

A Definitive Study Of Proselytizing

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By Professor Carl Lawrenz

As a Commission on Evangelism you have asked me to favor you with a definitive study on proselytizing. "Definitive" implies an authoritative, complete, and reliable study, one that may serve in supplying a final answer, solution, or evaluation of the subject matter, one that may hold out the promise of ending a previous unsettled and unresolved condition concerning this matter. The more time and thought I have given to this adjective "definitive" in the assignment, the more have I come to the realization that it calls for a rather ambitious, almost presumptuous, undertaking. I have taken comfort in the hope that if this study itself cannot attain the full objective set for it, the discussion that it is meant to stimulate may do so.

This assignment presents the task, first of all, of defining the term "proselytizing." We will want to determine what help, either direct or indirect, Scripture can give us in this matter of definition.

Holy Scripture does not use the term "to proselytize" nor the synonymous term "to proselyte." In four instances the New Testament does, however, use the related noun form, "proselyte." Three of these instances occur in the Book of Acts. The first of the Acts passages using the term "proselyte" is Acts 2:10 in the Pentecost epistle. We are told that among those who upon the Pentecost outpouring of the Holy Spirit heard the Twelve in their own tongues proclaim the wonderful works of God were also Roman visitors, both Jews and proselytes. Coupled with "Jews" the term "proselytes" obviously designates converts from heathendom to Judaism. No stigma is implied concerning the proselytes. We are merely apprised of the fact that among the visitors from Rome who marveled at the miraculous proclamation of the apostles on Pentecost were also Gentile converts to the faith of God's Old Testament people.

In Acts 6:5 among the list of the seven men, known to be full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom the mother church at Jerusalem chose as the first deacons to take care of the poor in their midst, was also Nicolas of Antioch, a proselyte. What is brought to our attention is this that Nicolas of Antioch was a man who had first been won from heathendom to faith in God as he had revealed himself in his Word to Israel; then, by the New Testament Gospel proclamation he was also brought to a joyful faith in the fulfillment of God's Old Testament promises as effected through Christ and his work of redemption.

In Acts 13:43 we hear that upon Paul's preaching in the synagog at Antioch concerning Christ crucified and the justification of sinners won by him many of the Jews and God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who then urged them to continue in the grace of God. With the modifying attribute "God-fearing," (*sebomenon*) the proselytes here mentioned are very definitely acknowledged as true converts to the Old Testament faith of Israel. Through Paul's preaching they now came to rejoice also in the glorious fulfillment of Israel's hope through Christ Jesus.

The final New Testament passage referring to a proselyte is Matthew 23:15. Here Jesus speaks of the Pharisees compassing sea and land to make one proselyte. Yet also here it is not their missionary zeal in itself for which Jesus chided the Pharisees, but rather for the fact that they expended all this zeal in converting heathen to their own hypocritical practices and to their work righteous traditions and regulations, so that as a result they made each convert twofold more the child of hell, i.e., even more fanatic and bigoted than they themselves were.

The term "Proselyte" is simply an English transliteration of the Greek word *proselutos*, which is made up of a derivative from the suppletive aorist of *erchesthai*, *elutos*, and the preposition *pros*, in the composite meaning of "one who has come to (a place)." *Proselutos* is the Greek word used seventy-eight times by the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew *ger*, designating an alien resident who had come to live in the midst of Israel. With some specific exceptions, the Mosaic Law sanctioned the admission of such aliens as full citizens on the condition of being circumcised. These bound themselves to observe the whole Mosaic Law and were admitted to the full privileges and blessings of the people of the covenant. Of a far greater number were, however, the strangers, *proselutoi*, living in Israel to whom the law extended toleration and certain privileges,

but who merely obligated themselves to comply with certain of the religious enactments prescribed to Israel. Later, when Israel lost its independence and was subjected to the sway of heathen powers, and the Jews were dispersed throughout the Roman Empire, the term *proselutos* lost its direct reference to the land of Israel and to sojourning in it. *Proselutoi*, proselytes, now came to be the designation for converts from heathendom to Judaism, for Gentiles who were induced to accept the faith, hope, salvation, and moral life of Israel, and who in varying degree lived also by some of the ceremonial precepts of the Mosaic Law. This is what is meant by a proselyte in the New Testament usage of *Proeslutos* that we have examined.

Later rabbis distinguished carefully between proselytes of the gate and proselytes of righteousness, but it is difficult to establish that this distinction is clearly reflected and discernable in the New Testament. We do not expect this. We need to remember that in accordance with a true understanding of the Old Testament the Mosaic Law Code was for Israel only; it was a special discipline for God's special Old Testament people. A Gentile, even though he wholeheartedly accepted God as he had revealed himself in Israel and God's promises of salvation as proclaimed in Israel, was not required to place himself under the entire Mosaic Law Code. It was enough if in faithborn love and thankfulness he endeavored to live according to the immutable holy will of God as it applied to all men, according to what we would call the moral law.

