

A Christ-Centered Program of Evangelism

[Presented at 1962 Minnesota District Convention]

By Daniel Malchow

At its 1957 convention held here in New Ulm, Minnesota, our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod resolved to create a new commission, known as the Commission on Evangelism. This resolution very likely prompted questions on the part of some and prompted fears on the part of others.

For some the word evangelism was perhaps strange, a word that seemed to carry a certain religious ring but had no practical meaning. For others the word evangelism might have awakened some very pointed thoughts, fearful thoughts. The fear might have been created that we were about to embark upon some type of religious crusade, such as Dr. Billy Graham's "Hour of Decision." The word evangelism might have given rise to thoughts or ideas of revival meetings where an itinerant man of the cloth pitches his tent and calls upon the immoral, the corrupt, and the wicked of the community to make a *decision* for Christ. And this should not seem strange. Even Webster's dictionary finds an association between evangelism and revival meetings. In, defining evangelism it says, "preaching or promulgation of the gospel, esp., in revival services." The word evangelism has even been facetiously used in connection with communism. Protestant Episcopal Bishop Henry L. Louttit of South Florida, speaking at a Lenten service last spring in the Pentagon before military officers and civilians said that "The worldwide evangelistic program of the communists puts to shame the efforts of Christians."

Thus one would be very ready to grant that as a result of the many so-called religious activities, carried on in the name of evangelism, the word evangelism carries a pronounced stigma in our midst. At the last Minnesota District pastoral conference the question was asked of the pastors present, "Do you object to the use of the word evangelism in connection with our home mission activities?" Nineteen of the approximately seventy answers to that question replied, "Yes." Surely we would all agree that if evangelism meant only the activities just cited, we would be justified in saying that we would want no part of it.

But what then, does the word mean? What kind of a committee or commission is this which came into existence at the 1957 convention of our synod for the purpose of promoting the work of evangelism? It, might be surprising to some to hear that the word evangelism as such is not found in the Holy Scriptures. And the only other English word bearing any connection at all with evangelism, the word evangelist, occurs only three times. There is, however, another closely related word which is very familiar to our ears. The word is evangelical. When a congregation adopts a name, it will invariably include the word evangelical. Our congregations are known as St. John's *Evangelical* Lutheran Church, Trinity *Evangelical* Lutheran Church, Good Shepherd *Evangelical* Lutheran Church, and the like. When the name of our beloved synod was changed in 1959, concern was shown not only to include the word Evangelical, but also to have the word precede the word Lutheran. Hence we are known as the Wisconsin *Evangelical* Lutheran Synod.

The word Evangelical links us with the Gospel. Our churches are evangelical and our synod is evangelical because we proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and as much as in us lies we strive as reborn children of God to live in the spirit of that Gospel. The ears of our lay people are not so apt to link the word Gospel with Evangelical. But to the one who has studied Greek, the original language of our New Testament, the connection is quickly apparent and unmistakable. The Greek word for Gospel is εὐαγγέλιον, and if our lay people were to see that word written out even in the Greek letters they would immediately note the similarity. So the word evangelism means simply "the preaching of the Gospel." The word evangelize means, according to Webster "to instruct in the Gospel, to convert to Christianity." And that is the ultimate purpose of our synod's program of evangelism—to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to instruct people in the fundamental truths of it.

The question, of course, could logically arise, "But are we not doing that through our called pastors and missionaries?" Has not our long history been one where we have done just that—preached and instructed in the truths of the Gospel? Surely that has been done. But at the convention of this district four years ago in an excellent essay prepared by Pastor F. E. Stern, delegates heard that the responsibility for this work of evangelism does not lie with called pastors, teachers, or missionaries. It lies with every single Christian. Every

single Christian is a royal priest, a member of the spiritual priesthood of all believers, and as such has the sacred trust of spreading the good news of salvation in Christ. Pastor Stern's essay contained a very sober warning, that this privilege all too often is restricted to only the clergy. He quoted Dr. Paul Scherer as saying, "We have *done again* what the reformation *undid*. We have professionalized religion. We turned witness-bearing into class prerogative and pay some man a salary to do it for use while we may come to church and listen."

