

How to Make Sound Doctrine Sound Good to Mission Prospects

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No intelligent WELS pastor would accept an assignment bearing such a title. It's a theological minefield. My presence here is itself a disclaimer therefore.

It is tempting to dismiss the subject with the observation that there is nothing necessary or possible to make unadulterated truth attractive. Before moving on with the assumption that we all subscribe to that fact, a warning against gilding the inspired lily is in place. At least St. Paul thought so. His pastoral epistles are filled with admonition against semantic sanforizing and communications cosmetics. To wit, "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers." (I Timothy 4:16) "These are the things you are to teach and urge on them. If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and arguments . . ." (I Timothy 6:2b-4a) "Guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith." (I Timothy 6:20-21) "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus." (II Timothy 1:13) "Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. Avoid godless chatter. . ." (II Timothy 2:14-16) Making sound doctrine sound good puts one squarely on the line between heresy and ministry that is biblically "all things to all men that we might by all possible means save some." (I Corinthians 9:22) "So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall." (I Corinthians 10:12) Let me affirm that truth is self-authenticating.

It is equally tempting to dismiss this subject with an appeal to Paul's words in 2 Timothy 4:3, "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear." No doubt these are days such as the apostle anticipated; and there are people who are impenetrable with sound doctrine. However, to dismiss the Great Commission and souls knee-deep in sulfur because secularism, humanism and existentialism have afflicted people with theological tinnitus is unworthy of our calling.

There is a hint of an excuse in the title of this essay. Put one way, it suggests that orthodox churches should expect slow growth. The flip side attributes statistical success in heterodox churches to heterodoxy. Such self-defeating self-fulfilling prophecy won't square with Scripture, logic, or experience. The early Christian Church grew dramatically - and not through compromise. Contemporary church growth principles and statistics suggest that conservative, biblical churches are the only ones that DO grow. True, these may not be fully orthodox; but I fail to see where baptism by immersion and assorted other Protestant departures are any drawing card. In fact, growing churches are typically those whose doctrines and expectations of members are strict. How would we like to make the unsound doctrine of Mormonism or the Pentecostals sound good? These are the rapidly growing religious bodies.

There is also the hint of a false assumption in the title of this essay. Is sound doctrine unattractive to mission prospects? Certainly, the Psalmists don't think so. Solomon and the prophets don't think so, nor do the apostles. Admittedly, they ministered to people who'd become enamored of falsehood. Israel's apostasy is well chronicled. But God's missionaries to such people never gave up their conviction that sound doctrine sounds good. They employed polemics, because false doctrine has logical holes and experiential consequences which need to be exposed. They employed apologetics because truth is defensible. But above all, they proclaimed the good news because the gospel is just that. It sounds good. Some may need heavy doses of the law or a surfeit of falsehood (I Corinthians 5:4-5; 1 Timothy 1:20) to appreciate how good sound doctrine sounds, but Christian ministers operate under the assumption that sound doctrine sounds good.

Perhaps we should discuss "sound doctrine." While like St. Paul we are to declare "all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), we are also to "rightly divide the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15) God "also has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant - not of the letter but of the Spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." (2 Corinthians 3:16) There is a "milk and meat" sequence to sound doctrine. (Hebrews 5:12-14) The Great Commission suggests such a sequence as it confers on us the privilege of "making disciples" for Jesus.

Sound doctrine is, first and foremost, the truth that God has reconciled us to himself by not counting our sins against us, that He made sinless Jesus to be sin for us, that one died for all and therefore all died. (2 Corinthians 5) Sound doctrine is that we've been saved by grace, through faith - the new life God gives as He raises us from spiritual death in the power, joy, and purpose of Christ's resurrection. (Ephesians 2, Romans 6) It is sound doctrine that eternal life is God's gift in Jesus. (Romans 6:23) The Lutheran clarity on justification sounds good. It is a pleasure and our purpose to sound that truth as often as possible. Equally pleasant is the derivative truth St. Paul offers in Romans 8:32, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things." The solution and answer to every one of life's problems is comprehended in sound gospel doctrine. That sounds good to anyone. Sound it well.

The law - the revealer of sin - shouldn't sound good. And yet, for people puzzled by what goes wrong and feels wrong with their life, the law offers a consistent explanation. It sounds good. Even the judgment of God against sin can be accepted as sound when it is accompanied by the judge's verdict of vicarious righteousness and vicarious atonement. People don't like the sound of sin when they don't know the solution for sin. The law as God's expressed will for living life sounds good when a child and heir hears it from his wise and loving Father. Children adopt their Father's will, concur in its wisdom, expect therein to find happiness. People rebel against such sound doctrine when God is an antagonist and they have not the wherewithal to comprehend or comply with his wisdom.

