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# The State of Evangelism in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

Erwin J. Kolb

On a recent airplane journey the man sitting next to me saw me reading an article on EST in *Sky*, the Delta Airlines magazine, and asked, "What do you think of EST?" "I don't know much about it," I said, "but doesn't it involve some kind of brain-washing techniques?" "Oh, no. It really works. There has been scientific evidence for that, just as there has been for TM." I asked more and discovered that this man was involved in TM, meditating fifteen minutes every morning and every evening, repeating his Mantra. He started when a friend of his died of a heart attack at thirty-five and he said to himself, "I've got to do something with my tension, or I'll go the same way." I suggested that the church could also help people deal with their tensions and other problems. He was a Christian, he said, having grown up in the United Church of Christ. He agreed that personal devotions and living with a confident trust in the presence of God could do for me the same thing that TM was doing for him, but he asked, "Why isn't the church reaching the masses like these other mind-related movements are? Maybe the church can help people cope with their problems, but it isn't."

That question haunts everyone who is involved in helping the church communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ to people, so that by the power of the Spirit of God people can have what Jesus intended, "life in all its fullness" (John 10:10). That is what this paper is dealing with, what we in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod are doing in the way of evangelism. We want to look at where we have been and where we are now, and at the same time take a look ahead. We want to examine both attitudes and practices. We will mix them all together — past, present, future, attitudes, and practices — under five summary statements:

1. We are adding evangelism to missions.
2. We are distinguishing mission, means, and goal.
3. We are replacing manipulation with motivation.
4. We are struggling with some faulty assumptions.
5. We are winning people for Jesus Christ and His Church.

Several more comments are in order before we begin to examine these statements more closely. These statements are personal observations that are intended to reflect various areas of the church. They are more true of some areas than of others. I have,

however sought to base them on my observations made in the course of visiting almost all of our thirty-eight North American Districts in the last six and a half years. Also notice that each statement is cast with an "are" and with an "-ing." These are intended to indicate that there is change and movement.

### I. We Are Adding Evangelism to Missions

The Missouri Synod has always been mission-minded. Some of our forefathers came to this country to convert the Indians. Congregations have for years had mission festivals to raise money to send missionaries to foreign countries. But this mission-mindedness largely involved sending professional clergyman to some other countries. We did not send lay-people to China or India. We were not sufficiently concerned about telling our neighbor about Jesus Christ or sharing the Gospel in our own community. What I see is that some thirty to forty years ago we began to add some new dimensions to the mission-mindedness that we might call "evangelism." These dimensions include:

1. Adding local witnessing to foreign missions.
2. Adding lay witness to clergy witness.
3. Becoming more open to personal response as well as the objective response.

In Acts 8:1 we read that the early church, because of persecutions, was scattered from Jerusalem to other towns throughout Judea and Samaria, all "except the apostles." They stayed in Jerusalem at this time. Then Acts 8:4 tells us that wherever this scattered church of lay people went they "preached the Word" (*euaggelizomenoi ton logon*), or as Michael Green<sup>1</sup> put it, "they gossiped the Gospel" with their neighbors and friends. This is being emphasized today more and more by all churches as we realize that if the Gospel is to be preached in "all the world," (Mark 16:16) it will have to be done by lay people. There just are not enough professionals to accomplish this end. But then what is the task of the professional clergy? According to St. Paul its task is to "equip" the saints for their work (Ephesians 4:11-12). Elton Trueblood coined the phrase that the pastor is to be the "playing coach," a term that is common today in evangelism programs such as the *Evangelism Explosion* of D. James Kennedy. The coach is to motivate his team, help each player find his position, develop his skills to play that particular position, point him to the goal, and develop the strategy; and in addition the pastor-coach plays the game with his team.

This addition of laity to clergy in personal evangelism is still developing and by no means complete. According to the *Study of Generations*,<sup>2</sup> only ten percent of Lutheran people do "considerable witness" measured in terms of talking to someone about

their faith, making a visit, giving someone a tract, inviting someone to church. Forty percent of Lutherans witness in these ways sometimes and fifty percent never do. That was in 1972. In a 1977 poll Gallup asked the question, "Have you ever tried to encourage someone to believe in Jesus Christ?" In response fifty-seven percent of the Lutherans polled said "Yes." The national average was forty-seven percent and the Protestant average fifty-eight percent.

The third aspect of adding evangelism to missions is the adding of the personal to the objective. This addition is difficult for Lutherans, who have always emphasized the objective truth of the Scripture. We have stressed the intellectual aspects of faith, understanding the catechism and accepting it with our mind. But when we witness to our friends and neighbors, we need to say not only, "This is what the Bible says," but also, "This is what I believe"; "This is what Jesus has done in my life." We have begun to find a place for personal testimony also within our church structures — namely, in small sharing-groups. One of the programs that has helped our clergy and lay-people verbalize their faith has been the Renewal Retreats which stress small "support-groups" which study the Scriptures and help each member of the group evaluate how he is growing in his faith and sharing it with others. The program was developed with the concept that the best "sowing" happens when there is healthy "growing."