From all of this it is evident that the Scriptures give us background material but do not help us directly in arriving at a definition of the term "proselytizing" as it is used in our assigned topic. The New Testament passages that we have considered merely lead us to the conclusion that a proselyte according to the New Testament designated a convert from the Gentiles to the God and faith of Israel, to Judaism. This observation would then justify the propriety of forming verbal forms like "to proselyte" and "to proselytize" for designating the action and endeavor of converting Gentiles to Judaism, of inducing them through testimony to embrace the God and the salvation of Israel.

These are the very definitions of "proselyte," both as a noun and as a verb, and also of the other verb form "to proselytize," as we find them in our English dictionaries, whether we consult the *Webster's Third New International* or even the comprehensive *Oxford English Dictionary*. Very specifically a proselyte is defined as a convert from heathendom to Judaism. From this historically based definition of a proselyte the dictionaries then proceed to various derived meanings: one who has been converted from one religious faith to another; and even more generally as applied to other fields than religion: one who has been converted from one belief, attitude, or party to another. Both verb forms: "to proselyte" and "to proselytize" are then defined without distinction as carrying the meaning: to make a proselyte of; to make or to attempt to make proselytes; or more general in scope, to convert from one religion, belief, opinion, or party to another.

The term "proselytizing" as it is used in our present study falls under the general definition: to convert someone from one religious faith to another. From what I know about the background of the assignment, however, it has a use of the term "proselytizing" in mind that restricts it to a very narrow scope of such activity. This use restricts the term "proselytizing" to the activity of converting or attempting to convert someone from a heterodox Christian faith to orthodox Christian faith. Yes, the restriction goes even further. This use of the term "proselytizing" is meant to pertain to such activity only insofar as it is reprehensible and not a proper way of carrying out the great commission entrusted to all believers, individually and collectively to preach the Gospel to every creature, to make disciples of all nations and to teach them to observe all things which the Lord has commanded. The synonymous term "proselyting" is in more common use, however.

One does not find this very restricted use of the term "proselyting" listed or discussed in English language dictionaries, or in Bible dictionaries and religious encyclopedias. It has, however, been in use for quite some time in what we would call English Synodical Conference literature.¹⁻⁴ I take it to be the objective of the requested study to establish from Scripture that there is such a restricted sphere of objectionable proselyting or proselytizing if you wish, and to point out what it consists in and under what circumstances and for what reason it is objectionable and not a proper part of carrying out our commission as believers to evangelize. The help that we get from Scripture for understanding this very narrow and restricted use of "proselytizing" is therefore an indirect one. From all that has already been said it should be evident that the scriptural truths and concerns

involved here do not have to be referred to and summed up by the term “proselyting” or “proselytizing,” but have been, and can be, treated and expressed and acknowledged also in other ways. I would like to call attention to one such treatment that goes back to the very beginnings of the Synodical Conference.

At the first convention of the Synodical Conference in 1872 a set of six theses was presented for discussion by Professor Matthias Loy, on the question: **What is our mission over against the English population of our country?** A journal was kept of the conference elaborations and discussions, and printed in the *Proceedings*.⁵ While all the theses and all the elaborations are very interesting, especially the first two theses and their elaborations are of interest for our topic. The first thesis shows the deep evangelistic interest out of which the subject matter was treated; the second thesis contains a statement that touches upon our present subject of proselytizing without using the term. (The translation and the underlining will be my own.)

Thesis 1: The Evangelical Lutheran Church indisputably has the mission to proclaim the great deeds of God here in this country; first of all, because otherwise it would not be complying with the Lord’s command to preach the Gospel to all nations, and secondly, because it would not be measuring up to its special obligation in this country.

Thesis 2: The church within the Synodical Conference is not excused from this obligation for the reason

- a) that it must provide for the German and Scandinavian brethren in the faith, for it is to do the one and not neglect the other, nor for the reason
- b) that other church organizations provide sufficiently for the English speaking population; for the church of the pure Word can never content itself with this that saving portions of the truth are still being proclaimed by others when it can offer the whole counsel of God for salvation, nor for the reason
- c) that heterodox have already occupied the field and that with its activity in English it would therefore become a busybody in the field of others; *for though it recognizes the church rights of the existing congregations in spite of their heterodoxy*, the rights of the preachers called by these congregations obviously do not extend beyond the circle of those who are involved in their calling, while everything outside of their circle is open territory, nor for the reason
- d) that certain other associations of such who call themselves Lutheran Christians do exist, to whom it lies closer to do the work of the church in the English language, for we dare not leave it to them because they in part bring false doctrine among the people, and in part treat pure doctrine lightly, and in part carry on the work very halfheartedly.

The journal on the discussion of the first thesis sets forth that it was clearly acknowledged to be the obligation of the Evangelical Lutheran to proclaim the Gospel also outside of its own circles. It was stated that the Lord’s great commission still stands and that one could not claim to be a part of Christ’s church of believers without also assuming responsibility for a share of the church’s entrusted task. Attention is called to the very peculiar and unique circumstances obtaining in this country.

