

SAVING SOULS OR STEALING SHEEP?

An Inquiry

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On February 4, 1975, when Professor Carl Lawrenz presented his essay, "A Definitive Study of Proselytizing" to the WELS Commission on Evangelism, he recognized that he'd been assigned an "ambitious, almost presumptuous undertaking."¹ He expressed his hope "that if this study cannot attain the full objective set for it, the discussion that it is meant to stimulate may do so."² As I discuss the same subject in this paper I wish to echo Lawrenz's sentiments exactly. If anything, the religious scene in North America today is more complex and ambiguous than it was in 1975, when a man of much greater acumen and experience than I undertook the work of defining "sheep stealing" and discussing its relation to evangelism. My hopes are even dimmer than his that I will arrive at any "definitive" answers; therefore my goal is rather to point out the reasons why this issue is so confusing and, in conclusion, to set forth some theses intended to provoke further discussion of the kind the Commission must have enjoyed.

"Proselytizing" or "proselyting" is a term which in popular usage denotes any kind of attempt at converting another; witness Webster:

pros' e lyte v. t. &i.; **-lyted** (lit'ed; id; 119) to convert to some religion, opinion or system, or the like; to make a proselyte of, to make proselytes of, to convert.³

This definition bears no reference to the religious stance of the proselyte before he was proselyted, and thus would even refer to our efforts to convert Jews, Moslems or agnostics. Only in our circles⁴ is the term restricted to attempting to convert someone from a heterodox Christian faith to orthodox Christian faith. Defined in this way it is also unanimously censured. Schuetze and Habeck's statement is representative: "The pastor himself will avoid proselytizing and warn his members against it."⁵ But the reasons given for the prohibition against proselytizing are various. Some cite the Ninth Commandment as a proof text,⁶ which I must say strikes me as an altogether too ingenious application unless the proselytizing is done purely for base, selfish motives. Others use Peter's censure of "meddlers" in his Epistle (1 Pe 4:15) which, though more convincing, may or may not apply: many times Scripture demands that we "meddle" where the welfare of souls is at stake. The soundest arguments against proselytizing are drawn as conclusions from the doctrines of the Church and of the Call, but as we shall see even these do not definitively settle the question.

The Augsburg Confession defines the "church" as "the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered"⁷; the Apology elaborates: "which fellowship nevertheless has outward marks so that it can be recognized, namely the pure doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ."⁸ This understanding, of course, is based on the doctrine of the efficacy of the Word: that anywhere God's Word is proclaimed the Holy Spirit is active and is gathering believers into the invisible body of Christ. Confessional Lutheranism is consistent in its

¹ Carl Lawrenz, "A Definitive Study of Proselytizing," (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, vol 73, 1976, pp. 23-41), p. 23.

² Ibid.

³ *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*, (Springfield, MS: G. & C. Merriam, 1945).

⁴ Lawrenz, p. 26.

⁵ Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974), p. 240.

⁶ F. Kuegele, "Theses on Parish Rights" in *Proceedings, First Convention of the General English Evangelical Lutheran Conference of Missouri and Other States*, October 19-23, 1888, p. 22 (Quoted in Lawrenz, p. 26).

⁷ Art. VII, Trigl. p. 47.

⁸ Trigl. p. 227

refusal to identify the *Una Sancta* with a visible Christian church, for as Walther said "those who are addicted to this error have only changed weapons with the papists."⁹

Therefore, the argument runs, any attempt to persuade those of a heterodox communion to join ours is misguided at best, for the person undertaking it acts as though he were unaware that there can be believers in heterodox churches. At worst, it is a full-blown denial of our Lutheran understanding of the doctrine of the Church, an identification of our church with the *Una Sancta*, and ultimately a denial of the efficacy of the Word and the power of the Holy Spirit. That, of course, every Lutheran evangelist should avoid like the plague. Great care must be taken that we do not for a moment give anyone the impression that we consider ours the only saving church.

But I wonder whether the doctrine of the Church really settles the proselytizing issue. That there are Christians in church bodies which cling to some error is undeniable. But that we must therefore recognize those bodies as churches among whom we may not evangelize seems a less-than-direct conclusion. Note, above all, that the "marks" of the church are the "right" or "pure" teaching of the Gospel and the "right" administration of the Sacraments. How "right" is "right"? Our accustomed answer to such questions is that there are no degrees of truth: truth is truth, and error error. Yet it seems that in discussing the proselytizing issue we generally recognize some errors as inevitably soul-destroying and others as less so, a distinction which makes a confessional Lutheran's skin crawl. How can it be made? The ecumenical creeds are an acknowledged starting point. But any answer must also take into consideration Paul's words to a heterodox "Christian" church: "You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Ga 5:4). The "marks of the church," then, do not necessarily give us a clear indication of who is and who is not a prospect for evangelism. If "right" means "right," then everyone but a confessional Lutheran is fair game.