## **II. We Are Distinguishing Mission, Means, and Goal**

August Suelflow in a convention essay prepared for the 125th anniversary of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, "Recounting His Mercies," saw in our history a tension between what he called "twin focal points" which were to preserve and to proclaim the Gospel. At times we emphasized one over the other in the concept of mission which guided our church activities. We still struggle with the proper balance of those two focal points, but it seems to me that the tension today is seen more between missions, means, and goal. What is our mission? What is the goal we seek to accomplish? What is the means by which to reach that goal. The problem is illustrated when we read convention resolutions which begin, "Whereas the primary purpose of the church is to preach the Gospel to all nations . . ." Likewise, in an essay presented at a theological convocation this statement was made, "The primary mission of the church can be described as the faithful use of the means of grace." Both of these statements stress "means" and "mission" but overlook the "goal."

What is the "goal"? Jesus gave it to the church in the Great Commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of

the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and, lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20). As you know, there are four verbs in the basic commission: "go," "make disciples," "baptizing," "teaching." And which is the imperative? "Make disciples." The others are participles which indicate the means needed to carry out the command, by "going," "baptizing," and by "teaching." The emphasis is not on the participles, but on the imperative. The same goal can be seen in the other occurrences of the "Dominical Commissions." In Luke it is that people "repent" and receive the "forgiveness of sins" (Luke 24:44-48). In Mark it is that they be baptized and "be saved" (Mark 16:15-16). In John Jesus prays for the unity of the church so that "the world may believe" (John 17:21). Our forefathers expressed this concern in our constitution when they listed as Object Two of the Synod, "The joint extension of the Kingdom of God." A Task Force has suggested as a substitute object, "Extend the Gospel witness into all the world." I think that this phraseology tends to place the emphasis on the means instead of the goal.

To summarize, the Church is sent on a mission equipped with means to accomplish the goal. The goal is to make disciples of all nations. The means to accomplish that goal is the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments, what Walther called "the infallible marks of the church." A resolution of our Anaheim Convention in 1975 (1-02A) stated it like this: "Evangelism has as its goal the conversion of the whole world."<sup>3</sup> To use Suelflow's language, we need to "preserve" the Gospel in order to "proclaim" it. Or in our terms, we need to keep our mission clearly in mind and to use the *means* to accomplish the goal. The means are not to be used as ends in themselves.

One of the results of a confusion of means and goal can be the identification of a function of the church, such as teaching, worship, fellowship, or nurture, with the goal. These become ends in themselves, and the mission and goal are clouded. In an article entitled "Evangelism" in *Circle* (December, 1973) Oscar J. Ice quotes a pastor as saying, "My sole pastoral mission is to care for those already within the church." Pastoral care may be "a mission," or a function which uses the special gifts given to a pastor, but the overarching goal is still to "make disciples." Every pastor, every member of the church has a responsibility to that goal. The functions of education or worship that the church carries out must be related to that goal.

Another result of confusing means and goal is reflected in the statement, "Our job is to sow the seed. We do not worry about the results. We leave the harvest to God." It is true that our job is to

sow the seed and that God produces the results, but we need to be very concerned about the harvest. When Jesus saw the crowds in his day he said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Matt. 9:37-38). We are the laborers, the reapers. St. Paul could say that "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (I Cor. 12:3), but he could also say, "I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more" (I Cor. 9:19). And four more times he says, "I win" — the Jews, those under the law, those outside the law, and the weak (I Cor. 9:19-22). The Christian, in a unique kind of synergism, is the channel by which the Gospel, as the power of God, is brought to people; he is the instrument which God uses. My goal then in witnessing is not merely to sow the seed but to help it develop into a healthy fruit-bearing plant. In practice this principal means a strong emphasis on such things as sponsoring, integrating, and assimilating new members. Our goal is not to get a person to make a decision to receive Christ or to join the church, but to help a person become a fully functioning disciple within the Body of Christ.

### **III. We are Replacing Manipulation with Motivation**

By manipulation I am referring, first of all, to the way in which we seek to move people to give for missions or to witness to their faith. As I have listened to mission or evangelism sermons over the years, the appeals I have often heard were to fear, guilt, duty, pity, obedience, example, and sometimes love and gratitude. Many of these kinds of approaches to motivating people are manipulating people to do what they really do not want to do. They are forcing people with Law rather than moving them with Gospel. Hopefully we are moving away from these manipulative approaches to motivation with the Gospel. The Anaheim evangelism resolution puts it like this, "The motivation for all evangelism is the baptized Christian's Spirit-born compulsion to share the Gospel."<sup>4</sup> Sydral says that motivation for missions is "not an imposed task or program, but the natural overflow of a redeemed nature that has within it the same love nature that Christ has."<sup>5</sup> That "compulsion" is created by the Spirit through the Gospel and needs continual nurture and direction.