Because of the sad Anabaptist spirit of the sects all about us it has come about that thousands live near and among us who are unbaptized and belong to no church organization. These neglected and dispersed sheep need to be contacted, and become our concern, since they are like sheep who have no shepherd. Still our task is not the one facing the church among heathen, but rather that of bringing the full saving truth to a people which indeed still knows portions of divine truth, but at the same time clings to great and dangerous errors. It has really come to this in a great many congregations who still want to be Christian, that Christ is not at all being proclaimed among them, but the people are put off with the straw of human wisdom. Also on our part we ought to have men who can proclaim the pure saving truth to the English people in their own language.

In the elaborations and discussions regarding the second thesis, in which every argument for excusing themselves from evangelism among English speaking people is broken down, the same evangelistic zeal and ardor is again in evidence.

The Lutheran church is the church of the pure Word and therefore not only has the obligation to bring the Word of God to the heathen, but also to those who in the sects indeed have some portions of the pure doctrine, but have it mixed with strong and dangerous errors, whereby they are in danger of being lost. In addition to this the sects also cling less and less, as time goes on, to those portions of the truth, which are still to be found here and there in their confession. Concerning Christ and the way to salvation through him alone they are almost silent altogether. They say: A different time has set in now, the time of confessions and catechisms is over. The result is that heathen are growing up all around us under a Christian name. But even if the outlook would not be so terrible among the sects, the obligation would still remain for us, if at all possible, to bring the whole truth near to them. For we know that no sectarian is saved through his doctrine, but only through that which apart from his doctrine is still preached to him of the pure truth of God's Word and believed by him. Since those, however, who adhere to false doctrine are led into perdition through it, how can we doubt that it is our holy duty to labor with all earnestness against the soul destroying poison of human doctrine?

We thought it worthwhile to offer these lengthy quotations because they offer so much that can serve also as a description of our own surroundings. Above all, however, we have brought this lengthy quotation of concern for the salvation of those misled by and in the sects to make us aware of the actual context and perspective in which that was said and, elaborated, which is our present interest, namely, the restrictive clause in point c) of Thesis 2 which was underlined: "...*though it (our Lutheran church) recognizes the church rights of the existing congregations in spite of their heterodoxy.*" Not to do so is proselytizing in the narrow sense. In the report on the elaborations and discussions it is regarding this clause of point c) that we read:

Here we might probably like to ask: What is this to mean that we dare not violate the church rights of the sects? To this the reply is in place: Where there are still children of God, there is also the right of calling. Now among the sects there are still children of God. When therefore also among the sects a preacher has been called, we dare not intrude ourselves among those who have called him. We speak therefore of the rights of sects for this reason, that we need to consider them in a twofold manner: on the one hand as persons which cling to false doctrine, and which for this reason are a sect; but then also people who have true believers among them and in this respect are therefore a church. All sects are in the midst of the church, even as the apostle says to Christians: "There must be factions among you,"⁶ and asserts that the Antichrist "sits in the temple of God."⁷ As sects indeed no association has any kind of rights; as a church, however, an association tyrannized by false teachers has no fewer rights than we. When they therefore call a preacher, he has the true office just as well as a preacher of the pure Word, and therefore we dare not interfere in the office of any Methodist, nor with that of a Roman priest. That they do not administer the true office, which they have because of the children of God hidden in the sects, that God will judge in His time, but it does not behoove us arbitrarily to interfere where the divine office is already established. What is divine the church has recognized also in the sects since the time of the apostles. Now the call is, however, something divine; therefore it is also to be recognized by us. Of course, only those can subscribe to this position of the thesis who have the pure doctrine of the ministry. Whoever does not have it will either believe in an Anabaptist fashion that he can preach where he wants to and when it pleases him; or, if he derives the office from a succession, be it through the laying on of hands, be it through transmission of the pure doctrine, he will believe: No one except I and those like me stand in this office. It is, of course, to be noted that like the sect itself also the office in a sect must be considered from two different sides; on the one hand as it is of itself and according to its nature, a true office; then also as it is

misused by those who have it and exercise it. Therefore we have to respect it insofar as it is a true one, not insofar as it is one that is misused. Luther says very decisively, one should for God's sake not preach in the parish of a sectarian, also not secretly, for we are not bidden to do so. If such people ask us for counsel with terrified consciences, then I should, of course, not withhold the true comfort of the gospel from them. But to this my general obligation as a Christian gives me authorization, not my public ministry. All, however, which indeed live in the territory of a sectarian preacher, but have not called him—the wretched masses who belong to no one—they we are to regard as people toward whom we ought to carry out the obligation: “Bid them to come in.” They, too, have all been redeemed. Their heritage of spiritual and heavenly treasures lies altogether ready, and it is only necessary that they come to faith in order to enjoy it. May we go after them with earnestness and redeeming zeal, and we will in accordance with God's promise rescue many of them to their eternal salvation.

