

THE GOAL OF EVANGELISM: AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE THE GOSPEL

BY
ANDREW SCHRIMPF

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PROF. JOEL OTTO, ADVISOR
WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY
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ABSTRACT

Evangelism has taken on many definitions throughout the ages, and much has been said about its origin in meaning. Proselytizing is not as well-known a term, but oddly enough, it has a plethora of definitions. Since the definitions and scope of the two are often ambiguous and seem to overlap one another, it is the intent of this paper to discuss how evangelism's etymology within the New Testament tells us everything we need to know about evangelism, showing how Scripture has already dealt with the difference between evangelism and proselytizing. The goal of this paper is to help all people recognize the true goal of evangelism with the impact that postmodernism has had on evangelism and how that goal strengthens not just individual visible churches but also the one holy invisible church.

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INTRODUCTION

A pastor was on a flight back home from a conference. After finding his seat and settling in, he initiated a conversation with the woman next to him and learned that she was a Christian; but she believed some teachings that were contrary to biblical truths. He discussed these matters with her, hoping to enlighten her and increase her understanding of certain truths. After a long conversation between the pastor and his seatmate, the plane landed. The woman left the plane, upset and angry. Feeling guilty for his part in the interaction, the pastor thought to himself, “For the sake of peace, I should have just been happy that she was a Christian.”

Are believers supposed to feel *guilty* for spreading the truths of God’s Word? It is understandable that the pastor in this situation felt guilty: he had initiated a discussion that led to disagreement with a person whom he had no or little chance of talking to again. Many of us have been in this position, feeling we have failed because sharing the truths of Scripture did not produce the results we had hoped for. But to regret sharing God’s truth because the person we shared it with did not like or agree with our message shows that we do not always recognize the importance of our sharing in these situations.

In a recent survey¹ 100 Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary students were asked what they thought of when they heard the word *evangelism*. Fifty percent of the participants answered *sharing the gospel with the lost*, while the other fifty percent said evangelism is *sharing the gospel with all people*. These views can affect how a person reaches out to his community and to the people who come to his church: If he believes that evangelism involves sharing the gospel with only those who are not believers, he may limit his proclamation of the gospel to a specified group of people—unbelievers—but if he believes evangelism involves teaching all people, believer or not, he will be willing to speak God’s Word to a larger number of people. District President Charles Westra of the South Atlantic District and pastor of a mission church, describes how this limited view of evangelism can affect how we reach out to the community:

In my young and idealistic perspective, I was there to reach the lost. That is why we start new missions, right? Finally, that is our mission, right? Go and find those who don’t know Jesus and share clear law and gospel. Do it over and over and over again. Take the living Gospel to a dying world. That was my mission and my objective.

¹Andrew Schrimpf, September 1, 2016, available from Internet
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/analyze/e_2F8lkFln2VyR_2BOCbJCszYaNWdK_2FN1vtQl_2Fmk8SVS1V0_3D>

But I quickly realized what that meant. It meant that I would be ignoring many people who were right in front of me. There were many displaced families. Some had some church affiliation before they moved to our area and some did not. Some knew and trusted in Jesus as their Savior from sin and some did not. Some of them were actively looking for a church and many were not. If my objective (mission) was to reach the lost, I would pass by those who knew Jesus and spend all my time and plan all my activities to reach those who did not believe.²

The same survey also questioned each participant what is more important to each of them: witnessing to an unbeliever, to a Christian, or if both are equally important. Thirty-five percent said that witnessing to an unbeliever is more important while sixty-five percent said both are equally important.

The results of these two survey questions tell us two things: first, a large group of those surveyed (one-third) do not view speaking to believers as evangelism; and second, fifteen percent of those surveyed have an inconsistent understanding of what evangelism is. If fifty percent say that *only sharing the gospel with the lost* is evangelism, but sixty-five percent say that it is equally important to share that gospel with Christians as well as unbelievers, then there is at least fifteen percent of people with a varying degree of understanding evangelism.

The most extensive work written about evangelism within the WELS is easily retired professor David Valleskey's book entitled *We Believe—Therefore We Speak*. Valleskey goes beyond the simple definition of evangelism and involves many biblical doctrines that coincide with evangelism. The work he has done is impressive and substantial. Just like any large scale project there is always room for a more narrow research. That is where this essay comes in. Valleskey touches on the definition of evangelism on pages 15-17 but it is limited in comparison with his book. This essay deals primarily within subcategories 3—The Church, and 4—The Ministry, of chapter three in Valleskey's book. In these subcategories, Valleskey speaks about the mission of the church, whether it includes members of other churches, and outreach versus nurture. He also speaks of the priesthood of all believers. This is all done in the broad scope of his book and so there is plenty of room for a more in-depth and focused discussion. It is the intention of this paper to focus in on the biblical definition of evangelism and see how that definition involves speaking the gospel among unbelievers and believers alike within the realm of the royal priesthood.

² Charles Westra, "To Whom Shall We Go? An Examination of our Mission and Ministry," January 27, 2015, 1.

This thesis will attempt to clarify mixed views of evangelism by explaining its etymology and meaning per the Scriptures. The distinction between evangelism and proselytizing will be made, since the two are often confused, with the biblical goal of evangelism and the impact of postmodernism on evangelism highlighted. By emphasizing the scriptural goal of evangelism—an opportunity to share the gospel—we are opening ourselves to a larger audience and avoid the pitfalls we can encounter.

THE MEANING OF EVANGELISM

The pastor's action in the earlier situation can be viewed as Christian instinct. He perceived that the lady sitting next to him was a Christian and then discussed where he could shed light on her misconceptions. Clearly, his first goal was sharing more of God's Word with her, just as Apostle Paul relates in Acts: "As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Ac. 4:20). Think of Jesus' ministry: Whom did he speak to and why did he speak to them? Sometimes he speaks just to the Pharisees and sometimes the Sadducees. Both groups are unbelievers who have rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Other times he speaks to his disciples and crowds of people, many of whom believe that he is the Savior promised to them in the Old Testament Scriptures and follow him. In John chapter 4 we are told that Jesus goes to the Samaritan town of Sychar and stays there with the Samaritans for two days, teaching them. Many more Samaritans come to believe. Jesus does not tell those who had believed on the first day to go away while he teaches others; he continues to teach them all. Whether Jesus is speaking to unbelievers or believers is not of utmost importance. Rather, what is paramount is the reason he is teaching them: either to bring people to faith or increase the faith of those who had already believed. In both cases Jesus is evangelizing with both groups being equally important to him. Robert E. Coleman is a distinguished senior professor of evangelism and discipleship at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He writes in his book *The Heart of the Gospel*:

Jesus went about continually serving people—healing the sick, feeding the hungry, preaching the Gospel to the poor—but he did not let this ministry distract him from the training of a few men. So in his role as a servant, he drew some disciples close to himself.³

³Robert Coleman, *The Heart of the Gospel: The Theology Behind the Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011) 219.

How then should we understand evangelism? The word *evangelism* comes from the Greek verb εὐαγγελίζω and is used 54 times in the New Testament. It has three basic senses:

1) To convey the gospel—to bring the good news concerning the now present instantiation [proof/evidence] of Jesus’ divine dominion and way of salvation by His death and resurrection.⁴ 2) To be conveyed good news—to be or become audience to positive information about recent and important events.⁵ 3) To bring good news—to announce or convey a message of positive information about recent and important events.⁶

The first sense is the more specific gospel (the message of Jesus’ death and resurrection that saves people from their sins) and is used far more in the New Testament than the other two senses. The book of Galatians uses the first sense and provides an extraordinary example where Paul reminds the Galatians that the reason he had come and preached the gospel, εὐαγγελίζω, to them “the first time” (Gal. 4:13), “before they knew God” (Gal. 4:9), was because of a physical ailment. They were unbelievers when he preached this specific gospel, the salvation of the Lord to them. In his letter, he writes to the converted Christian Galatians because of a problem that had arisen among them: “But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?” (Gal. 4:9) A. J. Panning, author of the commentary on Galatians and Ephesians in *The People’s Bible* explains that the “turning back” that Paul refers to is the Galatians’ following the Judaizers “who insisted that in addition to believing in Christ, the Galatians needed also to obey the Old Testament ceremonies,”⁷ specifically circumcision. So now Paul needs to *evangelize*, explain the very specific gospel to them again, teaching them that they are free from the law because of the freedom Christ won through his death and resurrection.

