itself; it serves the mission and cannot be separated from it.

Another confusion of means and mission is to say that spiritual growth or the personal study of the word is our primary mission. Surely the study of the word and spiritual growth are necessary to make the body strong, just as taking nourishing food and exercise is necessary to make the human body strong, but that is not an end in itself. The purpose of becoming strong is to use the body for the purpose for which it was created. In the case of the church, that purpose is to seek and save the lost. The CTCR document puts it thus (page 29):

Even the preaching of the Gospel, the administration of the sacraments, and Bible study are not *the ultimate goals* of the church. The church's *ultimate mission* is to bring lost children back to the Father's house.

In George Bernard Shaw's play *Saint Joan*, Joan, a teenage French peasant girl, comes into the presence of young Prince Charles in order to encourage him to take up arms to drive the English out of France. Prince Charles is living in luxury and Joan is dressed in armor. The prince sees her as an intrusion into a life in which he is satisfied and content and says brusquely, "Why don't you go away and mind your own business and let me mind mine." Joan pulls herself erect in her armor and says, "And what is your business—petting lap dogs and sucking sugar sticks? I'll tell you what your business is. Your business is to do God's business. That's why you're here."

What is God's business? God's will is that "everyone come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9), that all nations "become disciples," that all the sheep be brought into the fold, that all the lost be saved. Everything the church does, all of its functions, all the means God gave to accomplish His purpose must be used with that purpose and goal in the center. Richard Schultz put it thus (*The Christian's Mission*, p. 13):

The church is not a corral into which God herds His people after He has extracted them from the world. The church is more like a school. People come into it to prepare to go out into the world where the real work is. The task for which God sends His people is *not* to build the church but to win the world. The church is an instrument that does not exist for itself but for the mission of God.

The Missouri Synod does not have a clear statement of its mission. The CTCR was directed by the 1986 convention to develop a mission statement which, it appears, will be a longer theology of mission. Sometimes we have thought of the "Objectives of the Synod" in our constitution as a statement of mission, but they are intended to be objectives of what we agree to do together. They do not define the "mission."

Even looking at these "objects," as they were called before the 1981 revision, in comparison with the "objectives," as they are called in the present version of our constitution, we see the tendency to equate the mission with the means. In the original

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“Objects of the Synod” Number 2 was “the joint extension of the Kingdom of God,” which is close to a mission statement. But when Number 2 was rewritten, it was made to emphasize function and means rather than mission: “strengthen congregations and their members in giving bold witness by word and deed to the love of and work of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and extend that Gospel witness into all the world” (*Handbook*, page 9).

The Texas District memorialized the 1989 synodical convention to adopt the following as our understanding of the primary mission of the church: “God sends the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to bring all people to a faith-filled discipleship in Christ through the witness of the Gospel.” This statement clearly distinguishes between means and mission.

### *C. Making the Preservation of Pure Doctrine the Primary Mission*

In a convention essay prepared for the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod entitled “Recounting the Mercies,” Dr. August Suelflow says that there has been in our history a tension between what he calls “twin focal points” of two “p’s”—preserve the gospel and proclaim the gospel. At times, he says, we emphasized one over the other in the understanding of what our purpose or mission was. I suppose that there will always be a “tension” between the two “p’s” and that may be healthy. But in our church body today, we can see some who tend to move away from a balance between the two to either end of a continuum, those who see the primary mission as “preserving pure doctrine” and those who understand the primary mission as “proclaiming the gospel to save the lost.” Here the point is that an overemphasis on “preserving” can detract from the “proclaiming.” They are both necessary and important but, when all our energies are spent on preserving, the primary mission is hindered.

In spite of the danger that someone will wrongly accuse me of condoning false teaching, I shall still say that God has always worked through churches and organizations which include some false teaching in their proclamations of the gospel in order to win the lost. Those who are familiar with organizations like the Navigators and Campus Crusade for

Christ know that God has used them and their materials to bring thousands upon thousands to faith in Jesus Christ, including some who are now Lutherans, even though these materials clearly contain synergistic teaching.

It has always been that way throughout history. God used, and still uses, churches and individuals which teach ordinances instead of sacraments, synergism together with monotheism, works more than grace. We praise God for that and we God praise that, although even in our own beloved church body many pastors and lay people, as they talk about their faith and share it with others, say many things which a doctrinal reviewer would say is not “in complete harmony with the Scripture and the confessions,” yet God uses their witness to the gospel to win people.

God does not use false teaching, but He uses the truth of the gospel that is there even though it is diluted with false teaching. The situation might be compared to eating food that is nutritious and food with little nutritional value or even ingredients harmful to the body. The body benefits from the nutritional contents of whatever food it ingests, but the benefit is reduced by the presence of worthless or harmful ingredients. Our goal is to eat the most nutritious food possible. Our goal in mission is to preach the purest gospel possible. The point is, not that we agree with faulty teaching or not try to correct it, but that we are aware of the danger of letting “preserve” absorb so much of our energy, time, and resources that “proclaim” suffers. That would be like spending all our time purifying food and never eating it.

In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul gives us direction when he says that God reconciled the world to Himself through His Son Jesus Christ and then “committed” that message to us. (The “us” in 2 Corinthians were “God’s fellow-workers” [2 Corinthians 6:1] in the first century. We apply the “us” in an extended sense to “us” today.) Some translations use the word “entrusted” for “committed”; the new translation, *God’s Word to the Nations* (GWN), has “put into our hands.” After God accomplished the reconciliation of the world, He made us the “ambassadors for Christ” to share that message with the world. He “put it into our hands.” He entrusted it to us, knowing we should do something with it, both preserve it and proclaim it. The GWN

translates verse 18 as “gave us the responsibility of distributing this reconciliation.”

The Lutheran Church has done a marvelous task of preserving the message. Bill Hogue, former Director of Evangelism for the Southern Baptist Church, said to the Washington Roundtable on Evangelism that Lutherans have the clearest understanding of the gospel. Methodists are plagued with moralism; Baptists are shot through with legalism; Presbyterians do not know where they are. But Lutherans know what the gospel is. We have it. God entrusted it to us. Now we need to “distribute” it, to pass it on, to share it. It is the means to accomplish our mission.

#### *Conclusion*

Sent by Jesus, just as He was sent by the Father, to seek and save the lost is the primary mission. We must beware of detractors. The more our attention is diluted by detractors, the more the mission is hindered. Dr. Ralph Bohlmann, in his opening remarks to a synodical planning conference on March 7 of this year, beautifully summarized that concern in his devotion entitled “Preparing Our Nets” based on Matthew 4:21-22. James and John were in their boats “preparing their nets” when Jesus came to them. Other translations use words like “mending their nets” or “getting their nets ready.” The nets they used would get torn and had to be mended or the fish would escape, and they had to be folded just right and put back into the boats so they would not get tangled when they were thrown out.

James and John were getting ready for their “fishing mission.” We are all fishers of men and need to prepare our nets constantly. Preparing the nets is not the mission. The nets are only instruments or the means for catching fish, not ends in themselves. The material of the nets is the gospel. An analogy can be pressed to hard, but the main point is beautifully illustrated. The mission is to catch fish. The nets, the task of mending them, the boats, and the acts of going out into the deep and throwing out the nets all have one goal—to catch fish. All the activities and functions of the church serve one ultimate purpose—to catch fish. Our primary mission is to save the lost.