The purpose for this theological tour through law and gospel is to draw a practical conclusion from sound doctrine. Since regeneration is the key to finding sound doctrine good and the gospel is the means of regeneration, all sound doctrine beyond the gospel should be sequenced beyond the gospel. In other words, don't ask prospects to acknowledge God's directives as good until God's promises have laid claim to their hearts. That is sound doctrine. Doctrines in controversy and applications to those doctrines are a disciple's meat. They are swallowed only after patient doses of discipling milk. The art of mission work is to preserve that sequence despite a prospect's desire to chew what he can't swallow.

Yet another practical concern is the use of law with gospel. To the self-righteous and coldly indifferent Jesus addressed stinging law, hardly expecting that sound doctrine would sound good! The beautiful sound of the gospel may have to wait until another time, perhaps from another voice. But to those burdened by sin's guilt or sin's hurt, Jesus offered the comfort of God's love - as it applied to that guilt or hurt. Generalized law and gospel, a mechanical - even ideological - discourse on sin and grace, may be sound doctrine in a vacuum. Listening will determine which hurt needs which gospel assurance. Then there is an audience for the sin-and-grace story of Calvary which makes the assurance sure. It is not false doctrine to address a prospect with a gospel-law-gospel sequence when self-righteousness is not the problem. Answer-problem-answer may also describe the sequence. Or to put it another way, offer the answer before you merely compound the problem for people who are living with only problems. That is sound doctrine.

"The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." Obviously, we do not intend to kill with a legal (and lethal) application of the law. But some prospects can almost force us into that mode with a masochistic urge to hear what Prof. Lawrenz aptly calls "ceremonial law." "What is your church's position on . . . is the kind of question that should trigger a warning light in us. Eager to demonstrate that we have an answer, we can leap to the application of a principle before the prospect is fully capable of comprehending even the principle. Worse yet, we demean the freedom and personal responsibility of Christianity by transforming sound doctrine into ecclesiastical law. Predictably, that law incites rebellion.

A last word on sound doctrine is in place. Sound doctrine must be distinguished from tradition, praxis and preference. The liturgy, translation of the Bible, vestments and organizational policies of the church are not equatable with sound doctrine. There may be sound reasons for what we do, but subscription to these things is no test of orthodoxy. Mission prospects can hardly be expected to distinguish truth from tradition. We had better do this for them lest, like the Pharisees, we make them "two-fold more the child of hell" (Matthew 23:15) or turn them off before they've heard the sound doctrine of salvation. The application of biblical principles should be distinguished from those articles of sound doctrine as well. This is, first, because until the principle is understood, the application will at best be accepted on legalistic terms. This is also because the application of some principles may enter the category of casuistry. For example, explaining Scripture's position on divorce is clear and sound doctrine. How the Christian Church ministers to the divorced is not so blithely explained in general terms. And if we are not sensitive, we may be communicating to a mission prospect that the church doesn't want him or her by our explanation. The application of fellowship principles, the role and relationship of man and woman, sacred-not-secular music in worship and a host of ethical issues from dancing and gambling to "living wills" and other dilemmas of modern medicine is too complex for cavalier pronouncements. Especially when we are unsure of the reasons for a prospect's question or objection, we must clarify the scriptural from the situational and avoid losing law and gospel in a debate clouded by emotion and experience.

That brings us to the subject of the "mission prospect." They come in all kinds. There are Christians looking for a fellowship, even Lutherans looking for a confessional fellowship. Never assume too much about what they know and believe, and always tie your exposition of sound doctrine to the central doctrine of salvation. Listen carefully for hints of legalism, not just "liberalism," so that you know which doctrines are essential to sound spiritual health. Give yourself and them the time to explore areas of common conviction, then areas of potential

disagreement. God's Word is convincing, all by itself. There is no need to rush. Let people discover that sound doctrine makes joyful, loving, committed Christians in your congregation.

Non-Christians usually become good prospects for personal reasons or as I like to say: "They come for sociological reasons and stay for theological reasons." These are people who have no bone to pick with the church. We make a mistake if we become defensive or aggressive about sound doctrine. Try to discover the obvious and not-so-obvious reasons they've become prospects: loneliness, guilt, family or personal problems, spiritual searching, or whatever. Address their need with God's love in whichever aspect applies and lead them back to the cross to see all of life in perspective. God's overwhelming love convinces them to the point that they seldom argue the finer points of sound doctrine when an adult class demonstrates that these are God's will.

Another whole category of mission prospects will not be listed in the "good prospect" portion of our file initially. They are unchurched and reasonably content to stay that way. We may misread them, however. They're not necessarily rejecting God or even the church. J. Russell Hale's book, *The Unchurched: Who They Are and Why They Stay Away*, is an excellent source of understanding for missionaries. The experiences, emotions and biases of these people have formulated barriers. The barrier may be a product of misunderstanding. It may be anti-institutionalism. Self-righteousness in one guise or another is frequently involved. Personal quirks and lifestyles are other barriers. In any case, sound doctrine won't sound good until there's an audience for it. The best approach is probably listening to them, asking their help in our attempt to understand how to make the church more attentive and responsive to people and their needs. Put your polemical pistol into its holster and over a period of time direct their thinking to the relationship they have with God, not the church. Let them see the church as it was intended -a mutual support system of people on-line with God's love. Because "denominationalism" is usually a pet peeve for this group, focus on the sound doctrines of salvation. Persistence pays off, even if such persistence can only be demonstrated by periodic visits and mail.