Paul’s teaching in Galatians is a great example of the importance of evangelism to believers; how evangelism does not stop once we become Christians. Yes, Christians still can be

⁴ Danker, Frederick William, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature Third Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000): Galatians 1:8, 16, 23; 4:13; Luke 4:43, 8:1, 9:6, 20:1; Acts 5:42, 8:4, 12, 25, 35, 40; 10:36, 11:20, 13:32, 14:7, 15, 21; 15:35, 16:10, 17:18; Romans 1:15, 15:20, 1 Corinthians 1:17, 9:16, 9:18, 15:1, 2; 2 Corinthians 10:16, 11:7; Ephesians 3:8; 1 Peter 1:12; Revelation 14:6. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from NIV 2011.

⁵ Ibid., Matthew 11:5; Luke 1:19, 7:22, 16:16; Galatians 1:11; Hebrews 4:2,6; 1 Peter 1:25, 4:6.

⁶ Ibid., Luke 2:10, 3:18, 4:18; Romans 10:15; Galatians 1:8, 9; Ephesians 2:17; 1 Thessalonians 3:6; Revelation 10:7

⁷ A.J. Panning, *The People’s Bible: Galatians, Ephesians* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 78.

evangelized, too. There are many Christian friends and family members who are following the “weak and worthless elementary principles of the world,” thinking that they must follow the law to be saved and that they are to do good works to get to heaven. Interestingly, a recent poll from LifeWay Research states that fifty-two percent of Americans feel that their good works contribute to earning their place in heaven.⁸ In addition, sixty-four percent “say God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam.”⁹ Extending love and encouragement to Christians with these ideologies as Paul does with the Galatians and reassuring them they do not need to do anything to earn their salvation is evangelism, the same as it was for the Apostle Paul.

The second sense of *εὐαγγελίζω* is closely tied to the third sense in that it is a more general gospel—any positive information that is associated with the specific gospel of Jesus Christ. To illustrate, in 1 Thessalonians Paul lets us know that Timothy brought him the good news (*εὐαγγελίζω*) of the Thessalonians’ faith and love—their remembering Paul and standing firm in the Lord (1 Th. 3:9). In other words, it was the general positive message of the works that the Thessalonians were demonstrating because of their faith in Christ, a faith that Timothy shared with Paul. In Luke, the angel Gabriel told the good news (*εὐαγγελίζω*) to Zechariah about the son he was about to have (John the Baptist) and the blessing he would be to the world because of his role in preparing the way for the Savior (Lk. 1:19). The only difference between the second sense and the third sense is whether the emphasis is on the person receiving the good news or the person giving the good news. The broad definition of *εὐαγγελίζω* shows there is much more to the definition of evangelism than the preaching of the specific gospel of Jesus’ saving work to unbelievers. As demonstrated here, the Bible’s definition of evangelism involves any and all positive information that is associated with the specific gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, evangelism is even more than just gospel; it also includes the teaching leading up to the preaching of the gospel. Looking at Galatians 4 again, we see that Paul first points out a problem: He needs to show the Galatians the error they are falling into, and he does this by

⁸ Bob Smietana, “American Theological Views: The Afterlife” (2016 State of American Theology Study), available from Internet <<http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2016-heaven.jpg>>, accessed 10/1/2016.

⁹ Bob Smietana, “American Theological Views: The Character of God” (2016 State of American Theology Study), available from Internet <<http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2016-God.jpg>>, accessed 10/1/2016.

preaching the law to them: “Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?” (Gal. 4:21 ESV) Paul is saying the Galatians want to follow the law yet they are not listening to the gospel promises in the first five books of Moses. Then Paul launches into an allegorical discourse to show the Galatians their sin of following the Judaizers. But remember his whole purpose in doing this was to teach them *again* the gospel message of Christ, to *evangelize* them. As long as the end goal of a person’s teaching is to share the gospel message and help people understand that message, we can rightly think of their whole teaching, both law and gospel, as evangelism.

We recognize the need to follow suit today. When witnessing to an unbeliever who doesn’t believe he is sinful, it is ineffective to launch into a discourse about how Jesus has saved him from his sin because as far as the unbeliever is concerned, there is no sin to forgive. More effective is first showing the unbeliever his sin by the teaching of the law, an important prelude to sharing the gospel since the law reveals sin and convicts persons of their sinful state. The goal is to lead the unbeliever to realize that he is sinful but free from the yoke of slavery because of the life and work of Christ. Some in the church would think of *only* the latter part of this process, the gospel message, as evangelism. Rather, we would consider as evangelism the entire conversation with the explanations of how the unbeliever is sinful, following with how Christ’s death and resurrection has washed him of his sin. The reason we consider this evangelism is because the Bible does.

It is possible to have a wide and a narrow definition of evangelism, but only in content and not in audience, just as Scripture uses the word *gospel* in a wide and narrow sense. Article V of the Formula of Concord states,

Sometimes it [Gospel] is used to mean the entire doctrine of Christ, our Lord, which He proclaimed in His ministry on earth and commanded to be proclaimed in the New Testament. Therefore, this includes the explanation of the Law and the proclamation of the favor and grace of God His heavenly Father. For it is written, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). And shortly afterward the chief points are stated: *Repentance and forgiveness of sins*. So when Christ after His resurrection commanded the apostles to “proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15), He compressed the sum of this doctrine into a few words...Furthermore, the term *Gospel* is used in another way. In its proper sense, *Gospel* does not mean the preaching of repentance, but only the preaching of God’s grace. This follows directly

after the preaching of repentance, as Christ says, “Repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).¹⁰

So it is with evangelism. Scripture uses evangelism in the wide sense to include both the law and the gospel as seen in the second and third senses shown above. It also uses evangelism in a narrow sense to include only gospel, which is seen in the first sense as shown above. Evangelism is never used in Scripture to indicate the narrow sense as speaking only to unbelievers and the wide sense as speaking to both believers and unbelievers. The Apostle Paul gives us a great example of how *εὐαγγελίζω* is used for both believer and unbeliever: “I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome” (Ro. 1:14-15). The scriptural view of evangelism is speaking law, gospel or both to a recipient for the growth or start of their faith. Even our Synod Commission on Evangelism understands this to be the full meaning of evangelism:

Evangelism is the preaching from the pulpit and the teaching in the classroom of the Law and the Gospel as an inseparable unit, in particular the speaking of the Law and the Gospel by a Christian to his neighbor, specifically speaking that portion of Scripture which brings comfort to sin-sick [souls].¹¹

Furthermore, there is no need to separate believers and unbelievers from the word evangelism. In fact, by referring to evangelism in only a narrow sense of talking to unbelievers, it can lead people to the understanding that there is no need to talk with fellow believers about the message of Christ. For example, if we think of evangelism as only to the lost then by that definition, believers are exempt from the term evangelism. And since evangelism is sharing the gospel, another word needs to be used for speaking to fellow believers about the message of Christ. Otherwise it can be assumed believers do not need to hear the message of Christ, but only unbelievers. Mark J. Cares, a Lutheran Pastor and author of *Speaking the Truth in Love to Mormons*, writes about this unhealthy assumption, that the efforts to reach Mormons is dampened when people think that Mormons are Christians. He writes, “Regarding Mormons as Christians is nothing short of tragic. That view dramatically increases the danger of more Christians joining the Mormon church. It also puts the damper on efforts to reach Mormons with

¹⁰ Book of Concord, *A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), Article V: 4,6.

¹¹ David Witte, “Personal Evangelism” [essay on-line] (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Digital Library, 1975), available from Internet <<http://essays.wls.wels.net/handle/123456789/1193>>, accessed 10/1/2016.

the message of forgiveness through Christ. Why witness to them, if they are already Christian?”¹² Cares shows that people can have an unconcerned or casual attitude towards witnessing to people when they view them as already Christian. If Cares is seeing this within the Mormon/Christian community how much more is this happening among people in Christian denominations? The thought that as long as you belong to a Christian church it does not matter the doctrines being taught.