The Synodical Conference fathers of 1872 showed a commendable evangelistic concern for those who were still without the saving knowledge of Christ, and for those misled by the errors of the sects. Nevertheless, it was at the same time very clear to them that only the unchurched could be the legitimate object of their evangelism thrust. They realized that it was not God's will that they take the initiative in making or endeavoring to make converts among those whom they still had to recognize as being a church because of the presence of the marks of the church in their midst, namely, the Gospel in word and sacrament through which children of God are born, Isaiah 55:11, 1 Peter 1:23. They knew, therefore, that these, too, had the right to establish the public ministry. For this reason it was something objectionable in the eyes of the Synodical Conference fathers to interfere with such a ministry and to endeavor to serve those who had called him. They did not use the term proselytizing,” but on the basis of Scripture they found the same things objectionable that are covered as being objectionable by this term, used in that very restricted sense in which it appears in this present topic assignment. We, too, want to continue to believe, teach, and confess that those who profess active membership in a congregation that we must still recognize as a Christian congregation, though not necessarily as an orthodox Christian congregation, cannot come into consideration for our direct mission outreach. This would mean all those who belong to a Christian congregation where Christ is still proclaimed as the Son of God and the Savior of men. For where the basic truths of the Gospel are still taught and confessed there also people can still be brought to saving faith and kept in this faith. This is quite in keeping with what we state in our synodical explanatory catechism on the basis of Scripture: “Are there not Christians also in false churches? Yes, provided that Christ is still confessed to be the Son of God and Savior” 1 John 4:2-3; John 10:16; John 10:27-28; 2 Timothy 2:19; Romans 11:2-4.⁸ Where there are Christians, however, there is also the right to establish the public ministry. Those who have called a spiritual shepherd have a relation to this shepherd for which he bears the responsibility before God, so that we may not interfere directly with this relationship.

Scripture does speak clearly of such a bond existing between a Christian pastor and those entrusted to his care, when it tells us through the Apostle Paul, Acts 20:28: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves and to all the flock over the which the Holy Ghost has made you overseers to feed the church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood.” The same bond is stressed in 1 Peter 5:2: “Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve, not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away” (NIV). When believers, to whom the Gospel in Word and sacrament, namely, the keys of heaven, are entrusted, exercise their rights as royal priests and call a spiritual shepherd, then, as Paul states, the Holy Ghost has made him an overseer over them. Then God's Word in Hebrews 13:17 applies to the members of his flock: “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable.”

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.

Doing this would mean becoming "a busybody in other men's matters." We will readily grant that the context of 2 Peter 4:15 does not fully establish that the activity of the *allogotriepiskopos* mentioned there is restricted to meddling in the public ministry of another; but there can be no doubt that it above all applies also to this kind of meddling. In view of that let us not fail to note that the activity of the *allogotriepiskopos*, of a busybody in other men's matters, is lined up with that of a murderer, and of a thief, and of an evildoer. Let us also take to heart that if we would come to suffer something because we have made ourselves guilty of being such a meddler we would not, as the Apostle Peter points out, be suffering as a Christian, we would not be partakers of Christ's suffering. It is not a light thing to disregard or to act contrary to any of the scriptural truths concerning Christ's church of believers and of its ministry. It is not a light thing to ignore or to violate the spiritual rights of even the weakest of God's royal priests, those tyrannized by false teachers, or to make light of the sacredness of a divine call in itself, even though the person who has that call misuses it and does not carry it out faithfully. Let us remember, as we were reminded by the Synodical Conference fathers in their conference deliberation, which the call to the public ministry of the church is divine, first of all, because of the spiritual rights of the believers who have done the calling. It is in this way that God is pleased to establish the ministry of his church.

Clinging to the scriptural teaching that the presence of believers, the presence of the church, must be concluded and apprehended by us on the basis of the presence of the marks of the church, Lutherans from Luther down have not been ready to question altogether even in the case of the Roman Catholic church, the church of the Antichrist, its character as a church. They have remembered that even this church, in spite of its horrendous doctrinal errors, still adheres to the three ecumenical creeds, uses them in its services, still acknowledges the triune God and Christ as the divine Redeemer, still reads the Gospels and Epistles in its services as God's Word, above all still has and performs holy baptism as instituted by the Lord.