The fundamental principle in any event is that the sound doctrine which distinguishes the WELS is comprehensible when people have grasped the sound doctrine which distinguishes Christianity and have become spiritually transformed by grace. Our mission is to lead people to Jesus. Jesus will lead them to a discipleship role in the church.

A related concern is the relationship of the mission prospect to the church. Our tendency is to create two categories of people: members and non-members. There is an "exclusive" impression left by that mindset and a subtle pressure on those who are not members. A three-category scenario may alleviate pressures and impressions while allowing sound doctrine to make its own impression on hearts. In this model there are members, "friends" and guests. At least one church I know calls second time attenders "friends" and treats them as part of the Christian family to the degree that sound doctrine and the prospect's interests allow. A practice growing in popularity is to provide name tags for everyone in worship. "Friends" have their own name tag just as members do. Another dimension of this approach is the involvement of "friends" in the church's organizations and activities. Are our women's organizations, youth groups, service clubs, Bible studies really open to such "friends?" Are "friends" welcome to sing in the choir? There may even be situations in which a "friend" could receive the Lord's Supper without contradiction of Biblical principle, though it will be important to clarify close communion for both prospect and congregation. Perhaps at issue is our congregation's attitude and understanding toward mission prospects and fellowship, as well as a personal nurturing

approach to each such prospect. Basic to our concern is that “sound doctrine” not become a corpus of theological and ecclesiastical by-laws that a prospect must buy en masse before he can discover essential Christianity and the love God has for and through his people.

The place where sound doctrine is most soundly expounded is the Adult Information Class. Getting people into that class is one of the arts of mission prospecting. The highly motivated will make schedule sacrifices to be there. For the rest there must be motivational means. Offering the adult class on Sunday morning eliminates some scheduling barriers, but necessitates lay-led Bible classes for members in most congregations. Good Bible study materials can make this realistic. I might also suggest that members can be expected to have more motivation for evening Bible classes than non-members. The big question is whether our congregations see themselves as primarily serving themselves or the unchurched. Other possibilities include pre-AIC classes of two to four lessons focused on basic Christianity, self-study manuals (CPH’s new *The God Who Loves Me* is a good example), and cassette tapes of your adult class.

I have a lingering suspicion that the “problem” to which this essay was addressed has less to do with sound doctrine than the attitude of our church toward that doctrine. Allow me to elaborate. There is a tendency to view our church body as a small, conservative, midwestern, Germanic bastion of orthodoxy. I’m not talking about how others see us. When we view ourselves in those terms, it becomes hard to believe that others would want to identify with us. We become what we see ourselves and arbitrarily limit the field of prospects we expect to attract. That makes us, perhaps unwittingly, defensive and apologetic about ourselves and our doctrinal position. We lose our mission aggressiveness, especially among demographic groups unlike ourselves. We almost expect people to react negatively to us and our sound doctrine, with the result that we get (or at least think we get) what we expect. And we shrink from further contact with people who’ve become “the enemy” instead of victims of the enemy.

Closely related to this phenomenon is the tendency among our members to equate theological conservatism with political and sociological conservatism rendering us “communally conservative.” We present a social climate unattractive to people coming to us from a pluralistic world. Thus our image becomes once more defensive and apologetic. Unconsciously we may even be pitting Scripture’s exhortations to sound doctrine against the Great Commission, viewing our role in the greater kingdom picture as preserving truth much more than sharing truth. The fear of false doctrine inhibits confident proclaiming of sound doctrine. We become too much like Jesus’ illustration of a light under a bowl. We shun publicity, disengage ourselves from mainstream life in our community, and shine at each other - a practice that may even exaggerate internal disagreements.

An adjunct problem is frequently hyper-criticism. We look for negatives, not only in the world and people outside, but in ourselves. Too much self-criticism keeps us from risking ourselves and new ideas in approaches to ministry, especially among the unchurched. An overly critical assessment of our church keeps us from eager and positive efforts to share our church, its message and ministry. Low self-image is neither Christian humility nor penitence among people who confess that Jesus is Savior and Lord. It inhibits rejoicing, and that in turn leaves an image of coldness, joylessness, even lovelessness about our church and its doctrine.

Conservatism has other dangers. It easily slips into traditionalism, the preservation of an organizational status quo in the face of legitimate calls for change. Churches and pastors glibly quote: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” without the self-study to determine whether what we’re doing is the best way to minister truth to our generation and situation. Fear that changing

structure, methods and emphases will mean the loss of sound doctrine freezes the church in a mold that may not always be relevant. Truth is relevant always, but it must be heard and applied. Protecting sound doctrine can occasionally mean that we aren't actually listening to it. Xenophobia is a frequent result of traditionalism. We fear outsiders because they may bring change; and we communicate that fear as an "unwelcome" sign to our guests.