But what other word can be used for the continuing instruction of believers outside of WELS? “Continuing education,” “preservation,” “nurture,” are words that could be used, but these words are usually reserved for the growing of faith within membership of a church body. David Valleskey refers to these words in that context throughout his book, most notably on pages 134-140, 162. For example, in describing the word nurture Valleskey writes, “In a congregation or church body that takes God’s Word seriously there will always be a tension between outreach and nurture...Both nurture (which includes the training of workers for the church) and outreach require time as well as human and material resources.”¹³ So if these are words that are regularly used to describe believers growing in their faith among one’s church body then we are still left with the problem of finding a word to use for speaking the truth of Christ to believers outside of one’s own church body. It seems to make the most sense to stay with the biblical definition of evangelism to include both believer and unbeliever, and at the same time avoid the possibility of people assuming evangelism is not needed for believers.

WHY POSTMODERNISM HAS MADE EVANGELISTIC WORK EXTREMELY IMPORTANT

Speaking of evangelism as not just teaching the lost about Christ but also continuing the education of a believer’s faith may sound like a moot point at first, but understanding evangelism this way is extremely important today in Postmodern America. Postmodernism says there are no absolute truths and brings with it a subjectivism that allows anyone to believe something is true based on their feelings and experience. So what is true for one person may not be true for

¹² Mark J. Cares, *Speaking the Truth in Love to Mormons*, 2nd Revised Edition (USA: Truth in Love Ministry Corp., 1998) 1.

¹³ David Valleskey, *We Believe—Therefore We Speak* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995) 137.

another. Pastor Stephen Valleskey writes on the unfortunate impact this has in regards to faith and religion,

Seventy percent of Americans today believe that there are no absolutes. While the majority of Americans (60 percent) still believes that the Bible is totally accurate in all it teaches, unbelievably two out of three Americans reject the notion of absolute truth. Three out of five adults do not believe in Satan. Nearly two out of three adults contend that the choice of one religious faith over another is irrelevant because all faiths teach the same basic lessons about life. Three out of five say that all people pray to the same god, regardless of what name or character we ascribe to it. Americans are nearly evenly divided regarding whether or not Christ was perfect, almost half of the public believing that Jesus made mistakes while he was on earth. And this in the face of the fact that the majority of Americans accept the Bible as God's truth.¹⁴

The times have changed, no longer are we in the era of modernism where clear lines of truth are drawn based on the denomination a person belongs to much less the religion they belong to. Stephen Valleskey writes,

But if the choice were given between ministering with the gospel in the more fixed world, I knew in the early days of my ministry when the lines were clearly drawn, and children tended to follow their parents in the faith by convention if not by conviction, I'll take the free marketplace of ideas anytime and the access to people with the gospel that presents to us. I can't remember when I last sat down to speak with anyone who said to me something like, "I'm sorry, we're Catholic and not interested in what you have to say."¹⁵

The postmodern world we live in almost demands we see evangelism everywhere we look, not just with unbelievers. With so much uncertainty about truth when it comes to what people believe, and their willingness to share their experiences of faith as well as hear the experiences of others would it not be wise for us to view their continuing education as evangelism?

Viewing the continuing education of a believer's faith as evangelism actually changes the way we look at people. Howard Festerling was a missionary and long time pastor in the WELS now called home to heaven. He wrote an essay on friendship evangelism (using friendship relationships for evangelism) where he points out that one of the difficulties with friendship

¹⁴ Stephen Valleskey, "The Impact of Postmodernism on our Ministry and its Antidote" [essay on-line] (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Digital Library, April 27, 1999), available from Internet <<http://essays.wls.wels.net/handle/123456789/1374>> accessed 10/1/2016.

¹⁵ Stephen Valleskey, "The Impact of Postmodernism on our Ministry and its Antidote" [essay on-line] (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Digital Library, April 27, 1999), available from Internet <<http://essays.wls.wels.net/handle/123456789/1374>> accessed 10/1/2016.

evangelism is the lack of understanding of what sin has really done to people and the tolerance our society has had toward sin. He writes:

Sin-blindness is the inability to call sin what it is.... The Phil Donahues of our day have done much to desensitize Christians to activities and attitudes that just a decade or two ago would have appalled even many non-Christians.... How does one talk about a Savior from sin in a world that barely recognizes the term any longer? Or even worse: How does a Christian get excited about proclaiming Christ crucified for sinners when his or her own abhorrence of sin is beginning to disappear? Tolerance of the sins of our family members, our friends or our fellow-workers is a guarantee that we'll never talk to them about their Savior.¹⁶

Because of this tolerance of sin, evangelism is hindered since people do not see the *need* to evangelize in many of the situations and relationships they are in. At the same time, if we do not view a Christian's education as evangelism, we are removing the *need* for us to go and share the gospel with him: Instead of looking at a friend or family member in need of instruction as an opportunity for evangelism, a Christian may have the attitude that instruction is "not my job," thus laying the responsibility on that friend or family member's pastor or church family.

Evangelicals have understood the importance of ongoing evangelism, of seeing evangelism as instruction beyond the point of conversion. Most mainstream Evangelicals today consider that the point of conversion is when a decision is made for Christ; but before postmodernism, in the age of modernity, Evangelicals understood evangelism as crusades, the Billy Graham-style-seeker service where people gathered in large numbers, had a conversion experience, and then went on their merry way.¹⁷ David Fitch, writer of *The Great Giveaway* recognizes that

This new generation is not impacted by the ways evangelicals have traditionally presented truth and defended their faith. They experience and engage truth differently than previous generations. They want to see how truth is lived, not just talked about intellectually as information. And so the traditional evangelical methods of evangelism do not make sense among this new generation.¹⁸

If the traditional view of evangelism is non-effective, what should evangelism look like today? Fitch goes on to propose the following:

¹⁶ Howard Festerling, "Educating the Congregation for Friendship Evangelism" [essay on-line] (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Digital Library, January 18, 1988), available from Internet <<http://essays.wls.wels.net/handle/123456789/1432> > accessed 10/1/2016.

¹⁷ David E. Fitch, *The Great Giveaway* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2005), 47-70.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

Evangelism therefore requires that evangelicals retrieve the significance and power of baptism and/or confirmation as an initiatory rite. It requires that our churches develop processes that link “making a decision for Christ” with a process of baptism (or confirmation) and all that lies in between. . . . And whereas evangelism used to end with the ritual of the candidate walking down the aisle to “Just As I Am,” now such an experience marks one of many moments in that person’s participation in the salvation process of the Holy Spirit. . . . Our evangelism should embrace as its work the entire journey from the decision for Christ all the way to baptism (or other initiatory rites of established church traditions), because it is the entry into the world of his lordship that marks a disciple in postmodernity.¹⁹

Fitch leaves a lot of room here for the definition of evangelism based on a church’s traditions, but his point remains the same: Evangelism should be viewed beyond the point of conversion and should extend into the instruction and growth of a person’s faith. If we apply his definition to the WELS, evangelism includes the entire time a person is confronted with the gospel up to his confirmation. While he may have been converted long ago, the evangelism does not stop, per Fitch, until he is confirmed. Why does he see the need to change the definition of evangelism for the postmodern era? This distinction is important: Fitch realizes that faith is more than just a one-time conversion experience. Although the Bible would disagree with this “conversion experience theology,” we can acknowledge the need for ongoing instruction of a person’s faith through the continued sharing of the gospel. Even if it did take a new generation to want more truth of Scripture than the seeker-style worship experiences, Fitch rightly understands ongoing instruction of God’s truth as evangelism.

Fitch’s change in evangelism’s definition may be easier for mainstream Evangelicals to accept than people in the WELS because WELS has never been a part of seeker-style evangelism, and it has not been exposed to the consequences of this style of evangelism. The major downfall of this style of evangelism is that it does not connect new believers to anything. They may have had a wonderful conversion experience out in the middle of a hay field or in a huge stadium filled with people, but what happens when that stadium is emptied and everyone has gone home? Those “newly converted Christians” have no church to call home and no one to instruct or encourage them in their faith; and if that faith is not nourished, it will die.²⁰ Even Billy Graham, the modern-day promoter of seeker-style evangelism, understands the need to be

¹⁹ Ibid., 69.