Thus Luther in his Lectures on Galatians, commenting on Galatians 1:2, writes:

Jerome raises an important question here: Why does Paul call "churches" those that were not churches? For Paul, he says, is writing to the Galatians, who had been led astray and turned away from Christ and from grace to Moses and the law. I reply: When Paul calls them the churches of Galatia, he is employing *synecdoche*, a very common practice in the Scriptures. Writing in a similar vein to the Corinthians, he congratulates them that the grace of God was given them in Christ, that is, that they were enriched in him with all speech and all knowledge (1 Co 1:4-5). And yet many of them had been perverted by false apostles and did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, etc. So today we still call the Church of Rome holy and all its sees holy, even though they have been undermined and their ministers are ungodly. For God "rules in the midst of his foes." (Ps 110:2), Antichrist "takes his seat in the temple of God" (2 Th 2:4), and Satan is present among the sons of God (Job 1:6). Even if the church is "in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation," as Paul says to the Philippians (2:15), and even if it is surrounded by wolves and robbers, that is, spiritual tyrants, it is still the church. Although the city of Rome is worse than Sodom and Gomorrah, nevertheless there remain in it baptism, the Sacrament, the voice and text of the Gospel, the Sacred Scriptures, the name of Christ, and the name of God. Whoever has these has them; whoever does not have them, has no excuse, for the treasure is still there. Therefore the Church of Rome is holy because it has the holy name of God, the Gospel, baptism, etc.⁹

On the basis of these considerations we cannot approach an active member even of the Roman Catholic church as though he were an unchurched heathen and as though he had no relation to a Christian ministry, no matter how great our fears may be about his faith and his salvation because of the horrendous errors by which he is being tyrannized in his heterodox church and by its ministry.

It is different with those denominations who also lay claim to a Christian reference like the Unitarians, Universalists, Christian Scientists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc., but who no longer confess the triune God or Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of men. Here the marks of the church are wholly missing and thus indicate no presence of the church. Thus they can also have no Christian ministry. Their members are a legitimate object of our evangelism thrust, and approaching them with our witness is not objectionable proselytizing.

We cannot, of course, discount or minimize the difficulty with which one is often confronted in the present era of rapid confessional deterioration in the matter of determining which congregations and which ministries still can and must be respected as Christian in spite of the grave errors with which they are infested. This is particularly true concerning those extremely liberal and doctrinally indifferent Christian denominations that have a strong congregational polity, so that each congregation functions and acts almost like an independent unit. The decision becomes difficult in these instances also because these congregations do not subscribe to a common confessional statement and frequently also have no fixed order of service which all their congregations follow and which could assure the presence of a basic Christian message. It is somewhat different in the case of those liberal churches on the other hand in which every congregation has committed itself formally to common confessional statements which still present the basic Christian truths and who still follow a fixed order of service which includes the ecumenical creeds, prescribe Scripture lections from the Gospels and the Epistles that are regularly read, fixed prayers with rich Christian content, and who sing traditional Christian hymns, hymns from an authorized hymnal of the past full of rich evangelical messages. It often happens with reference to such churches that the simple worshippers absorb better things and more that is in harmony with Christian truth and the Gospel than their called ministers intend to offer. Examples are the liberal Episcopalian churches, which, however, still worship according to the rich biblical content of the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. Yet no matter how great the difficulty of decision may be regarding the evaluation of certain churches and their ministry, it must always be made on the basis of the presence or the non-presence of the marks of the church, and thereby of the presence of its ministry.

If in this way I have made the judgment concerning any active member of a Christian church that he still has a pastor whom I must recognize as being in the Christian ministry, I cannot presume to offer my ministrations as a pastor. It would be proselyting. I will have to say to myself: 'My almighty and all-wise Lord and Savior is not helpless in getting the full truth of his saving Word to people. It is true enough that he wants to use me whom he has blessed with a full knowledge of his saving Word as his instrument to bring it to others. Yet when I seek to serve as such an instrument in a way which is not in accordance to his Word, then it becomes presumption on my part. I must not act or think as though God is dependent upon me, and that I must act at any cost whether what I do is wholly in keeping with his Word or not. I should rather fear that I am placing obstacles into the way of the pure Word of God by endeavoring to reach a person through unwarranted interference in the ministry and responsibility of another. Such convictions were frequently expressed by Luther. We find them also in the aforementioned *Lectures on Galatians*:

It is not lawful for me to forsake my assigned station as a preacher or to go to another city where I have no call, and to preach there. (As a doctor of divinity, of course, I could preach throughout the papacy, provided that they let me.) I have no right to do this even if I hear that false doctrine is being taught and that souls are being seduced and condemned which I could rescue from error and condemnation by my sound doctrine. But I should commit the matter to God, who in his own time will find the opportunity to call ministers lawfully and to give the word. For he is the Lord of the harvest who will send laborers into his harvest; our task is to pray (Matt. 9:38).

Is there nothing, then, that an orthodox pastor and an orthodox Christian can do to bring their testimony of the saving Gospel and of the whole counsel of God to people tyrannized by the heterodox ministry of the sects? Is there no way in which they can also over against these people carry out their Christian mission and obligation to proclaim the Gospel to every creature? There certainly is still much that they can do.

The Christian pastor cannot approach these people, of course, on the basis of his call, for he has no call to these people. Also our individual Lutheran Christians cannot approach them as members of their church's evangelism committee, representing their congregation, for that would also be working, as the pastor's assistants, under a call—a call, however, which their congregation has no right to issue.