The second problem that this statement of "replacing manipulation with motivation" addresses is the problem of seeking a commitment in a witnessing situation. The problem arises especially when Lutherans use methods of evangelism which come from other sources without changing them in any way. Most of these methods come out of Reformed theology and are based on assumptions which are incongruous with Lutheran theology. The result often is that we use methods which involve

sales techniques and other subtle devices which can manipulate people into the right responses. Recent research has indicated that skilled persuaders can exert tremendous influence on people with purely human techniques. Not only can a person be made "religious" through hypnosis, but psychologist James McConnell says, "The time has come when if you give me any normal human being and a couple of weeks . . . I can change his behavior from what it is now to whatever you want it to be, if it's physically possible. I can't make him fly by flapping his wings, but I can turn him from a Christian into a Communist and vice versa."<sup>6</sup>

One of the areas where this phenomenon becomes a concern for Missouri Lutherans is in using methods like "The Four Spiritual Laws" of Campus Crusade or the *Evangelism Explosion* of D. James Kennedy, as the witness seeks to obtain a commitment. People can be from one "yes" to another until they are brought to their "prayer of commitment" in a way which looks very similar to a method of persuasion which psychologists call a "cognitive consistency" model. When a person says one "yes" he is under pressure to be consistent and to say it again. And the danger is that the prayer of commitment is treated as a means of grace. The impression is given that the individual makes the decision to accept Christ of his own free will. About fifty percent of the congregations of the Missouri Synod are using some type of "Kennedy" method, either the original material or an adaptation of it. Some of the Lutheran adaptations in use are *Speaking of Salvation* by Steve Biegel, *Presenting the Gospel* by Armand Ulbrich, and *Dialog Evangelism* by W. Leroy Biesenthal.

*Speaking of Salvation* is a private endeavor by a young pastor in Michigan. He developed his adaptation while a student at Concordia Seminary, Springfield, now Fort Wayne. *Presenting the Gospel* is the method the Synod's Board for Evangelism published and is farther away from the original Kennedy than the others. It offers more options, and suggests that the material be studied in small groups. *Dialog Evangelism* is by far the most widely used. Pastor Biesenthal put his adaptation in a three-ring notebook which is used at his clinics and then used to teach the method to lay-people in the parish. He is now the Associate Secretary for Evangelism and is continuing to conduct clinics on the basis of this method.

All of these methods involve the use of some of the basic principles which Kennedy emphasized:

1. The use of diagnostic questions to determine a person's understanding of the Christian faith so that the Gospel can be applied to that person's needs.

2. A memorized outline of the Gospel which is the basis on which a person presents the Gospel in a logical and complete way.

3. Seeking a response after the Gospel has been presented, often called the "commitment."

4. The use of "on-the-job" training over a period of about sixteen weeks.

5. A sharing-time in which the callers can evaluate the visits and support each other.

One of the variations which developed in the use of the original Kennedy method was to drop the last section on commitment while using the rest of the program as outlined in *Evangelism Explosion*. The commitment section has presented problems because of the fear of being synergistic and because of the uneasiness of being so personal as to speak about faith. As a result we have had considerable discussion of this matter in our circles. Generally we have suggested the following principles:

1. The emphasis should be on presenting the Gospel.
2. We can expect the Spirit of God to work through the Gospel.
3. We should determine whether The Spirit has worked by asking simple questions as to whether the person understands and believes.
4. If the person indicates some faith, we can acknowledge that the Spirit has worked and provide a means of expressing that faith in conversation or prayer or both. Here is the place for a prayer of commitment, thanking God for the faith He has created, asking Him to continue to nurture that faith, and offering oneself to the service of God.

Our Commission on Theology and Church Relations studied this question and concluded that an individual would have no desire to speak a prayer of commitment prior to conversion and that any attempt to lead him to do so would be synergistic. But a prayer recognizing the presence of faith and asking for growth therein is valid. As such it becomes "an act of sanctification rather than conversion."<sup>7</sup>

#### **IV. We Are Struggling with Some Faulty Assumptions**

I see four faulty assumptions in particular which hinder our evangelistic efforts:

1. Some people suggest that our members will spontaneously share their faith if we motivate them properly with the Gospel. The conclusion then is that we do not need any program of evangelism. Ideally this principle should hold true. But, in reality, we have problems because we have a tradition of not witnessing.



If an individual desires to serve and praise his Lord he sees too many Lutheran models who do not talk to others about their faith. We need programs to direct the motivated, to equip people to listen, to understand people, to verbalize the Gospel, and to apply it to the needs of people.