²⁰ Matthew 13:18-23

part of a church. When asked why he always states that a new Christian should immediately unite with a church, Billy Graham answered:

Why should a newborn baby have a home? It is as simple as that. A child can be born outside the home, and a person can become a Christian outside the church, but nurture and care is essential to the development of both. These can best be provided in the home in case of the child, and in the church in the case of a Christian.²¹

Even though WELS is not a part of seeker-style evangelism, this does not mean we are immune to the problem of continued evangelism among believers. There has been a continuing problem with what happens to the youth once they graduate from confirmation in eighth grade. Professor John Brenner at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary writes in his essay, “Many are legitimately concerned about the graduation syndrome of confirmation and the fact that so many of our young people drift away from the church during their high school and college years.”²² Pastor Richard I. Krahn II of Martin Luther Church in Neenah, WI shared what happened at a church he used to serve at. “Only 63 of those 307 young people were still active members of Martin Luther...74% were gone. Not transferred to another WELS church, but gone.”²³

If evangelism ends, as some believe, once a person becomes a believer, then where is the urgency to speak to him further about the gospel? If we don’t want to view evangelism even as far as Fitch deems we should— to confirmation—then what is our goal in speaking God’s Word? When looking at the concept of evangelism in Scripture we find a very important truth— Continued education is evangelism and evangelism is continued education. The Scriptures do not discriminate between believer and unbeliever when it comes to evangelism. Which makes it important for us to ask ourselves if this is what we are doing when we use different terminology like continued education and evangelism. Is it okay for us to use these terms to describe different functions of our church? Definitely, but if we see continued education as completely separate from evangelism by forgetting that the preaching of the gospel is done in both for the growth of faith, then we are forgetting why we educate people in God’s Word. At the very least

²¹Billy Graham, “Chapter 24: Your Church and Its Problems,” *My Answer* [book on-line] (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Publishing Company, 1960) available from Internet <<http://www.ccel.us/myanswer.ch24.html>>, accessed 10/1/2016.

²² John Brenner, “A Brief Study of Confirmation: Historical Development, Theological Considerations, and Practical Implications” [essay on-line] (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Digital Library, November 18, 1996), available from Internet<<http://hdl.handle.net/123456789/731>>, accessed 01/23/2016.

²³ Richard I. Krahn II, “Confirmation: Form in Search of Function.” [essay on-line] (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Digital Library, 2012), available from Internet <<http://hdl.handle.net/123456789/2691>>, accessed 01/23/2016.

it removes responsibility away from the priesthood of all believers to a specific person. With the lay member for example, the thought of evangelism has been abandoned completely, along with his responsibility: “That person is a Christian, so now it is up to the pastor to train them in hopes of an increase in faith.”

Even if his definition of evangelism ends at conversion, can a pastor or lay member still teach effectively to strengthen a person’s faith? Of course, but the temptation to do otherwise increases dramatically. If a Christian believes that evangelism ends when the lost are converted, then by definition their *goal* of evangelism is to get the lost converted to Christ: The unbeliever has become a believer; therefore, no more evangelism is necessary. The goal of conversion has been met, and so the action of sharing the gospel is either reduced or stopped altogether.²⁴

Whether a person uses seeker-style evangelism or not, if the focus of the evangelism is *only* to get the lost to become a believer, the danger of that converted Christian falling away is greater since he has no body of believers to encourage him and hold him accountable. Too, the temptation to pawn off responsibility is greater.

Valleskey points out that because people can fall away (cf. 1 Cor. 10:12; Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-31) it is important for the pastor to train his members in evangelism to see evangelism as an ongoing work. He writes:

Those involved in the work of evangelism, therefore, will not consider their work finished as soon as people confess faith in Jesus as their Savior. They will want to do what they can to help new converts grow as disciples and remain disciples until the day their lives on earth come to an end.²⁵

We need to ask ourselves what the goal is when we evangelize. We are not seeking more members for our church, or even looking to convert people to Christ. This is a common misconception about evangelism. Many understand the goal of evangelism as either getting others into their church or converting unbelievers to believers or both. Scott Sunquist, author of *Understanding Christian Mission*, clarifies Roman Catholic evangelistic work in the Middle East:

For the Roman Catholic Church the goal was twofold. First, missionary work meant working to bring the Coptic, Maronite, St. Thomas, or Orthodox Church under the oversight of the papacy. The pope, as the Vicar of Christ, was the ruler of all Christians—those not acknowledging his authority must do so. The second goal was to

²⁴ Charles Westra, “To Whom Shall We Go? An Examination of our Mission and Ministry,” January 27, 2015, 1.

²⁵ David Valleskey, *We Believe—Therefore We Speak* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995) 162.

properly catechize these “Oriental Christians,” and work together to bring Muslims and other non-Christians to the faith.²⁶

Gary McIntosh, author of *Growing God’s Church* explains:

In more than a few cases, it (in-reach) results in local churches ignoring their responsibility to evangelize and assimilate new disciples into the life of the church. Conversely we have the Great Commission’s call to make disciples, which is only fulfilled when *new* disciples are made out of secular humanity. The Great Commission demands numerical growth of Christ’s church through the winning of new converts and folding them into local churches.²⁷

Numerous sources claim that the goal of evangelism is to get people into the church and/or to convert them to Christianity; but if the goal of evangelism and even the church is to gain numbers and maintain those numbers, then what do we need the gospel for? Surely there are a plethora of things we can use to keep people interested in the church outside of the gospel (none of which I recommend). The constant need to revamp and revitalize areas of the church to keep people interested and coming to the pews is a constant challenge for many churches.

Filling church pews cannot be the goal of evangelism. It puts emphasis on the work of the one evangelizing instead of the work of the Holy Spirit. Conversion is entirely the work of God alone as our Confessions state:

Conversion is not only in part, but totally an act, gift, present, and work of the Holy Spirit alone. He accomplishes and does it by His power and might, through the Word, in a person’s intellect, will, and heart, “while the person does or works nothing, but only undergoes it.”²⁸

Just as a person’s conversion has nothing to do with any power in himself, so a person’s conversion has nothing to do with any power in the person who shared God’s Word with him. Therefore, our goal with evangelism cannot be to convert, because we are powerless to convert anyone. Former professor of theology at Martin Luther College, Lyle Lange writes, “The Bible makes it clear that God alone is responsible for a sinner’s conversion. Jesus said, ‘No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him’” (Jn 6:44).²⁹ Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary professor Kenneth Cherney stated in his essay, “Nor, strictly speaking, are we out to

²⁶ Scott Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 71.

²⁷ Gary L. McIntosh, *Growing God’s Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 72.

²⁸ Book of Concord, *A Reader’s Edition of the Book of Concord* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), Article II, 89.

²⁹ Lyle Lange, *God So Loved the World* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2008), 320.

convert people to Christ: the Holy Spirit does that, we do not, and to set that as a goal which we are powerless to control and cannot evaluate as to success or failure is bad theology and bad mental hygiene.”³⁰

Certainly, we hope that all people will come to a knowledge of the truth, just as God tells us in 1 Timothy 2:4, but Scripture separates what we hope for and the goal the Holy Spirit accomplishes through his Word: “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Ro. 10:14) Again in Romans Paul states, “I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles” (Ro. 1:13). In evangelism we hope for the unbelievers conversion but it is the goal of the Holy Spirit, not ours. While God uses us to be his tools in spreading his Word throughout all nations, we cannot dictate where and when the Holy Spirit will convert a soul. It is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit to convert souls when and where he wills. Jesus tells us, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (Jn. 3:8).

Therefore, the goal of evangelism is to simply present the gospel message to all people because it is through that message that God has told us the Holy Spirit works to convert souls. The goal of evangelism “is simply opportunities to present the gospel.”³¹ Even in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) Jesus tells us the making of disciples is the result of *his* work. *Μαθητεύσατε* – the aorist active imperative *make disciples*, “connotes results not methods and ways.”³² The best way to understand the sense and meaning of *Μαθητεύσατε* in its context is “cause all nations to become pupils by baptizing and teaching them.”³³ The two participles *βαπτίζοντες baptizing* and *διδάσκοντες teaching* “state *how* all nations are to be made into

³⁰ Kenneth A. Cherney, “Saving Souls or Stealing Sheep: An Inquiry” [essay on-line] (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Digital Library, November 14, 1987), available from Internet <<http://essays.wls.wels.net/handle/123456789/1040>> accessed 10/1/2016.