Yet in all of our ordinary contacts in life with the heterodox we can and should as God's individual royal priests give our Christian testimony also over against these people. We should endeavor to give such testimony judiciously and carefully and incisively by word and conduct. If for one reason or another we are brought together with them and an occasion arises to confess God's truth and to warn against pernicious error, we should not let it pass by. We should train ourselves to make good use of such opportunities. It does take prayer and training, just as good evangelism visits do. For all such occasions the scriptural exhortation applies: "Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear," (1 Pe 3:15).

Our Christians have endless such contacts with heterodox Christians, as neighbors and as friends, at work and on the way to work, in their travels and at their leisure activities. On all of these occasions conversations invariably turn to subject matters that have religious implications. What subject matter does not have them? Let us utilize these occasions to confess our faith as the opportunity presents itself. Let us do it as judiciously and wisely and adeptly as we possibly can. Also here much careful, thoughtful practice helps. By practice we learn to bear witness in a telling way. Some times a very brief incisive statement will be the most effective testimony. If further expansion in our witness is requested and solicited we shall want to supply it. Again we should take care that we do not close ears to our witness by belaboring the matter unduly. In such conversation it generally becomes evident what we still have in common with such heterodox Christians and where their errors begin to show up. We will take note of these errors and prepare ourselves with prayer and the study of God's Word to be able to testify effectively against them when another occasion in our continued contacts arises to bear witness of our faith and to set forth God's Word in these matters. We will always strive to keep our Christian testimony in close connection with the heart of our faith, Christ's pardon and salvation. It is this close connection that will make our testimony truly a Christian witness. As you express your conviction when an error is voiced, preferably try to show by your testimony how in something at variance with God's Word you find your salvation endangered and theirs also. If it should be abortion, for example, that is being discussed, do not content yourself by merely confessing that it is murder, but that it is murder by which a human being also redeemed by the blood of Christ is robbed of his time of grace, the real purpose of all earthly life since the fall.

You will agree, I believe, that your own experience in making evangelism visits has convinced you that people are, on the whole, much more willing to talk about religious matters and about what troubles them, religiously than was generally acknowledged in time past. You will be aware, however, that you came to realize this, as you became more and more adept in making evangelism visits in such a way that people were put at ease. We will experience the same thing as we gain adeptness in confessing our faith in a very natural way in our daily contacts with others, also with those of a heterodox faith. Through the Apostle Peter we are bidden to give our answers, our Christian witness, to every man with meekness and fear, that is, in a reverent, humble way that will not strike others unnecessarily as overbearing, presumptuous and meddlesome. We need to pray over it, ask the Lord that he may use our testimony to help also the heterodox in their faith.

We find such testimony as royal priests in the daily contacts of life with the heterodox urged and encouraged also by others who earnestly warn against proselytizing. Dr. H. C. Fritz, afterly stating that

...visiting members of Christian congregations of another denomination with the intention of persuading them to leave that congregation is forbidden; for a pastor or any other Christian has no right to break into the flock of another,

goes on to write:

This, however, should not keep any pastor or any Christian from bearing testimony to the truth when called upon to do so or whenever opportunity presents itself to do so; e.g., when I am making a house-to-house canvass for the purpose of finding the unchurched, or when I meet a person in a public vehicle (train, streetcar, bus, airplane) or at some other public place or in my own home and am asked in reference to my faith, or the difference between the creed of my church and the creed of another church, or in reference to any religious question, or if the drift of a conversation presents such an opportunity, I should not hesitate to confess the truth and give a good account of my faith; that is not only not forbidden but directly commanded.

As support he, too, quotes I Peter 3:15,16.¹⁰

Professor Armin Schuetze likewise, after having stated in *The Shepherd Under Christ*:

The pastor himself will avoid proselytizing and warn his members against it,

goes on to say:

When, however, members of erring Christian congregations seek information in their search for the truth, a forthright answer must follow without fear that this could raise the charge of proselytizing (I Pe 3:15).¹¹

There are ways also in which as a church we can still bring effective testimony to Christians in heterodox churches to aid them in their struggle against error and to help them to a clearer grasp of the truths of the Gospel. As a congregation and as groups of congregations we can use the mass media for a general public testimony. Our scriptural witness on certain issues can at times be effectively set forth on the religion pages of major newspapers. The facilities of the radio and of television lend themselves well to present regular public services and devotions by which anyone who himself chooses to do so may hear the Gospel, the way of salvation for sinners in Christ Jesus in all of its clarity as understood in the Lutheran church. There can be no doubt, for example, that through The Lutheran Hour many in sectarian churches have come to hear and appreciate the pure message of salvation as it is proclaimed in the Lutheran church, and as they had not heard it in their own churches. In many cases, as our own men in our mission outposts will testify, it was this medium that induced them to respond to the mission call of our mission pastors when they, too, had moved to a new locality and no longer had an active church affiliation. Such public testimony is not proselytizing since "we are not singling out anyone in particular with the intention of estranging him from his own church, but are in this world bearing witness to the truth as God has commanded us, saying: 'Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. Mk 16:15; 1 Pe 2:9; Mt 5:13-16.'"¹²