This program of evangelism has then in mind particularly the lay people of our synod. It is the understanding of this writer that this program which we hope to foster in our synod and in our districts will be primarily an effort both to encourage and also to assist our lay people in serving as ambassadors of their Savior. The very resolutions of our synod point this program in the direction of our lay people. It was resolved in 1957 that "Whereas our *laity* represents a vast reservoir for personal mission work, and Whereas our present pastor shortage only emphasizes the urgent need of employing our *laity* to better advantage, and Whereas such a program would surely stimulate greater *lay participation* in personal mission work,... Resolved, that an Evangelism Committee be created..."

So that there be no mistake, let us also add at this point that this program of witnessing is not only to be directed toward the unchurched, but also toward those who have become delinquent in their church and communion attendance. Here, too, it is hoped that our lay people might become increasingly more active in bringing such people admonition and correction from God's Word. The delinquent lists in many congregations often reach a number far too staggering for a pastor to adequately handle.

It should be obvious that we want an evangelism program in our midst to remain within the bounds of God's Word. Surely the abuses which have crept into the evangelism programs of others would serve to make us extremely careful that any program we inaugurate would not run contrary to the express Word of God nor contrary to the spirit of that Word. We want an evangelism program that is pleasing to Christ and centered about Christ. For that reason we have taken as a title for this paper:

A Christ Centered Program of Evangelism

In discussing such a program we would like to treat

- 1) Its importance.
- 2) Its dangers
- 3) Its blessings.

I. Its Importance

The importance of a Christ-centered program of evangelism is soon first of all from the fact that our Lord has commanded evangelism. He has commanded us to be His witnesses. To His disciples the Savior says: "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature." (Mark 16:15) In His final instruction to the disciples before His ascension into heaven, Jesus ordered them to go and make disciples of all nations, "baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you." (Mt. 28:19,20) Through the inspired writer, Peter, the Lord tells us, "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts and be ready to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear." (1 Pet. 3:15) This very fact that our Lord has commanded evangelism makes it a matter of supreme importance. It is not then something toward which we can remain indifferent, not something we can either choose to do or not to do. This is the arrangement, called by Paul the "foolishness of preaching," which our Lord has instituted to bring lost sinners into His fold and make them members of the body of Christ.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of this command as a burdensome one, one from which the child of God would tend to recoil, one that he would dread to carry out. Quite the contrary, the redeemed child of God, his heart teeming with gratefulness over the marvelous salvation his Savior has won for him, wants to serve as a witness to his Savior. It lies within his very nature to be such a witness. Peter and John were led to exclaim before the Jewish Sanhedrin, "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." (Acts

4:20) In this connection it might be well to observe the words of Jesus which Luke records in the book of Acts just before describing the Savior's ascension. Jesus there said: "And ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." (Acts 1: 8) "Ye shall be my witnesses"—this is not a command. For those familiar with the mechanics of language, this verb form "shall be" is not an imperative. It is an indicative. Jesus here is stating a fact. He is telling us, "This is going to happen. You are going to be my witnesses."

Perhaps the question will then arise: "Why, then a program? If it lies within the very nature of a Christian to evangelize, to testify of his God-given faith, then why do we need a *program* stressing the importance of evangelism?" The answer lies in great part in our sinful nature. Surely as reborn children of God we want to witness to our Savior and to God's marvelous salvation, but lying within us is sinful nature that repeatedly rebels against this desire to testify.

Looking through past history one could find no greater or more faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ than the apostle Paul. Yet even this pillar of faith was led to confess openly, "For the good that I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do." (Rom. 7:9) When looking at the fearless men of faith in Holy Scripture we would likewise think of Simon Peter. Brave, certainly! When the savior was taken captive in Gethsemane's garden, Simon was ready to do battle with the entire contingent of Jews and Romans. Wielding the sword he actually cut off the ear of one of them. Yet in the courtyard of the temple when charged by a lowly maid that he was a disciple of Jesus, what witness did this man make? This same Peter "began to curse and to swear saying, 'I know this man of whom ye speak.'" (Mark 14:71)

When we thus view this sad denial on the part of Simon Peter, are we not ready to admit that our witness for the Savior has at times been just as feeble, just as tragic? Are we not ready to admit that we too are sadly in need of encouragement to serve as witnesses faithful to our Lord? Why do we seem to fail so often? Why do we find it *hard* to function as faithful witnesses to Christ?