³¹ Ibid.

³² R.C.H. Lenski, Matthew Commentary, The Wartburg Press, Columbus, Ohio, 1943, pg. 1172.

³³ W. Arndt, F.W. Danker, and W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature 3rd ed.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 609.

disciples.”³⁴ So it is not *our* work that makes disciples, but it is the work of the Holy Spirit given out in our work that makes disciples. Jerome and Michael Albrecht state it well:

As Christ’s church proclaims the apostolic gospel and administers Christ’s sacraments, the church has Christ’s promise always to be with his followers, working through his Word and sacraments to make and keep people as his disciples, his believers.³⁵

If the goal of evangelism is to simply present the gospel to people, how can we not speak of all presentations of the gospel, no matter to whom those presentations are given and when they are given, as evangelism? Perhaps a more important question is why would we *refrain* from calling it evangelism? There is absolutely nothing negative about calling the entire spiritual education of a Christian evangelism, but there are many positive reasons. One rationale is that it helps a pastor’s focus of Bible Information Classes as sharing the gospel for their spiritual growth instead of boosting church membership. In addition, it helps lay members understand their role in educating new converts as not just the pastor’s job but also their job. It also helps prevent confusing the goal of evangelism as an opportunity to present the gospel with the unscriptural goal of converting unbelievers. Finally, it helps maintain the urgency of sharing the gospel to all people and it *gives* urgency to continuing the spiritual education of believers. How does viewing Christian education as evangelism give a sense of urgency? Well think of what evangelism means to many in our day. As shown in the survey on page five, thirty-five percent of Seminary students view evangelism to unbelievers as more important. Why? Clearly it is because they desire for those lost souls to know the free grace of God and go to heaven instead of hell. This automatically gives urgency to evangelism. The Apostle John states in his gospel, “Don’t you have a saying, ‘It’s still four months until harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest” (John 4:35). It is good and right for all Christians to have the same sentiment of urgency as the apostle John. But what if the threat of hell is taken away? What if the fields ripe for harvest no longer include believers? Then the urgency is gone, or at the very least diminished. But what if we bring the same urgency one experiences in sharing the gospel to the lost to sharing the gospel with believers? Scripture has already done this for us.

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit,⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of

³⁴ Lenski, Matthew, pg. 1173.

³⁵ G. J. Albrecht, G. J., and M. J. Albrecht, *Matthew* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1966), 442.

God and the powers of the coming age⁶ and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace (Hebrews 6:4-6).

Just because a person has the gospel today does not guarantee they will have it tomorrow. We sinful human beings always need the warning against falling away to keep our sinful nature from boasting. Our postmodern world confirms this tragic and urgent call to those falling away. A Pew Research study concluded in 2014 that one-in-five Americans have said they were raised Christian or of another faith but now have no religious affiliation.³⁶ This number is continuing to grow every year. There is just as much need for evangelism urgency in continued education today as there is with evangelism to the lost.

Another important reason postmodernism requires us to view evangelism as sharing the gospel with all people is that it cuts through the lines of denominationalism and keeps the focus on Christ and his gospel. There is an unprecedented number of denominations in the world today. In his book *The Gospel Commission*, Michael Horton contends that there are 33,820 Protestant denominations, “and an estimated 270-300 new denominations are born each year.”³⁷ His book was published in 2011. Horton asks the question

Is there not a cause for encouraging churches and denominations to pursue (1) organic, visible, connectional unity wherever there is a common confession of faith; (2) cooperation wherever possible (especially in missions and mercy ministries); and (3) forums for mutual instruction and admonition on matters of church-dividing disagreements?³⁸

While there are good doctrinal and confessional reasons the WELS and many other denominations are separated from each other—and should remain that way—we should not act as if the other does not exist. Neither should we falsely believe that every denomination is content with where it is, much less every individual within each denomination. From 2009 to 2013, 675 churches reportedly left the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.³⁹ While the

³⁶ Michael Lipka, Editor, “A closer look at America’s rapidly growing religious ‘nones,’ [essay-online] available from <<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/>> accessed 02/06/2016.

³⁷ Michael Horton, *The Gospel Commission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), 205.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Dan Skogan, “Number of Churches That Left the ELCA from 2009 to 2013” [blog on-line] (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America “Report to the Secretary” April, 2014), available from Internet <<http://www.elcatoday.com/witness-stone-blog/number-of-churches-that-left-the-elca-from-2009-to-2013>>, accessed 10/1/2016.

majority of churches left in 2010 and 2011 over the issue of same-sex relationships, there were three major contributing factors to the breakage: (1) “Bullying” tactics by denominational leaders; (2) A perceived abandonment of foundational principles of Scripture and tradition; (3) The devaluation of personal faith.⁴⁰ Seventy thousand members left the Presbyterian Church alone in 2012-2013. Where did these Christians go?

The great majority of congregations leaving the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) chose to join the Evangelical Presbyterian Church or the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians. Few chose to join the larger Presbyterian Church in America, which does not permit women clergy.⁴¹

Where did these Christians not go?

Similarly, congregations leaving the ELCA overwhelmingly bypassed the more conservative Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod denominations for the new Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ and the North American Lutheran Church.⁴²

Why have most ELCA churches bypassed the more conservative WELS? Clearly it is because they do not agree with the truths of Scripture that the WELS holds so dear. So who can say this is not a field ripe for harvest? Would it not be *more* loving to want to reach out to these people by sharing and explaining these wonderful Bible truths instead of thinking they already have a church so let them deal with it? Certainly, we do not need to get on the Ecumenical bandwagon that promises to heal all denominational divisions by simply putting aside all differences and disregarding all of Scripture. Arnold Sitz maintains that “No ecumenical movement will ever be successful that proves to be nothing above the effort of men. To succeed it must come from above, the work of the Holy Spirit.”⁴³ That “it must come from the Holy Spirit” is precisely the point, and we know that the Holy Spirit works only through the Word and sacraments.⁴⁴ To be sure, this evangelism is going on in our circles and we must be thankful for that. Dean of

⁴⁰ David Briggs, “Not Just Gay Issues: Why Hundreds of Congregations Made Final Break with Mainline Denominations,” [blog on-line] (The Association of Religion Data Archives: Ahead of the Trend January 25, 2015 <http://blogs.thearda.com/trend/featured/more-than-sex-why-hundreds-of-congregations-made-final-break-with-mainline-denominations/>; Internet; accessed 10/1/2016.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Arnold Sitz, “Observations on Ecumenicity” [essay on-line] (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Digital Library), available from Internet <<http://essays.wls.net/handle/123456789/3781>> accessed DATE.

⁴⁴ Book of Concord, *A Reader’s Edition of the Book of Concord* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), Article III paragraph 16 - This righteousness is offered us by the Holy Ghost through the Gospel and in the Sacraments.

students Joel Otto at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary mentioned several of these opportunities taking place at the church he regularly attends. But we would be kidding ourselves to say there is no confusion in our circles of whether we can evangelize to believers of other denominations or not. Pastor Charles Westra wrote about this confusion.

Those of you who are as old as I am were told in PT classes that we should avoid proselytizing. That always confused me a bit. I was never completely sure who was “in bounds” and who was “out of bounds.” In my opinion, the lines are even more blurry today than they were in 1990 when I began parish ministry.⁴⁵

If a person’s understanding of evangelism is only to reach the lost, then God’s Word is not being used to alert fellow believers of errors they are being taught or to strengthen and encourage them in their faith. How much help could our members be to those fleeing the ELCA and Presbyterian Churches? What a message it would be to let our members know it is okay for them to encourage their family and friends and co-workers that leaving their church for false teachings is a good thing. To seek a more scriptural bound church is a good thing. To help turn a Satan-devising plan of division and devastation into an opportunity to strengthen the faith of those trapped by ferocious wolves is also good. *This is* evangelism with the simple goal of sharing God’s gospel. We should relish the opportunity.