Small churches need not be small thinkers, but small-thinking churches will always remain small. Churches and people seldom go/grow beyond their expectations. If we convince ourselves that sound doctrine is some kind of impediment to our mission of outreach among the unchurched, we will correspondingly plan for small success. It seems to me unworthy of our call to mission to make God's gift of sound doctrine a "problem" and in practice doubt the power and promise of God's Word to convince and convert large numbers of the lost. When we expect God to work big miracles of conversion, we will also plan and work with such expectations. We will stop calling opportunities problems and look instead for the strengths we have to build on and the possibilities our situation offers. Obviously, the starting point in making sound doctrine sound good to mission prospects is the congregation's conviction that its primary objective is reaching and serving mission prospects. Evangelism cannot be merely a program of the church. It is the mission of the church. The *best* of our research, planning, effort and allocation of resources will then go toward fulfilling that mission. All the people in the congregation will see themselves as having some role in that mission. Incidentally, it has been well said that you'll read the mission of your church most clearly, not in its constitution and by-laws, but in its budget. Small-thinking churches typically budget to remain small.

It is not necessary that churches which prize sound doctrine become doctrinaire or dogmatic in their presentation of truth to the unchurched, but it can happen. Indicators of such a malaise are: a tendency to present law and gospel or answer questions in a formulistic manner, using theological jargon; a tendency to "proof-text" rather than explain; argumentative inclinations to butt in and correct a prospect rather than hear him out and build from where he is; impressions that doctrine exists for its own sake - as a kind of academic discipline - rather than for the sake of people; presenting doctrine as theoretical or ideological rather than practical; impressions that "who's right" is as important as "what's right." The clear antidote to such a malaise is a genuine love for people; empathetic love, understanding love, patient love, accepting love. We cannot truly love truth unless we love people.

I hope I have raised questions for introspection rather than making judgments which might fuel negativism. My intent is to emphasize that positive identity is essential to a positive presentation of sound doctrine. And I believe that we have a huge list of positives on which to build, including our heritage of sound doctrine. Above all, we have a God of boundless grace and power whose commission is our privilege. With this rather lengthy preface, let me proceed to several theses on "How to Make Sound Doctrine Sound Good to Mission prospects."

Thesis One: Sound Doctrine Sounds Good When People Sound It.

Normally, people respond to other people before they respond to doctrine. When the people of our church - especially pastor, evangelism callers and leaders - present a positive impression of joy, love, conviction and openness, mission prospects will rightly transfer those impressions to the sound doctrine which makes us what we are. When we are good listeners who obviously care about the people we're trying to reach, we will have won an audience for our sound doctrine. The early Christian Church faced some horrible misrepresentations of their

sound doctrine in the Roman world. And yet that church grew because obvious love and conviction won an audience. The same process is operative today.

Cultivating a positive image in and for our church will negate the caricatures of sound doctrine and the people who espouse it that may be a barrier to our mission. Some prospects have stereotyped all churches negatively because of personal experience or second-hand slander. Some may have a negative view of WELS churches based on unsolicited PR on all the things we are (allegedly) against. Adjectives like “strict” and “conservative,” as well as less favorable epithets, do create an impression of us. Utilizing the media to create a favorable image is one approach. A “progressive” impression balances “conservative” appropriately. Press releases that demonstrate our humanitarian concern for people and needs will balance our “strict” label. Using quality-prepared literature in direct-mail, door-to-door distribution or personal contact creates another facet of “image” or identity in our community. People will more readily identify with a church that looks like a winner.

Pastor and members are the critical components in establishing positive identity for the church. They do so by talking about their church in positive and enthusiastic (and frequent) terms. Members excited about the ministry and fellowship of their church make the role of pastor and evangelist much easier. But it is especially the impression made on the visitor to our church that eases the process of presenting sound doctrine (or complicates that process). Warm and friendly members who make guests feel welcome by design are paramount in importance. Uplifting worship hall-marked by the joy of salvation and arranged/explained so that guests can follow is a *sine qua non*. Follow-up by mail and in person shortly after a visit demonstrates genuine interest. And there are a host of little touches from reserved parking for guests nearest the church (not necessarily so marked) to “coffee hour” get-acquainted opportunities. And don’t forget, the condition of the church, property and sign are image producers.

None of all this simply happens. We need to care about mission prospects enough to make this impression happen. It is planned and nurtured. It is not phony. Give members positive roles and positive feedback, and they will respond positively. They need to know how important they are in making sound doctrine sound good to mission prospects. Emphasize *mission*. Our members have a mission.