The publication of a well edited church paper like our *Northwestern Lutheran* and of devotional material like *Meditations*, and making them publicly available in libraries and hospitals, can serve as testimony to the heterodox as well as the unchurched. The same is true concerning the publication of an abundance of Christian books that give a sound Christian witness to the Gospel and to the whole counsel of God. Our Northwestern Publishing House is frequented and used also by people of other churches. Other publishing houses will likewise sell and advertise our books if we have good ones to offer. Our Sunday school material is in use by churches outside of our confessional fellowship.

How effective a book can be in helping the heterodox brings my participation in the colloquy of two of our Spanish speaking pastors to mind. In the course of the colloquy it came to my attention that one of them had originally trained at a Protestant Mexican seminary, Baptist, I believe, and had already served in this church. Because of the great lack of Spanish theological books from their own denomination the Spanish translation of J. T. Mueller's *Christian Dogmatics* was highly recommended to the students at this seminary on a great number of doctrinal subjects. The recommended doctrinal treatments did not include Dr. Mueller's treatment of the means of grace. Yet Garcia Felipe Luna, who was very much pleased and edified with Dr. Mueller's

doctrinal expositions, on his own also read his presentation on the means of grace and became convinced that it was scripturally sound. That is how he was induced to become a Lutheran pastor and now serves our Spanish mission.

To some the difference may seem to be only a very slight one that we have made between that which must be declared to be objectionable proselyting on the one hand and on the other hand the witness of God's royal priests in every day contacts as such witness is made also over against heterodox Christians and the legitimate forms of public testimony likewise which a church makes before all. Yet on the basis of all that has been said in our scriptural analysis of proselytizing it is nevertheless a distinction that must be recognized and upheld in practice. Proselytizing is not in keeping with God's Word and will. The other actions and activities of witnessing mentioned are.

There are, of course, many circumstances when pastors are tempted to erase the difference. A pastor may be very much troubled about the many mixed marriages in his congregation. They do tend to increase more and more in our congregations. He sees that when there is a crisis in such a home with divided church affiliation, husband and wife are not really able to comfort and strengthen one another in Christ and his grace. Even under more ordinary circumstances there is a lack of spiritual togetherness in all the decisions and problems, sorrows and joys of life. In his pastoral concern he will be eager with God's saving and sanctifying Word to supply this missing bond of a common Christian faith and understanding to these divided homes. He will spare no efforts therefore in trying to win every unchurched spouse of his members for his Bible information class. He will encourage the members involved to join their unchurched spouses in such a common study of God's Word with all of its life and strength-giving promises in Christ Jesus. So far such a pastor is merely exercising the concern of a faithful servant of the Word.

The tempting thought has, however, come to pastors: Can I not also take the initiative and extend a formal invitation to my Bible information course to those spouses in the mixed marriages of the congregation who are active members in another Christian congregation? In his contacts with these spouses one such pastor had detected considerable lack of Christian understanding, and he had found reason to conclude that their churches were seemingly not offering their members too much in this respect. He decided therefore to explain in his formal invitation that he was well aware of the fact that the addressed spouse was a member of another Christian congregation and gave the assurance that his invitation was not meant to be a solicitation to join the Lutheran congregation of which he was pastor. He was merely extending the invitation that by his attending the Christ-centered presentations of his Bible information class with his own spouse they might both learn more fully from God's Word what relates to life, death, salvation, and eternal life for the strengthening of a Christian family bond, something that every Christian church should appreciate. Still we need to say that though the concern and interest was commendable, the action chosen was not. It was objectionable proselytizing. It was an action which interfered with the relation between a member of a Christian congregation, though a heterodox one, and his called shepherd, an action which presumed to offer spiritual ministrations which were the responsibility of another by virtue of what still had to be recognized as a divine call.

If any of the spouses addressed still had something of an understanding of their true relations to their own pastor and of their spiritual rights as Christians to call their own pastor, they would have resented the invitation as spiritual meddling. It could well have prejudiced them against any further testimony of the pastor involved which might have reached them in a proper way, have prejudiced them against the pure message of God's Word and put obstacles in its way.

Again this does not mean that there are no circumstances when a pastor can bring a message of Christian truth even to those spouses who are active members of another Christian denomination. In ministering to his own members in his visits to these divided homes, he may well enter into conversation also with the non-member spouse. In such conversations questions may be addressed to the pastor concerning his religious conviction and concerning various religious matters in themselves. In all such instances 1 Peter 3:14 again applies. It may happen that a non-member husband may make demands that violate the conscience of his spouse

so that she may ask her pastor to help her point this out very clearly to him, not with the intention of winning his assent necessarily but as a clear confession of her own faith.