Within a heterodox church there can be and there is the strengthening of faith through the Word of God, and we want to praise God for that; however, just because God’s Word is being taught in a church does not mean that we are no longer allowed to speak to members of that church. Suppose a member of a Presbyterian church came to me desiring to share God’s Word with me about a particular topic, and we discussed the matter without crossing fellowship lines. I was edified by our discussion since I was taught something new that was scriptural. How arrogant and stubborn would I be not to accept his teaching with gratitude and joy? How shallow minded would I have to be to kick him out of the house thinking my pastor is the only one allowed to instruct me? Hopefully, most of a person’s instruction is coming from his pastor because that is what pastors are called for, but the pastor is not meant to limit a person’s sources for understanding the Scriptures; in fact, it is the duty of all believers to be knowledgeable enough to test their pastors in making sure they are speaking the truths of Scripture, just as the Berean Jews did: “Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in

⁴⁵ Charles Westra, “To Whom Shall We Go? An Examination of our Mission and Ministry,” January 27, 2015, 6.

Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Ac. 17:11).

As the number of denominations around the world increases, the harder it becomes to identify a Christian’s status and much less his confession of faith. Schuetze and Habeck agree: "Unfortunately the confessional deterioration in many so-called Christian churches causes increasing difficulty in determining their Christian status."⁴⁶ According to the Pew Research Center seventy percent of Americans still claim to be Christian,⁴⁷ and yet in a LifeWay poll, sixty-five percent of all Americans agree that everyone sins a little, but that most people are good by nature.⁴⁸ It is startling that sixty-four percent of all those who hold evangelical beliefs say heaven is a place where all people will ultimately be reunited with their loved ones.⁴⁹ Furthermore, sixty-two percent of churchgoers disagree with the statement, “My local church has the authority to withhold the Lord’s Supper from me and exclude me from the fellowship of the church.”⁵⁰ These statistics are just a small sampling of the contradiction of beliefs people are willing to settle for, but as Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research says, “Contradictory and incompatible beliefs are OK for most people.”⁵¹

One of the greatest advantages in viewing evangelism as the speaking of the gospel to all people as well as understanding the true goal of evangelism as an opportunity to share the gospel is that we don’t have to guess where people are in their spiritual lives. With mixed views in postmodernism and in each age about what it means to be a Christian, it is impossible to know where every person is at, whether he truly is a Christian or if he simply claims to be a Christian. Neither can a person be classified as a believer by his church membership since church

⁴⁶Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974), 240.

⁴⁷ Pew Research Center, “Christians Decline as Share of U.S. Population; Other Faiths and the Unaffiliated Are Growing” (2014 Religious Landscape Study June 4-September 30, 2014), available from Internet <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/pr_15-05-12_rls-00/> accessed 10/1/2016.

⁴⁸ Bob Smietana, “Sin and Condemnation” (2016 State of American Theology Study), available from Internet <<http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2016-sin.jpg>>, 4, accessed DATE.

⁴⁹ Bob Smietana, “Americans Love God and the Bible, Are Fuzzy on the Details” (2016 State of American Theology Study), available from Internet <<http://lifewayresearch.com/2016/09/27/americans-love-god-and-the-bible-are-fuzzy-on-the-details/>> accessed 10/1/2016.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

membership does not necessarily mean that a person knows or believes what his church teaches. If a person evangelizes only to the lost, then he either must determine which people among Evangelicals are believers and which are not, or he has to avoid Evangelicals altogether and simply focus on the unchurched. Both approaches are problematic. The first option is almost impossible, and the second option ignores potential millions who really don't know Christ at all; and Scripture tells us that unbelievers do exist in the visible church:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ (Mt. 7:21-23)

When understanding the true goal of evangelism—an opportunity to share the gospel—we do not have to determine if someone is or is not a Christian since we want to share the gospel with all people. We want *all* people to be edified by the gospel message. Like Jesus we have the same goal with both believers and non-believers—an opportunity to share the gospel. We are no longer tied down to a specific type of person (unbeliever), but rather we can freely share Christ's gospel and edify one another whenever the opportunity arises.

PROSELYTIZING

Understanding evangelism as sharing the gospel to all people should not be confused with proselytizing, or more aptly known, “sheep stealing.” Proselytizing has an entirely different goal than evangelism. Unfortunately, the definition of proselytizing has become just as diverse as the definition of evangelism. Merriam-Webster defines proselytizing as, “to induce someone to convert to one's faith.”⁵² Higher critics of the Bible understand proselytizing as any attempt to convert a person from one religion or school of thought to their own. John Fletcher, higher critic and author of *Proselytizing*, uses this definition: “expressive conduct undertaken with the purpose of trying to change the religious beliefs, affiliation, or identity of another.”⁵³ Christians would narrow this definition since speaking to unbelievers is not considered proselytizing but

⁵²Merriam Webster Dictionary “Proselytize” [dictionary online] available from the Internet < <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/proselytize>>, accessed 10/1/2016.

⁵³ John Fletcher, “Proselytism,” *Ecumenica*, 7: 67-70, 2014 [journal on-line]; *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost [database on-line]; accessed 31 August 2016, 1.

instead evangelism. Narrowing the definition within the confines of the Christian community, John H.C. Fritz states that proselytizing is “visiting members of a Christian congregation of another denomination with the intention of persuading them to leave that congregation and denomination.”⁵⁴

According to society, proselytizing has the goal of converting someone from one religion or thought to another. As stated earlier, many understand evangelism as “The Great Commission [demanding] numerical growth of Christ’s church through the winning of new converts and folding them into local churches.”⁵⁵ Looking closely at society’s definition of proselytizing and the view that many Christians have about evangelism, we see something rather unique: the two have the same goal. If a person’s goal in evangelism is to convert a person to his way of thinking and get that person into the church, then the evangelist’s definition of evangelism is consistent with how society views proselytizing. This is where the confusion comes with determining concrete explanations of evangelism and proselytizing. Two groups can be talking about two completely different terms, but their goal is the same while their target audience is different.

There is an easier way; it does not need to be so complicated. Proselytizing should retain its definition as an attempt to convert someone from one religion or school of thought to another, and evangelism should be understood as an opportunity to share the gospel. In other words, the definition of evangelism and proselytizing should not change based on the target audience. This is not a new idea since Scripture already suggests this. This has already been established with the word εὐαγγελίζω earlier. Now consider the following about προσήλυτον (proselytize):

The New Testament uses the noun προσήλυτον only four times (Mt. 23:15, Ac. 2:11, Ac. 6:5, and Ac. 13:43), and all four times it refers to a converter to Judaism. In Matthew, the term refers to the Pharisees’ winning people over to Judaism. All three times that it is used in Acts it speaks of those who have been converted to Judaism. Within Scripture the full meaning of the noun is limited to conversion to Judaism: “One who has come over from polytheism to Judean religion and practice or *convert*.”⁵⁶ The Septuagint sometimes translates גֵר (sojourner), as προσήλυτον. In the New Testament, the meaning is the same— a converter to Judaism, showing

⁵⁴ John H. C. Fritz, *Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1945), 64-65.

⁵⁵ Gary McIntosh, *Growing God’s Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 72.

⁵⁶ W.Arndt, et.al, 880.

that Scripture keeps the definition of proselyte the same—a convert, but it never changes based on who is being proselytized. Since Scripture defines proselytize and evangelism separately and doesn't change their definitions regardless of the target audience, there is no good reason for us to change them.

Keeping proselytizing separate from evangelism and vice-versa is extremely beneficial because proselytizing, whether believer or unbeliever, has a bad connotation in society today. John Fletcher explains, “To proselytize is unavoidably to express negative judgment of another’s identity. More, it inaugurates a world that construes religious identities as incompatible, therefore in competition.”⁵⁷ This is a very accurate description of what many consider proselytizing today, all the more reason for us to keep evangelism and proselytizing separate.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

Some make the argument that an attempt to evangelize among Christians of other denominations is wrong since it disregards the relationship and divine call of that church’s pastor with his parishioners. Professor Carl Lawrenz clarifies:

This relationship exists even in a heterodox Christian congregation insofar as it must still be recognized as a church on the basis of the marks of the church. The relationship exists also here between the called spiritual shepherd and the members who have called him, called him by virtue of their rights as believers. If a member of an unorthodox Christian congregation from God’s Word becomes aware of the errors of his church and of the false doctrines which his pastor is teaching and proclaiming, and finds that he intends to persist in them, he not only can but must disavow him as his shepherd and thereby end the relationship that existed. Yet unless that has taken place an orthodox Christian or an orthodox pastor cannot simply brush that relationship aside and presume to take over the role of spiritual shepherd and overseer with respect to the members of such a congregation. This is not warranted just because there are errors confessed and taught by its ministry.⁵⁸

We must remember the goal of evangelism: an opportunity to present the gospel. Evangelism is *not* proselytizing. It is not an attempt to convert someone to Christianity. Neither is it an attempt to convert one member of a heterodox church to be a member of an orthodox church. Moreover, it surely is not an attempt by an orthodox Christian or pastor to replace the

⁵⁷ Fletcher, 2.