Thesis Two: Sound Doctrine Sounds Good When the Good News Sounds Through It

When Jesus or the Apostle Peter talked about cross-bearing discipleship, it sounded good because it was related to Jesus’ cross of redemption. When St. Paul talked about election, it didn’t sound irrational because it was linked inseparably with God’s plan of salvation assured at the cross. The model in Scripture for making sound doctrine sound good is to link it naturally with the gospel. Problems occur when we try to explain sound doctrine without its context. I’ve elaborated earlier on the importance of Spirit-worked faith in Jesus as a prerequisite to accepting truths that are part of a Christian’s commitment to that Lord. Sequence and priority are the key words. Sound doctrine is built, logically, on the central truth of salvation. You can’t build a case for sound doctrine without the Cornerstone. Priority in our approach to mission prospects must always be given to the reaffirmation of the simple gospel.

It may help to remember that people don’t have to be convinced of a six-day creation or close communion in order to be converted to faith in Jesus Christ. If we love them enough, we won’t let them distract us from sharing the regenerative power of the gospel. Review the common methodology for handling objections: 1) LISTEN! 2) Accept the objection 3) Use the key word in the objection to demonstrate that there may be another way of looking at the issue,

and 4) GET BACK TO SIN AND GRACE. The FEEL, FELT, FOUND approach that Pastor Richard Stadler promotes is effective, as is his, “Since that’s the case, how has your relationship with God been affected? Is your spiritual life stronger, weaker or about the same?” At the very least, we can simply tell a mission prospect: “I wouldn’t expect you to agree with that position, at least now. And it won’t hurt me if you never do agree. I’m only interested here in sharing something that I think you’ll find undebatable - how much God loves you. . .”

With prospects who are Christians, it is critical to link any doctrinal position we’re discussing with clear gospel. Verbal inspiration and inerrancy are best seen through the words of Jesus, for one’s Savior cannot be a liar. The consequence to the gospel if scripture is suborned as a witness should be at least sobering to any Christian. At the very least, one cannot accuse us of being mere literalists or bibliolators when we sound salvation through sound doctrine. Even our position on lodge or scouting membership is essentially tied to our concern for clear gospel and the salvation of souls.

Thesis Three: Sound Doctrine Sounds Good When It’s Sounded by the Prospect Himself

It infuriates me when I see how an organization like Campus Crusade for Christ leads people through their Bible study guides to the conclusion that Baptism is an ordinance for adults. But I can learn from their methodology. The Bible study guide doesn’t tell the prospect that this is correct doctrine. In fact, Bill Bright is smart enough to avoid words with connotations that are potentially negative - like “doctrine.” The studyguide asks a deliberately worded question, then quotes one Scripture verse and asks the prospect to draw his own conclusion. The method, as used by Campus Crusade, is manipulative. It is also effective. It can be an effective method without being manipulative - and without compromising sound doctrine. Educators call it the **INDUCTIVE METHOD** of teaching.

What I’m encouraging is that we avoid the temptation to provide facile answers that appear as codified “church doctrine,” that we let people wrestle with God in Scripture over the tough issues of sound doctrine rather than give them packaged promulgations, that we give the Spirit room to convince them rather than argue God’s case as his lawyers, that we **LEAD** people to sound doctrine instead of merely telling them that doctrine.

One of the unchurched’s favorite dodges is, “That’s just a matter of interpretation,” usually accompanied by the plea that with so many denominations it’s impossible for the poor prospect to know what to believe. Ignoring the issue has been their refuge. We need to remember and remind others that the primary responsibility for a person’s convictions and relationship with God is his own. We can’t afford to let “churches” get in the way of people’s religious conclusions. Let them draw their own conclusions from Scripture. Then it will be **THEIR** sound doctrine. Let me respond to that dodge. “I can understand how you feel. It is confusing to see contradictory viewpoints on any subject. I’ve had to work through some of that confusion myself with my Bible. I certainly wouldn’t want to believe anything just because a church said so. In fact, we all have to work through conflicting claims to draw our own conclusions from the evidence in a variety of issues - from our political convictions to the best brand of car to buy. Our relationship with God is so important that you should have your own conviction about his will for people. Why don’t I just get back to you with some Bible passages on the subject just to get you started?” Rather than “bull” or bully your way through the subject then and there, prepare key questions and appropriate Bible verses on a sheet of paper and mail them to the person with the promise to stop back and discuss further. Pressure can drive people away from even sound doctrine. Winning an argument on the spot usually means losing a prospect. Once

more we may have let “who’s right” overshadow “what’s right.” The inductive approach is good advertising for your adult class. Explain that the same “get into the Bible” method is what the class is all about . . . no preconceived expectations of the person who comes.

This approach is especially critical when theological concerns such as the existence of hell, a six-day creation, conversion or verbal inspiration are at issue. It can work well also in moral questions such as homosexuality or abortion. It is probably phase one of tough issues like the role of women in the church, church fellowship, and the applications of such doctrines.

Thesis Four: Sound Doctrine Sounds Good When It Has the Sound of Love

Before sound doctrine can sound good to people who’ve adopted an antagonistic stance toward it (or the church), the climate of confrontation must be defused. Only Christian love will do that. There are two aspects to that Love-antidote. The first is the loving approach we take toward the person. The second is the love-rooted intent of the doctrine.