The causes are many. We would first of all attribute it to the influence of the unholy trinity—the devil, the world, and our flesh. Yes, let us recognize the efforts and the influence of Satan. Satan does not want us to bear witness. One would expect nothing other from Satan but that he would wage a fierce combat against any means God has chosen to extend the Savior's kingdom. Surely the prince of this world would employ every means at his disposal to keep us from serving as our Lord's instrument in proclaiming the message of salvation. I think we would be safe in saying that there is no greater cause for the Christian's lethargy when it comes to witnessing. Satan is at work to keep him from it.

We could, however, list other causes. For the most part, we dislike disagreements. The world considers it the mark of an honorable man when he can live in peace and harmony, and on good terms with all men. Yet we know that when we witness to the truth of salvation, such witnessing will at times, perhaps even often, provoke anger and deep resentment. We thus are inclined to think twice before provoking such a discussion.

We fear ridicule. And this is no light matter, even though at first it may seem so. When compared to the physical harm which often befell the early Christians ridicule might seem relatively mild. Surely we can be grateful that physical harm is seldom a factor in our country when the Christian testifies his faith. It is not required that we jeopardize our lives in order to be witnesses for Christ. But such witnessing does often result in this that we must endure criticism, scorn, and contempt of those who reject the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And if there is anything that hurts us, something that sometimes pains even more than the sword, it is to be laughed at and to be treated as one who must be quite unintelligent. And so fear of scorn and laughter may tend to muzzle us and silence our voices.

In close line with this would be the fear of being called a fanatic, or in the terms of Old West we would be regarded as one who has got "religion." Now we know that there *are* fanatics. There *are* people who are extremely religious and at the same time extremely eccentric. People of La Crosse area, particularly pastors, occasionally find at their door a self-styled evangelist who claims spectacular visions from God and rare insights into Holy Scripture. Such alleged visions have prompted him to use huge stones in forming on the side of a cliff the words, "Cast out into the deep." Recently, before it was possible to send him on his way, he related to me that hours before a La Crosse Lutheran pastor had been killed in an automobile accident, God had

revealed this to him through the Scriptures. Thinking of people like this, we dread the thought of being looked upon as nothing more than a religious fanatic.

We might further find ourselves discouraged from being a witness because of the type of people we deal with. We might think it hopeless to testify of our faith when we find ourselves in the midst of people who use loud and intemperate language, when every other word is a curse or a word of filth. We might be ready to write off all such occasions as instances where we would become guilty of what our Lord calls casting the “pearls before swine.” (Matt. 7:16)

Then there is the matter of our own shortcomings. Can we who so repeatedly fail in our efforts to lead a God pleasing life, can we who shortcomings become apparent before the eyes of men, seek to call others to repentance and faith? Would not such people be ready to point the finger at us and tell us to put our own house in order, to concern ourselves about our own conduct before worrying about others? One would readily admit that if our own house is not in order, if we are careless about the Christianity we practice in our lives, it serves as a decided drawback in any testimony we would make concerning our faith.

Our failure to witness might stem from the difficulty we have in using the name of God. Does this seem strange? Then ask yourself how often you use the name of Jesus? How often during the day does the name Christ or Savior come from your lips? If we do refer to the Almighty, isn't it usually with the more general term of Lord, a term which is wholeheartedly used even by one who believes merely in a supreme being? Is then our witness not seriously hampered when we find it awkward to use the name of Jesus?

We would add one more cause for our failure to witness. That would be the fear lurking in our hearts that we would not know what to say. The Christian sometimes is inclined to feel that he must possess the qualifications of an attorney. He must be ready to meet all arguments, all objections. He must be ready to stifle all opposition which he meets in his contracts. And yet our Lord does not say that we are to out-argue anyone. It is not the force of arguments which win people. It is God's Holy Word, that Word which the writer to the Hebrews calls “quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword.” (Hebrews 4:12)

So the list of causes why the Christian does not witness consistently and faithfully, in spite of his fervent desire to do so, could go on and on. Undoubtedly many others could be added to those which I have cited here. And all this points to the fact that the Christian needs encouragement, strong encouragement to bear witness to his faith. It is our hope and our prayer that a Christ-centered program of evangelism will provide the encouragement.