An instance of this kind comes to my mind that a pastor experienced as one of his last ministrations in a congregation which he had served. A young woman who had only recently joined the congregation but who had been very faithful in her church attendance had without fully knowing what she was doing signed the Catholic ante-nuptial agreement to please her Catholic husband at their marriage by a Catholic priest. The pastor ran into no difficulty when he pointed out to her from God's Word that she had denied her Savior in promising to have any children which the Lord might give them brought up in the Catholic faith and to do nothing to undermine this in any way.

In her penitent faith she now realized that she would want to tell her husband that she could never feel bound to the sinful promise that she had made, for her blessed relation to her Savior was at stake. She stated, however, that after having calmly discussed this with her Catholic husband she would try to convince him to come along with her to her pastor so that he might explain even more clearly in her name why it was impossible for her to feel bound to the promise which he now recognized as wrong.

When the meeting actually took place the pastor in a very calm and understanding way endeavored to do just that. In her name he clearly set forth the concerns of her faith. He pointed out that in her faith in her Savior, based on God's clear Word, she had full certainty of forgiveness of all her sins by grace alone and a sure hope of heaven. This treasure she would not be able to give up in her humble, joyful faith. Though, recognizing her husband as the head of the house, she would not be able to prevent him from having their children baptized in the Catholic faith, she would at the same time not be able to keep from confessing her faith before her children as they grew up; she would pray, too, that with the Lord's blessing on her testimony they might cling to the true Christian faith.

The Catholic husband responded by pointing out that his status in the Catholic church would be at stake if he did not carry through the ante-nuptial agreement. The pastor contented himself with the soul-searching question: Does your Catholic faith likewise hold out to you that blessed certainty of God's grace now and of eternal life hereafter through Christ's vicarious redemption which your wife will not give up in her joyful, thankful faith? The husband himself did not seem to be too happy with his answer that even if he would have to spend some time in purgatory he would eventually get to heaven if he retained his status in the Catholic church. The matter was left to rest with this for the time being.

Ten years later when the pastor was asked to preach in a service of his former congregation, he was happy to see both of these young people and their two children in church. He found out that the husband had not only been instructed and confirmed in the Lutheran faith in the meantime, but he was now a member of the church board. The pastor never came to know the details of this course of events. Probably the clear testimony that he had given in connection with the unsolved problems of the mixed marriage without engaging in any proselyting was blessed by the Lord.

We will want to realize that the same motivation which can make us zealous in bringing the Gospel to others is also the motivation that will keep us from proselytizing: humble, joyful, God-given faith in the Savior's grace that incites us in thankfulness to share his grace with others and which makes us want to do God's will in all things and at the same time gives us the trust that God's will is always done well when it is done in accordance with his Word. A zeal for evangelism and careful avoiding of proselytizing go well together.

ENDNOTES:

- 1) *Proceedings, First Convention of the General English Ev. Luth. Conference of Missouri and Other States*, Oct. 19-23, 1888. *Theses on Parish Rights*, by Rev. F. Kuegele, p. 22: "**Proselyting** in a parish of another is forbidden in the ninth commandment, 'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house.'"
- 2) *Country Sermons*, New Series Vol. 4, *Sermons on the Gospels for the Church Year*, by Rev. F. Kuegele, Augusta Publishing Co., 1908. *Mission Festival* sermon, p. 720: "Lutherans are not like some fanatics who

claim to be sent by God to preach everywhere. A true Lutheran will not be ‘a busybody in other men’s matters’ 1 Pe 4:15. He will not give for the purpose of proselyting among Christians of another name.”

- 3) *Pastoral Theology*, by John H. C. Fritz, Concordia Publishing House, 1945, p. 64-65. “...proselyting (visiting members of a Christian congregation of another denomination with the intention of persuading them to leave that congregation and denomination) is forbidden, for a pastor or any other Christian has no right to break into the flock of another pastor.”
- 4) *The Shepherd Under Christ*, by Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, Northwestern Publishing House, 1974, p. 237: “Evangelism must be carried on in such a way that it does not seek to make converts of those who are active members in a Christian church. The pastor himself will avoid proselyting and warn his members against it.”
- 5) *Verhandlungen der ersten Versammlung der Ev. Luth. Synodal-Conferenz von Nord-Amerika zu Milwaukee, Wis., vom 10. bis zum 16. Juli, 1872*, pp. 14-20.
- 6) 1 Co 11:19
- 7) 2 Th 2:4
- 8) Dr. Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism*, explained for children and adults. Revision authorized by the Ev. Luth. Joint Synod of Wis. a. o. S., 1956.
- 9) *Luther’s Works*, Vol 26, *Lectures on Galatians*, Concordia Publishing House, 1963, p. 24
- 10) *Pastoral Theology*, John H. C. Fritz, p. 65
- 11) *The Shepherd Under Christ*, p. 237
- 12) *Pastoral Theology*, John H. C. Fritz, p. 65