St. Peter says: “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps . . . when they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate.” (I Peter 2:21-23) When people, frequently out of ignorance, attack sound doctrine or the church, the temptation exists to “take it personally,” become defensive and respond in kind. Only love for the misguided can curb our tongues and take the edge off our words. Mission prospects are seldom “persistent errorists.” Understanding, compassion and kindness can put out the fire of hostility in a prospect and allow sound doctrine to be judged on its own merit.

St. Paul had trouble with the congregation in Corinth over sound doctrine. An integral aspect of that trouble was his own reputation in Corinth. Note how Paul “backs off” in his first epistle without compromising apostolic authority. The fiery personality of the apostle, so evident in Galatians, was curtailed by love to defuse a situation clouded by confrontational “interference.”

Even when animosity is not the problem in a mission prospect, obvious love and concern by pastor or evangelist can create a climate of acceptance for sound doctrine. NEVER ARGUE is advice that can’t be repeated too often. The “fruit of the Spirit” evident in Christians is the best- advertising for the truth that the Spirit teaches. Persistence is the greatest demonstration of love - when it is loving persistence that won’t give up on a prospect after several visits.

You and I know that every doctrine of Scripture is an aspect of God’s love for people. We know that because we know God and his love. The central fact of Calvary has colored all of sound doctrine with God’s love. Our natural hostility toward God and our blindness to his will have been countered by conversion and sanctification through the Spirit. The unconverted and the spiritually malnourished cannot be expected to see love in all of sound doctrine. It is our task to demonstrate this. For example, admonition and excommunication sound harsh, especially when a prospect is relating second-hand information or recalling an experience through hurt feelings. It may take time to explain and illustrate how these are expressions of love. But time taken is itself an evidence of love on our part. Take time!

Let me use another example. Close communion sounds like “closed communion” when it is a mere statement of who can and who can’t come to our altar. Especially prospects of Lutheran background feel personally offended by the practice misunderstood. The sound doctrine sounds better when we approach people lovingly and demonstrate the love-roots of the doctrine. Roger Kovaciny, in the May 1, 1985 issue of *The Northwestern Lutheran* demonstrates one approach. My own is to assure people that we would love to have them share the sacrament with us because it is the clearest expression of the love and oneness we have in our faith.

Because we have too much respect and concern for people and their confession of faith, we cannot ask them to publicly state their agreement with all that we teach and confess before we've given them an opportunity to discover what we teach and whether they want to publicly endorse that position. We aren't passing judgment on their faith; rather we're hoping to point out how eager we are to sit down and exchange confessions of faith. Real love, not superficial love is what we're about.

Read Pastor Kovaciny's article for examples of loving approaches and love-bases for our position on sponsors, funeral and wedding practice. Above all, work on your attitude and explanations for every situation and doctrine that is an opportunity to demonstrate that sound doctrine sounds good.

Thesis Five: Sound Doctrine Sounds Good When It Is Understood

The longest discourse of Jesus recorded in Scripture was given on the eve of his Passion because his disciples didn't understand. Sound doctrine didn't sound so good when intellectually they couldn't comprehend how perfectly God's plan of salvation fit together and fulfilled Scripture and emotionally they were blinded by the sorrows and fears of Jesus' departure. Jesus took time to explain and promised greater understanding in the gift of the Holy Spirit. In fact, most of the New Testament epistles are explanation repeated to people who probably should have already understood. Sound doctrine won't often sound good until it is understood. Sensitive missionaries will recognize the emotional and intellectual barriers to understanding in a prospect and patiently work to overcome those barriers with Scripture.

"Professionals" face the problem of forgetting how much time, instruction, personal struggle and repetition it took to bring them to their own understanding of sound doctrine. They tend to assume too much on the part of others and take gazelle-like leaps through logic that are too broad and rapid for people trying to follow. They may also lack the patience and listening skills necessary to nurture prospects through the process of understanding. We've all experienced how varied that process is in prospects. Some grasp concepts quickly, while others may be mid-way through an instruction class before suddenly the whole picture of God's grace enlightens not only mind and heart, but face as well.

Repetition is one element of understanding. Building from simple concepts to the more complex is another. Varied approaches to the same subject can help clarify the issue. Illustration is important because many people have difficulty comprehending abstract concepts. All of these are tools employed by the inspired authors of Scripture. But unless we listen and ask questions, we may miss the most direct route toward understanding in a prospect. Putting an explanation down on paper may be one way to assure that we aren't skipping steps in explanation, while also providing an opportunity for the prospect to move through the explanation at his own pace. Published explanations may meet our needs (tracts, articles, excerpts from books). Writing and mailing our own explanation may be the best way to demonstrate concern as well as truth.