Now let us dwell on this matter of a program. In stressing the importance of a Christ-centered program of evangelism, we stated previously that our Lord has commanded evangelism. Would we want to carry this one step further and say that our Lord has commanded a *program* of evangelism? We would state quickly that our Lord has not commanded any specific program as such. Pastor Stern pointed out well in his paper, “that nowhere in the New Testament Scripture do we find an injunction concerning any particular organizational program of the church, or any specific outward method and form of building Christ's church.” And he went on to say, “For the gospel, as our sainted seminary professors used to state it to us students, the gospel furnishes the forms which become necessary.” Yes, specific forms are not commanded, but specific forms do become necessary.

In this connection, let me call to your attention the fact that nowhere in Scripture do we read that ministerial candidates must go through a three, seven, or an eleven year period of training. Scripture prescribes no specific type of training or time of training for young men who want to become ministers of the Word. We in our synod have an intense three-year program at our seminary for these young men. And if we would include our colleges and prep departments we could even speak of it as a seven or an eleven year program. Last summer this program was slightly altered when our synod resolved that the practice of having ministerial students spend time vicaring become obligatory as soon as possible. Now perhaps there are some young people of our faith who could step into a pulpit or into the pastorate of a congregation and serve very effectively as ambassadors for their Savior without putting in three years at our seminary. Does this militate against the ministerial program which we follow and which we follow quite rigidly? No, even though Scripture has laid out no specific program, we still consider it the much better part of Christian wisdom to give these would be pastors training so

that they might become well grounded in the Word of God, so that they might acquire habits, techniques, and methods which have served others well in the work of the ministry, so that they might benefit from the experience of men who have served in their Lord's ministry. Such a program, such training we consider to be pleasing in the sight of our God.

Let us further realize that such training is in keeping with examples that we have in Scripture, examples even given to us by Jesus Himself. Before sending out his twelve chosen disciples, Jesus gave them extensive training. In fact, that training was already indicated when He summoned these men into discipleship. The first chapter of Mark tells us that when He called Peter and Andrew He said, "Come ye after Me, and I will make you to *become* fishers of men." (Mark 1:17) Through training these men were to *become* witnesses to the truth.

Such training was also given to the larger group of seventy disciples before they went out in their Savior's name. And this training did not only consist in the message which they were to proclaim. This training included a word of encouragement to face difficulties with confidence. It provided specific words which they were to speak under certain circumstances. It explained how they were to respond to various situations. It even indicated the belongings which they were to take along.

The importance of training is found also in Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. There he speaks of how Christians are to be equipped for work in the Lord's service. Since this point is not too apparent in our Authorized, Version, we shall quote from the New English Bible, "And these were His gifts: some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip God's people for work in His service, to the building up of the body of Christ." (Eph. 4:11,12) We grant that this passage lends itself to different interpretations, but one obvious truth which it presents is that it is the function of pastors and teachers to equip God's people for work in the Lord's service.

We have thus seen from Scripture that training is highly important for the witnessing Christian. Scripture speaks of its importance. And ordinary common sense would also agree with such importance. What work, what business, or what profession is there in this world, where training is not a most vital factor? What type of work could you visualize where an untrained person would simply jump in and carry out effective work? If this then is true in the ordinary affairs of life, would we want to treat the work of our Lord in any other way, least of all in a haphazard way? When we consider the importance of the Gospel, when we consider how precious every human soul is in the sight of God, do we not want to employ the most effective ways possible for bringing this Gospel to others? Would we not want to give our lay people the privilege of receiving the best training we can give them to serve as witnesses to their Savior? We feel that this question must be answered with an emphatic "yes!" This is what we consider to be the importance of a Christ-centered program of evangelism.

II. Its Dangers

We have mentioned previously that the resolutions of our synod to institute a program of evangelism was viewed by some people with fears. And such fears are justified. We are quite aware of abuses which have crept into the evangelism program of others. We are aware of the dangers which could accompany such a program in our own midst. Our synod, too, recognized these dangers, and therefore in its resolution it was stated pointedly that our synod "create an Evangelism Committee whose specific duties would be to plan such programs *consistent with our doctrine and practice.*" That phrase "consistent with our doctrine and practice" was obviously a measure taken to safeguard such a program in our midst. That safeguard was again expressed last summer at our synod's convention when it was resolved "That the (Evangelism) Commission be directed to produce more materials and to suggest evangelism programs *in keeping with our theology and practice.*"

What then are some of the dangers that accompany a program of evangelism? It would serve, our purpose well to group these dangers into two major categories. The one major danger is that the evangelism

program could turn into nothing more than a drive to increase the membership of our churches. The other danger is that the church could start taking on the aspect of simply a well-oiled organization machine.