The second argument against evangelizing the heterodox, and to me the more convincing one, is the doctrine of the Call: "...no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called" is the Augsburg Confession's brief statement. The call, of course, cannot be understood apart from one of the foundational principles of the Reformation: the priesthood of all believers. God has given the Gospel in Word and Sacraments to his entire church, and every believer has the right to make use of it. However, for the sake of good order, believers generally delegate some measure of this right to a man they call to be their pastor, to preach the Gospel to them, to administer the Sacraments, and to care for their souls. When this occurs, the call has come from God and, though mediate, must be recognized as divine. The universal priesthood makes it presumptuous in the extreme for someone to act as pastor over another without his consent, which the call guarantees; it also establishes the relationship between pastor and parishioner as a sacred one no one may lightly violate.

Those, it happens, are the twin directions the divine call-argument against proselytizing generally takes. First, it says, proselytizing is presumption, because when an orthodox pastor does it he is undertaking to preach to those who have not called him, and failing to restrict his sphere of activity to the body he was called to serve. Clear enough; yet as proof it is hardly an iron-clad argument. Reduced to an absurdity it would prohibit all evangelism, period. A pastor does not need a call from someone before he may testify to the truth before him, or the Holy Christian Church would be small indeed.

The second direction of the argument is that a proselytizer violates the sacred relationship between a member of a heterodox communion and the pastor he has called to serve him. This is, I feel, the more compelling argument, the thrust of which Luther put so well: "If the incumbents of the office teach wrongly, what affair is that of yours? You are not called to account for it."¹⁰ But an additional point must be borne in mind. The call, as mentioned, is founded on the priesthood of all believers. It seems, therefore, that to assume the existence of a pastoral relationship between call-er and pastor is to assume two other things as well: 1) that the call-er is indeed among the universal priesthood (or else we had better recognize the call of the local Jewish rabbi as divine), and 2) that the member of the heterodox communion was, in some way, involved in his pastor's

⁹ C. F. W. Walther, *Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), p. 336.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers*, LW vol. 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 391.

call (or else the traditional Roman position that we are "separated brethren" who are actually still under the Supreme Pontiff would carry some weight). As our Synodical Conference fathers concede,

...though it [the Synodical Conference] recognizes the church rights of the existing congregations in spite of their heterodoxy [emphasis Lawrenz's], the rights of the preachers called by these congregations obviously do not extend beyond the circle of those involved in their calling [emphasis mine], while everything outside of their circle is open territory.¹¹

Is there an inviolable pastoral relationship between an appointed Roman parish priest and the people who had only the most indirect say in his appointment? More to the point, doesn't the validity of a call and the existence of a pastoral relationship require that at least some members of the *Una Sancta* were the ones doing the calling? And doesn't that put us right back where we were previously, in the unenviable position of having to distinguish how much error can be mixed with the truth of God's Word before it loses its ability to draw men into the body of Christ?

Since Rome has been mentioned, perhaps it is time to take it as a test case. This is the church of Antichrist, which excommunicated Luther and anathematized St. Paul; and no Lutheran would argue that a well-instructed Roman Catholic who follows his church's dogma at every point will be lost. Doctrinally the Judaizers Paul dealt with in Galatia are a nearly identical case, and we have already noted what Paul said about those who adopted their particular brand of semi-Pelagianism. Yet Rome does adhere to the ecumenical creeds (though even that is debatable; it has virtually dropped the "*ante omnia opus est*" of the Athanasian), and though its sacramental system is a construct of work-righteousness, it does preserve Christ's institutions. Should a Roman Catholic be evangelized? Apparently the angel who called out,

Come out of her, my people
so that you will not share in her sins,
so that you will not receive any of her plagues;
for her sins are piled up to heaven
and God has remembered her crimes (Rv 18:4-5).