⁵⁸ Carl J. Lawrenz, “A Definitive Study of Proselytizing,” [essay on-line] (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Digital Library February 1975) available from Internet <<http://hdl.handle.net/123456789/2919>>, accessed 10/1/2016.

pastor of a heterodox church. It should not be forgotten that the call into public ministry is limited in scope over the universal priesthood of all believers. Dennis Rardin writes in his Pastoral Theology paper:

So an evangelist...as a public minister of his congregation, ought not teach or instruct members of a heterodox church without their asking; *his call does not include them* [emphasis added]. But as a universal priest, he is to encourage his fellow Christians of all denominations, and admonish and correct whenever he finds opportunity in his station in life. When a priest rebukes error on the basis of the Word, he is not usurping the authority of the public minister. He is rather fulfilling his role as a one who “cannot help but speak the things he has heard and seen” through the work of the public minister.⁵⁹

Scripture further instructs pastors to “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (Ac. 20:28).

But when it comes to the royal priesthood, it is a real stretch to say that a presentation of the gospel message to a fellow Christian for their edification is meddling in the affairs of their relationship with their pastor. The pastor is not the only person from whom one can learn Scripture. In fact, Scripture tells us whom we should be learning Scripture from—our pastors and teachers:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ might be built up, until we reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:11-13).

In addition to pastors and teachers, the Scriptures give all believers responsibilities: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pe. 2:9). The Apostle Peter exhorts believers to “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Pe. 3:15).

Parents as well are given specific instructions for the edification of their children: “Teach them [the laws and decrees of the Lord] to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Dt. 11:19).

⁵⁹ Dennis Rardin, “Proselytizing or Evangelizing? Applying the Doctrine of Church and Ministry When Dealing with the Heterodox Christian,” [essay on-line] (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Digital Library 1988) available from Internet <<http://hdl.handle.net/123456789/3953>>, accessed 10/1/2016.

The responsibility of the parent is a grave one: “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Pr. 22:6 ESV). Specifically, fathers are challenged: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph.6:4). Scripture recognizes that parents are crucial in the spiritual education of their children:

I will open my mouth with a parable;
I will utter hidden things, things from of old—
³ things we have heard and known,
things our ancestors have told us.
⁴ We will not hide them from their descendants;
we will tell the next generation
the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD,
his power, and the wonders he has done (Ps.78:2-4).

While those who have a role in the public ministry are limited to instructing and evangelizing to both those God has placed under their care and to unbelievers, it is the duty of all believers to encourage and share God’s gospel to *everyone*, both unbelievers and fellow believers. McIntosh “engaged in a new study to discover the answer to two key questions—how are people coming to faith in Christ, and how are people coming into responsible church involvement.”⁶⁰ In his survey, the participants were asked who had led them to Christ with 43.2 percent naming a family member and 15.7 percent a friend, for a combined total of 58.9 percent.”⁶¹ In addition, he asked Church Transfers (those who have been believers for more than 2 years) who had influenced them to attend Church; 28.9 percent indicated that a family member had persuaded them and 22.4 percent said a friend, for a total of 51.3 percent.⁶² That means 51.3 percent of the Christians that McIntosh polled said they were influenced to go to church by another Christian. Of course, these statistics shouldn’t be interpreted to support the idea that evangelism concerns numbers in the church because that is *not* the goal of evangelism. Instead, the data support the view of evangelism as any opportunity to share the gospel—with believer or unbeliever. Another aspect of evangelism that the survey numbers support is that evangelism between people who have a personal relationship can be effective. Whether the relationship is between pastor and

⁶⁰ Gary L. McIntosh, *Growing God’s Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 94.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 95.

⁶² *Ibid*, 120.

church member, parent and child, or between friends, the Scriptures support having a personal relationship as a foundation for evangelism.

BEWARE THE DITCHES

Professor Daniel Deutschlander, author of *The Narrow Lutheran Middle*, made the statement that

Any number of false doctrines are the result of falls off the narrow middle road into ditches on either side of the truth in the middle. See how clever the devil is: Often he does not make a frontal assault on the truths of God's Word. Rather, he prefers to take a bit of truth and distort it until it becomes a lie; he does that by emphasizing only one aspect of the truth at the expense of the whole truth. With the grain of truth that he has corrupted, a grain that he uses to make his lie believable, he seduces unguarded souls into error and even unbelief; he pushes them from the narrow middle into the ditches on either side of the truth.⁶³

Evangelism is not immune to such ditches of untruth. In fact, evangelism may be the most prone to trenches because it entails the preaching and teaching of the entire Word of God. If someone teaches any false doctrine, he has strayed from the narrow road of truth. Since evangelism involves *all* of God's Word, it is wise to maintain the middle road of truth. The first ditch that people can fall into with evangelism is thinking those of other denominations are not Christian, thus feeling the need to convert them to their church or synod. Valleskey explains this ditch when he writes about evangelizing to a believer of a heterodox church. "To do so would give the false impression that our church body and denomination is the only saving church on earth and is virtually identical with the holy Christian church."⁶⁴ While his evaluation that evangelizing to other believers gives the false impression we are the only saving church is an assumption, he nevertheless is describing the first ditch. The second ditch is a lackadaisical attitude of thinking evangelism is not necessary in all parts of a Christian's life, that it is only for a certain *type* of person (unbeliever). This ditch is proved by Cares, quoted earlier, when he writes, "Regarding Mormons as Christians is nothing short of tragic. That view dramatically increases the danger of more Christians joining the Mormon church. It also puts the damper on efforts to reach Mormons with the message of forgiveness through Christ. **Why witness to them, if they are**

⁶³ Daniel Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2011), 2.

⁶⁴ David Valleskey, *We Believe—Therefore We Speak* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995), 142.

already Christian.”⁶⁵ Both ditches are neglecting the meaning of evangelism and its goal while replacing it with the goal of converting people.

The first ditch is neglecting the doctrine of the invisible church. The Apostle Matthew writes in Matthew 18:20 that “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” More will be said on the invisible church in the next chapter, but for now it is enough to say the person who falls into the temptation of the first ditch is failing to recognize that there are believers wherever the marks of the church are present: “These marks are the pure doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ. This Church alone is called Christ’s body, which Christ renews, sanctifies, and governs by His Spirit.”⁶⁶ An attempt to convert someone into the WELS does not guarantee that person’s salvation. We assume that by bringing someone into a church body that person will enter into a closer relationship with their Savior; but the conviction of sin, their conversion and growth of faith is through the Holy Spirit alone, whenever he pleases. To believe otherwise places undo emphasis on a church body, as Valleskey pointed out, and neglects the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word. It may also become an opportunity for Satan to develop a condescending attitude in the believers toward the unbeliever.

The true goal of evangelism—an opportunity to share the gospel—should be brought back to mind. A person cannot help but show love for another since giving the good news is entirely gospel-motivated. There is no longer concern with winning the person over to a specific church; the desire is for the person to see the free grace of Christ.

Besides neglect of doctrine, the second trap is a lackadaisical attitude thinking that evangelism is not necessary in all parts of a Christian’s life, that it is only for a certain *type* of person (unbeliever). In this thinking, key passages of Scripture are forgotten. The Apostle Peter writes in 1 Peter 3:15 that we should “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” He does not say only give an answer to unbelievers or someone of the same church or synod, but continuously be ready to give an answer to anyone that asks. Furthermore, Jesus calls us the light of the world (Mat. 5:14) that we

⁶⁵ Mark J. Cares, *Speaking the Truth in Love to Mormons*, 2nd Revised Edition (USA: Truth in Love Ministry Corp., 1998) 1, *emphasis mine*.