Because people often come at sound doctrine with unsound preconceptions, we need to not only explain carefully what we are saying but also what we're not saying. Again, listening is important to the discovery of misconceptions and defensive interpretations on the part of the prospect. Often, the logjam of misunderstanding is broken when we clarify what we do not mean. We do not mean that women are inferior in any sense when we make the office of pastor male. Please explain further that we, like the Lord, provide for a full range of ministerial opportunities for women. We are not saying that a dearly loved relative now resides in hell when we explain why we won't officiate at a funeral. Please also offer a full range of ministry to the

bereaved family. We are not saying that no boy scouts are Christians when we take a stand against membership in organizations whose religious principles are mutually exclusive. Please recognize the civic good that such an organization can accomplish, no doubt one reason why many of our congregations have organized Lutheran Pioneer groups.

Incidentally, don't assume that all of our members understand fully the sound doctrine they profess with their membership. Their misguided explanations can get in the way of our own efforts. At the same time, their membership demonstrates that people do espouse sound doctrine without fully comprehending it. Prospects who've come to know their Savior through our ministry are often willing to "trust" our church for its clear gospel and Scriptural base without fully comprehending the entirety of sound doctrine. You don't have to overwhelm a prospect with sound doctrine to get him into an adult class. People will accept our ministry without having all of their objections, reservations and questions answered. There may be wisdom in letting an issue rest for a time while returning to basics and encouraging continued study and growth through the adult class. Allow people the right to have questions and reservations so long as they are willing to let God speak to them. Even membership is possible where a person confesses that he still has questions but is willing to subscribe to the church's position by membership (obviously without contradicting the church's position by membership in an organization which holds conflicting positions).

Thesis Six: Sound Doctrine Sounds Good When It's a Call to Mission

The casual observer might wonder how serious Jesus was about gathering disciples. When a scribe ran up to volunteer for full-time service, Jesus responded "Foxes have holes and the birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Another asked for a brief leave of absence to bury his father and . . . well, you know what he was told. The Sermon on the Mount begins by making virtues out of such up-beat topics as mourning and persecution. In fact, persecution was the primary fringe benefit Jesus offered disciples. What did he know that we don't?

Jesus understood that, contrary to frequent assumption, people respond positively to spiritual commitment, challenge, expectations, mission. An author named Jauncey in his book *One on One Evangelism* makes the point that Christianity offers the only meaningful mission in life for people who are looking for a mission to which they can commit their life. Wayne Pohl, pastor of the fastest growing Lutheran Church in this country, "requires" of new members a commitment to every Sunday worship, Bible Class attendance, a service role or task and progress toward tithing. Psychologists say that the basic emotional needs are to be loved and to be needed.

We make a mistake with prospects who do believe in Jesus when we play down commitment and apologetically approach tough doctrinal issues. In so doing we also cheapen Christian discipleship and sow the seeds of apathetic church membership. Stirring reminders of the imminence of Judgment Day, the sorry state of American Christendom and obviously declining moral and spiritual values in our nation logically demand spiritual commitment and doctrinal resolve. Make sound doctrine a significant mission not a waning echo of times past.

Explain our position on lodge membership, to be sure; but challenge people to take a stand. Remind them of Elijah at Mt. Carmel. And tie this issue to the Great Commission. Don't let the world paint us into a corner of antiquarianism on subjects like a six-day creation or verbal inspiration. These are hallmarks of faith, marks of spiritual "independence" from bankrupt religious compromise, intelligent challenges to an ideological system that has weakened our

nation. And these, too, are intimately tied to the Savior's great mission. Demand that prospects quit living together or get married when you teach the sixth commandment. Don't let them think that sound doctrine is fine-sounding talk by people who lack the love and commitment to honestly admonish. Let Christian discipleship and example be the significant mission it is.

Thesis Seven: Sound Apologetics Can Make Sound Doctrine Sound Good

While Christian faith is not based on reason, it is not irrational. I bristle when I hear Christians mouthing variations on the existential "leap of faith." Christianity is the only consistent explanation of life. It is a historical truth, not merely an experiential conviction. Logic never converted anyone; but Christianity is logically defensible, once one makes reason ministerial to God and His Word. More to the point, non-Christianity is illogical and indefensible on the basic questions of life and reality. And this is the role apologetics plays in our mission - to debunk the semi-rational barriers people have raised as reasons to disregard sound biblical doctrine.

Jesus used reason to point out how ridiculous was the unbelieving claim that he cast out demons by demonic power. (Matthew 12:22-30) He used reason to demonstrate reason's inadequacy in Matthew 22. St. Paul used reason and the natural knowledge of God to build his case in Romans 1 and 2. He is the model of effective apologetics in Galatians, applying the "law of non-contradiction." Only the Gospel converts, but sound apologetics can assist us in gaining an audience for the Gospel. And sound apologetics can make sound doctrine sound good.

Let me emphasize that SOUND apologetics is the point. Controvertible claims of creationist science, dubious efforts to support Scripture with archeology and experiential arguments for life after death are unworthy and destructive of our mission. Do not lightly enter the realm of apologetics. It may be intellectually overwhelming to run a prospect through the cosmological, ontological, teleological and anthropological arguments for the existence of God; so before you bore a prospect with all that, be sure your apologetic approach is appropriate to the prospect.