God has revealed who Antichrist is so that the elect may flee his kingdom; may we not join the angel and invite them, even plead with them, to do so? Must we acknowledge the Antichrist's call as divine, and "give the devil his due"? Or, as our dogmatics professor put it, shouldn't we "save **all** the sheep, including the ones that the wolves say are theirs"? Spener wrote,

Much would be contributed to this [i.e. the conversion of Jews] not only if the scandal of anti-Christian Rome were done away with but also if those who are now living under its grievous tyranny and ...are sighing yearningly for salvation without knowing where else to turn ...were freed from their bonds and were joyfully led to the freedom of the Gospel, which would shine more brightly in their eyes.¹²

Of course many modern church bodies present an easier problem than does Rome, because many have forsaken the historic Christian creeds. One example springs to mind from personal experience: the United Church of Canada. While hardly a confessional church, this merger of Methodist, Congregationalist and some Presbyterian churches did present a Statement of Faith composed of 12 Articles in 1940. Article IV of the Statement declares that "knowing God as Creator and Father, as Redeemer in Christ, and as Holy Spirit working

¹¹ *Verhandlung der ersten Versammlung der Ev. Luth. Synodalconferenz von Nord-Amerika* (zu Milwaukee, Wis., vom 10 bis zum 16, July 1872, pp 14-20)(Quoted in Lawrenz, p. 27).

¹² Philip Jacob Spener; Theodore C. Tappert, transl., *Pia Desideria* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 77.

in us, we confess the Trinity"; and these words are then explained in patently modalistic fashion.¹³ Though the United Church professes faith in the Creeds, my personal inclination would be to answer an unqualified "yes" to the question of whether United Church members are legitimate prospects. The faithful among them need to be warned that their "church" has adopted a two-thousand-year-old heresy which aims at the heart of Christian truth. Those without the Gospel among them need to hear it. Unfortunately, few churches make their defection from historic Christianity so plain. Schuetze and Habeck, again, have put their finger on the problem: "Unfortunately the confessional deterioration in many so-called Christian churches causes increasing difficulty in determining their Christian status."¹⁴ This being the case, when confronted with a member of a liberal, nonconfessional church, we may err in either of two directions. We might judge his church unChristian on the basis of some statement by a clearly fringe theologian which does not reflect the views of the average parish pastor, and that would be unfair. Or we might judge his church Christian on the basis of where it stood a hundred years ago where our seminary Church History course left it, and that would be naïve. Do we give liberal churches the benefit of the doubt? Are interviews with their parish pastors necessary? Or is it sufficient to ask the member, "What does your church teach?"

At this point let me declare the waters to have been sufficiently muddied that my point is demonstrated: there simply are no definitive answers to these questions. Let me also acknowledge that muddying waters does not require a great degree of skill. But let me conclude by pointing to one principle which does seem to hold out some hope: that of the real nature and goal of evangelism.

What are we after when we evangelize? Not, strictly speaking, more members for our church; we are naturally pleased when that's the result, but our goal is not "manipulating warm bodies into church pews" (Pastor Paul Kelm). Nor, strictly speaking, are we out to 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. What we are after is simply opportunities to present the Gospel: hence the term "witness"; hence the slogan "**Salesmen** sell; **Christians tell!**" It is, of course, appropriate in evangelism to call for a specific response from a grateful soul to the Gospel: attendance in church on Sunday, enrollment in Adult Information Class, or ultimately church membership. But perhaps this could be kept separate in our minds from evangelism *per se*, and reserved for the "unchurched," while those who claim a heterodox church home could be considered "prospects for testimony" if not "prospects for membership".

In conclusion, as promised, I'd like to offer a few theses for further consideration.

Thesis I: Just as the doctrines of Law and Gospel and that of Election have not only their proper and improper understandings but also their proper and improper spheres of application, so also the doctrines of the Church and of the Call. They are improperly applied whenever they are used to muzzle Christian testimony. "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16)

Thesis II: Stated positively, there is no reason – ever - to refrain from explaining the truths of the Christian faith as taught by the Lutheran Church to any person whatsoever. (1 Pe 3:15)

Thesis III: There is also no reason why opportunities to explain these truths to any and all may not be sought through the mass media, canvasses, mailings, etc. Pre-marital counseling and walk-in counseling will also provide such opportunities.

Thesis IV: When a "prospect for testimony" is identified through the means mentioned above, the fact that he is a member in good standing of a heterodox communion need not prevent our explaining to him what we believe and teach.

¹³ F. E. Mayer, *The Religious Bodies of America* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 375.

¹⁴ Schuetze and Habeck, p. 240.

Thesis V: Any effort to manipulate or coerce such a "prospect for testimony" into our communion is out of place, and is even more to be avoided than with a "prospect for membership." We will restrict ourselves to a dispassionate presentation of biblical truth.

Thesis VI: We will also strive to make it clear that we are not judging the prospect unChristian or his church as a communion in which souls are not being saved.

Thesis VII: Should there be any doubt as to whether a prospect is a "prospect for testimony" or a "prospect for membership," the determination rests with him, not us.

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