⁶⁶ *Concordia Lutheran Confessions: A Reader’s Edition of the Book of Concord* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 144.

are to “let [our] light shine before men, that they may see [our] good deeds and praise [our] Father in heaven” (Mat. 5:16). We Christians let our light shine for *all people* not just unbelievers. This ditch is usually caused by an overemphasis on the doctrine of the invisible church. That anyone who confesses to be a member of a Christian church must therefore be a Christian.

With this train of thought, evangelism is reserved only for the lost, and this again puts the emphasis of his evangelism on converting someone into his church. If the only people that believers can share God’s Word with are the lost, then this view leads to the conclusion that the goal of evangelism is to convert the lost to Christianity. (It should be noted again that it is proper for us to have the hope of converting the lost to Christ just as Paul says in Romans, “I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles” (Rom. 1:13). But it is not the goal of evangelism. We have the hope of conversion in evangelism but it is not our goal, it is the Holy Spirit’s goal.) The lackadaisical attitude creates the idea that as long as someone confesses he is a believer, then there is no need for anyone to discuss God’s Word with him further.⁶⁷ This leads into the next chapter of the invisible church along with church fellowship and what it means for Christians.

THE INVISIBLE CHURCH IN LIGHT OF CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

Lyle Lange wrote in his *book God So Loved the World* that “The church (the assembly of believers in Christ) is found wherever the gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are administered.”⁶⁸ We acknowledge that in other Christian denominations outside of WELS, there are believers and we have fellowship with them in the holy invisible church, for “You are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Yet we do not share visible church fellowship with true believers of other denominations because we cannot see into the hearts of people to see who is and who is not truly among this invisible church. We look at the confession of a church body to determine visible church fellowship based on whether there is false doctrine being taught along with the gospel. For

⁶⁷ Mark J. Cares, *Speaking the Truth in Love to Mormons*, 2nd Revised Edition (USA: Truth in Love Ministry Corp., 1998) 1.

⁶⁸ Lyle Lange, *God So Loved the World* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2008), 535.

The basis for fellowship in the visible church is agreement on all that Scripture teaches. Jesus tells us to teach all that he has commanded us (Mt. 28:20). God does not want anyone to add or take away from what is written in his Word (Dt. 4:2). Paul told the Roman Christians to stay away from those who persisted in teaching false doctrine (Ro. 16:17). He urged Timothy to oppose the false teachers in Ephesus (1 Ti. 1:3-5). He identified false teachers by name so that people would be on their guard against them (1 Ti. 1:20; 2 Ti. 2:17, 18; 4:14). He warned of false teachers who would come and indicated a good minister will warn against the error of these false teachers (1 Ti. 4:1-6). He wrote, “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him” (Tit. 3:10).⁶⁹

Clearly, with matters of church fellowship, we should stay away from those teaching false doctrines. This doctrinal position on fellowship is called the *unit concept*, which “means that, in the first place, all doctrines of Scripture must be dealt with as an indivisible unit when we are trying to determine with whom we may practice fellowship.”⁷⁰ And secondly, there are activities in which we reserve the right to practice with only those of whom we are in visible church fellowship with: *pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship, fellowship in worship, prayer fellowship, fellowship in church work, fellowship in missions, fellowship in Christian education.*⁷¹ It should be noted that the “keeping away from those who err” is speaking directly to visible church fellowship. Lange writes,

Thus, when the process of admonition reveals that a person or church body is persisting in error, the command of Scripture is clear: “Keep away from them” (Ro 16:17). This means, then, *that we will not participate with the person or church body in acts that are expressions of fellowship* (emphasis added).⁷²

Keeping away from all false doctrines and people of false teachings within our everyday lives is not realistic. To isolate ourselves from these people practicing false doctrine, we would have to leave the world (1 Co. 5:9-13). Even though we have fellowship with believers of different denominations within the holy invisible church, we cannot and should not join together to edify one another in worship and church work within the visible church.

However, we do have the command from God to encourage one another and build each other up. Paul clearly directs the Thessalonian Christians to “Therefore encourage one another with these words” (1 Th. 4:18) and “therefore encourage one another and build each other up,

⁶⁹ Ibid., 554.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 554-555.

⁷² Ibid., 560.

just as in fact you are doing” (1 Th. 5:11). The writer of Hebrews tells us to “... encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Heb. 3:13). “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). Paul commands believers to “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Ro. 14:19). This encouragement is certainly meant for the whole invisible church, and not limited to certain local visible churches. Paul’s letters are coupled with every book we have that consists of the New Testament, and these letters have been shared throughout the whole world by Christians ever since: “After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea” (Col. 4:16). Some of these churches that Paul wrote to had people teaching false doctrines among them: “As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer” (1 Ti. 1:3) as well as falling into false doctrines themselves, “Or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies” (1 Ti. 1:4). Another church, the Corinthian church, was even condoning false teachers: “For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough” (2 Co. 11:4). This encouragement is clearly meant for the whole invisible church.

We clearly have the command to encourage one another as well as reprove one another within the invisible church, but how do we do that since it is also clear we must keep away from false teachers by not practicing visible church fellowship? The answer is evangelism. When the goal of evangelism is perceived as an opportunity to share the gospel, we will be able to encourage those of other denominations in their faith; and we will be able to reprove those who are teaching false doctrines. We can take the initiative to approach our friends and neighbors and share God’s Word with them, despite where they are in their faith. Maybe they are unbelievers; sharing God’s Word with them gives the Holy Spirit the opportunity to convert them. Maybe they are believers; sharing God’s Word with them gives the Holy Spirit the opportunity to strengthen their faith. While each individual visible church enjoys a special, additional encouragement and building up through the activities of fellowship within that church, we can also provide encouragement and the building up among those within the invisible church through evangelism.

CONCLUSION

To think that God needs us in order to carry out the work of the Holy Spirit, that without us conversion would never take place would be an easy conclusion for some who are involved in evangelism, but Jesus himself contends the following: “I tell you,” he replied, “if they [disciples] keep quiet, the stones will cry out” (Lk. 19:40). We should remember that God does not need people to carry out the work of evangelism for his glory. Believers are simply the tools God has chosen to use in order that his Word is proclaimed to all nations. To share the gospel message with all people is our goal, a goal that is scriptural. We need to take this work of evangelism seriously. The converting, the strengthening of faith, that is the Holy Spirit’s goal to accomplish when and where he wills. As soon as we step out of the role as a simple tool that God has given us, we are in danger of placing ourselves in the role of the Holy Spirit by thinking it is our job to convert.

After Jesus’ death, the gospel was spread across the continent by twelve ordinary men—Jesus’ disciples— sharing the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection and the impact that His obedience had in their lives. The chosen twelve carried that gospel to unbelievers, and so are we to do so. The Apostle Paul started multiple churches across Asia Minor; but when he left an area, he maintained a close relationship with the converted to exhort, encourage, and even to admonish them when necessary. We are to follow Paul’s example with Christians in our relationship circles, going beyond their conversion to increase spiritual growth and maturity. The post modernistic, tolerant world today demands this clear definition of evangelism in answering Jesus’ call to be fishers of men (Mt. 4:19) among our congregations, families, and friends.

In conclusion, recognizing evangelism as an opportunity to share the gospel instead of recognizing evangelism as only to a certain group of people has distinct advantages. We open ourselves to more opportunities to share the truths of Scripture with more people. It allows us to embrace people with a postmodern ideology by showing we are just as open to talk to them as they are with us. At the same time it counteracts the postmodern thought that truth is what you make it by being witnesses of the truths of Scripture with everyone we meet. It keeps the focus of our witness away from who is right and who is wrong and makes it about love for our neighbor, because no matter where they are in there faith we simply want to share the gospel. It acknowledges the invisible church by allowing us to encourage all believers without crossing fellowship lines. Most importantly, it agrees with Scripture’s view of evangelism. May God

grant us mercy and strength to be humble enough to accept our limitations within evangelism and bold enough to share his message with all people.

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