Read C.S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer and Josh McDowell for practical apologetic tools. In fact, loan your copy to the prospect whose intelligence and education have become his curse. Once you've read Josh McDowell's "Lord, Liar or Lunatic" argument for the deity of Christ, you'll find yourself using it. Illustration is the easiest apologetic tool. If you prevail upon me, I'll offer my "auto mechanic" apologetic for the logical necessity of verbal inspiration.

On a simpler scale, I've found that our church fellowship position sounds good when you draw a series of concentric circles to illustrate that everyone has some kind of church fellowship position. Ours simply refuses to draw an arbitrary circle of inclusion/exclusion. We let God and His Word be the arbiter.

Rather than perpetuate this paper with examples, let me reiterate that sound doctrine is logically defensible when you accept the basic premises of Scripture, among which is the fact that God is greater than the mind he created and no thinking person would want a God no bigger than his own intelligence.

Thesis Eight: Sound Doctrine Sounds Good When It's Practical

It's interesting that God didn't inspire a New Testament dogmatics text. Gospels and epistles were addressed to real people and specific situations. Our heritage and education may predispose us toward systematic theology and the presentation of sound doctrine in systematic terms. Preserving and presenting the real-life context for proof passages can be one method of

letting sound doctrine sound good. But we can learn something also from the format in which God gave us sound doctrine. We can make sound doctrine practical.

Quoting Robert Schuller may be professional suicide in our circles; and I certainly wouldn't want to be understood as endorsing his curious theology of sin or the mixed bag of Reformed and pragmatic doctrine that underlies "The Hour of Power." But Schuller understands people, and there is something to be learned when he says: "Find a need and fill it. Find a hurt and heal it." Sound doctrine sounds good when it addresses felt needs. Even God attached promises to directives. His ten commandments are eminently practical. There can be no happiness in life lived in disharmony with the Creator's "instruction manual" for life. Our "strict" doctrine on whom we will marry is very practical. We, like God, are interested in marriages - not just weddings. And we have instructions and promises from Him that assure happy marriages. Taking a stand on adultery and homosexuality is practical, and not just because there are hygienic consequences of such sins. God wants to avert personal tragedy as well as to be glorified in the lives of his creatures.

The promises of God (e.g. answered prayer, comfort for sorrow, joy, confidence for the future) are eminently practical. Anything that erodes sound doctrine diminishes trust in those promises and, therefore, personal benefit. Sound doctrine is about our relationship with God. Happy, contented, purposeful living is a reflection of our relationship with God. Make these truths clear when addressing sound doctrine to prospects. Wherever possible, begin your approach to people at that point of Christian doctrine which addresses a prospect's hurt or need. Help them to see that their real need, the answer to the root of all their other needs, is forgiveness. Relate more difficult doctrines to this central doctrine and to the God who answers needs. Of course, we will avoid the unfounded promises of "abundant living" prophets; but there is no reason to veil the love, mercy, and promise of that God who inspired sound doctrine. People believe that doctrine when they believe Him!

Another way to describe the practicality of sound doctrine is to say it works. The sacraments DO bring comfort and assurance. "Ordinances" don't. The truth that conversion is the Spirit's work, another gift of grace, prevents all kinds of spiritual agony where faltering emotions and dedication would lead people to question their "decision" and the degree of their faith. Objective Justification is the most practical of doctrines for the same reason. There are no "impractical" doctrines. As a church, we've shied away from "personal testimony," and there are examples of excess from which to shy. But the faith I want to share is mine - subjectively experienced as well as objectively true. Testifying to my joy and satisfaction with that faith is praise to God. There's no reason to keep mission prospects from hearing praise for God addressed to them in personal testimony. My faith works. I wouldn't expect someone to want to learn about it if I didn't say so.

The corollary of "it works" is the consequence of false doctrine. False doctrine sounds bad when its consequences are elaborated. For example, if God didn't create us specially in his image - then how do you logically accept his provident involvement in our life, the existence of an immortal soul, the love in which He saved us? If Adam and Eve didn't introduce sin into the world, what is the origin of evil and what warped anthropological explanations (with social consequences of their own) must be adduced to explain away original sin? And, of course, there are Christological consequences of mythologizing Genesis 1 to 3. The consequence of open communion is people eating and drinking condemnation as well as "least common denominator" theology. The consequence of burying everyone is comforting no one and the reduction of truth and worship to ceremony. Immanuel Kant's philosophic approach to ethics was the extrapolative

question: “What if everyone did it all the time?” While that's hardly a biblical basis for ethics, it does demonstrate that even the unconverted can appreciate practical consequences as a reason to appreciate sound doctrine.

We conclude where we began - with the reminder that the Christian Gospel is the one doctrine that really sounds good. Make no apologies for it. Allow no substitutes for it. Link all sound doctrine to it. Get on with joyfully proclaiming it.

“AMAZING GRACE - HOW SWEET THE SOUND”