2. The second faulty assumption is that everyone can be reached with spontaneous witnessing and that consequently, we do not need any evangelism program. The problem is that this assertion is just not true. Kennedy says that he did not talk to a Christian until he was an adult, or at least not to anyone who admitted that he was a Christian. In Shawano, Wisconsin, in a Lay Witness Workshop we surveyed the area around the church, which at that time was the largest church in the Missouri Synod, and we found an old man within a block of that church who said that he had been waiting for years for someone from that church to come and invite him. We have often deliberately by-passed Jewish people in our witness because we were afraid, thought it was hopeless, or that they did not need it.

3. The third faulty assumption that at times plagues the churches is that service is evangelism. We must be concerned about the physical needs of people, but feeding the hungry or parading for social change is not evangelism. The word "evangelism" means to share the Good News of the Gospel, and that involves communicating the facts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. That communication cannot be done without words.

4. The fourth faulty assumption which at times prevents witnessing is that people can be saved in some other way than through Jesus Christ. Lutherans have been ambivalent about this matter for some years. In the *Study of Generations*,<sup>8</sup> for instance, seventy-five percent of the Lutherans said that all religions (such as Buddhism, Hinduism) lead to the same God. Yet, seventy-two percent said that a person must believe in Jesus Christ to be saved. Forty percent agreed that one should not try to change someone else's religion.

When the Missouri Synod at its Dallas Convention in 1977<sup>9</sup> affirmed the position that all people need the Gospel of Jesus Christ, including the Jews, there was an outcry of protest from the Jewish community which led to dialogues, review of our materials, and some bad press. But there was also some strong protest from what I like to think was a small minority of Missouri Synod pastors and lay-people. The protestors were struggling with the desire to have good relations with the local rabbi and their Jewish neighbors and rationalized that somehow the Jews could be saved through their own covenant. The Missouri

Synod's position is clear in its resolution, and our brochure indicates that, while we want to be loving and sensitive to the unique place of the Jews, we cannot compromise what we believe to be the commission given to us by the Lord to make disciples of all nations, or the truth of His own words, "I am the way, the truth and the life; no man cometh to the Father but by Me" (John 14:6), and of Peter's words, "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

#### **V. We Are Winning People for Jesus Christ and His Church**

Our congregations are using many different approaches and styles of evangelism — some prepared and offered by the national office and publishing house, some developed by individual districts, and some stemming from other sources. For example, one of the independent agencies which offer programs and materials to congregations is Ongoing Ambassadors for Christ (Wichita Falls, Texas) with a teenage witness training program. The Missouri Synod reached its peak in total baptized membership in 1971 and since then the baptized membership has dropped a little each year down to 2,766,958 in 1977. The communicant membership, however, continued to rise steadily until 1977 when it dropped slightly for the first time due to the fact that there were 120 fewer congregations reporting. The increase has come through internal growth, by confirming our own children. We equalize those who come to us from other Lutheran churches with those who leave for other Lutheran churches at about 15,000 people annually. We gain about 26,000 members a year by adult baptism or confirmation and reclaim about 10,000 former members, which makes a congregation of 700 each week. At the same time we lose by defection a congregation of 1,000 each week. There are people whose names are removed from congregational rosters because they became inactive, moved away, or were excommunicated. One important factor is that twenty-seven percent of our congregations win no adults each year by baptism or confirmation, and another ten or eleven percent gain one adult.

While we have concerns and challenges in outreach, we rejoice that the Lord uses our congregations to win people for faith in Jesus Christ. There is an interest in many congregations and a desire to learn how to witness and make calls. Increased attention is being given to the Church Growth movement, analyzing why a congregation is or is not growing, and studying the community and seeking ways to serve it. Gallup says that the search is on. Americans are searching for meaning and purpose in life and are trying to find it in every movement that comes along. He describes the challenge which confronts the church when he says that the next few years will determine whether the churches will become

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only sterile institutions. You know what I am praying for, and I hope you join me in that prayer.

#### Footnotes

1. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Erdmann, 1970).
2. Merton P. Strommen, et. al., *A Study of Generations* (Augsburg, 1972), pp. 182-185.
3. Resolution 1-02A, "To Affirm a Lutheran Understanding of Evangelism," *Convention Proceedings, 51st Regular Convention, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Anaheim, California, July 4-11, 1975*, p. 79.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Rolf A. Syrdal, *To the End of the Earth* (Augsburg, 1967), p. 17.
6. Quoted by Marvin Karlins and Herbert Abelson in *Persuasion* (Springer, 1970), p. 1
7. Adopted in January 1975.
8. Strommen, *A Study of Generations*, pp. 169, 368, 442.
9. Resolution 2-27, "To Encourage Evangelism Among the Jews," *Convention Proceedings, 52nd Convention, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Dallas, Texas, July 15-22, 1977*, p. 122.

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