First, this matter of a membership drive. It should be stated with great emphasis that the ultimate, purpose of an evangelism program is not to increase the size of our membership lists. Certainly it is our prayer that through the witnessing of our people it could be said as it was in the days of the New Testament church, “And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” (Acts 2:4) But we are not to be interested in members as such. We should not overlook the fact that before any unchurched people can be accepted into our membership, a thorough period of indoctrination is necessary. When our Lord gave His great commission to go and make disciples of all nations, He also said “teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” (Matt. 28:20)

Admittedly, the work of evangelism in some circles is nothing more than a membership drive. The pastors here present have perhaps received waste baskets full of literature with sensational promises along these lines. As an example, the mails recently carried an encouragement to purchase a booklet called “Operation Manhunt.” Accompanying literature explained this as “A fabulous plan for setting up a local church as a commando station and taking an entire town for Christ. Pastors can double the size of their fellowship in 6 months.”

This is also one of our chief objections to revival meetings. The word revival in itself can denote something very beneficial. In the sense of a spiritual awakening we would, I think, be ready to admit that there are any number of people on our membership rolls sorely in need of a revival. In a good sense the word has even been applied to the work of Luther’s Reformation. But revival meetings are usually something far different. Though I have never attended one, it is said that people are called together, and then when emotions are pitched to a high key, when a feeling of excitement has been created, people are begged, coaxed, and enticed to make a commitment for Christ. Revival meetings may not be too prevalent in our part of the country, especially in small communities, but in other parts of the country they are still a strong and mighty force. During the years this writer spent in the state of Oregon, in a city with a population of 35,000 people or a metropolitan area of about 75,000, it is my recollection that there were no less than three distinct and separate revival meetings taking place every week and taking place five out of the seven nights each week.

To eliminate any fears that evangelism in our circles might follow such lines, the first Commission on Evangelism in our synod in its prepared booklet called “Gaining and Reclaiming Souls for Christ” stated, “We do not want to be understood as advocating a program of highly emotional “evangelism” which is so popular today. Such emotionalism only too often tends to be superficial; solid indoctrination is neglected, and the Word of God is not thoroughly explained. The Gospel of Jesus Christ must be stressed, and through knowledge of the doctrines of Scripture must be our goal. Anything less will fall short of God’s express will.

In connection with such revival meetings there usually is an abundance of clever attempts to lure people into attending services. Huge advertisements are splashed over the pages of newspapers. Visiting evangelists are described as youthful, dynamic, inspiring, or any kind of adjective which would make them appealing or attractive. Such inducements are not only restricted to adults. Children are coaxed into Sunday School in ways that are similar. One Sunday will be designated as “Bring a twin Sunday,” when pairs of children are to dress alike. Another week it will be “Red and Blue Sunday” with children to dress only in red and blue.

One advertisement which still remains in my memory was a banner headline “Come and see Dopey!” “Dopey is going to make a parachute jump.” Dopey in this case happened to be the pet monkey of a former flier in the British Air Force. This former flier was visiting the evangelist, described as having found Christ while in the R.A.F. Apparently this monkey had been trained to make a parachute jump which was then filmed by the evangelist. This was the attraction in drawing people to this evangelistic temple—to see a monkey make a parachute jump.

Another experience which comes to mind was the occasion when three cars with loud-speaking systems drove through the city one day advertising an operation which could be witnessed. This operation was to be

performed at a Four Square Gospel Church (the church group founded by the so-called woman evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson). This was a week-long evangelistic effort. First there was to be a service, then an illustrated lecture, and finally the operation to be performed on a table. Details of the operation, of course, were not divulged. That is what you were to come and see. That is *why* you were to come.

Such efforts for sensationalism are not seen in our area, at least not so boldly or repeatedly, but efforts are made even in our own midst to attract the curiosity seeker. The La Crosse, Wisconsin television station has recently carried a series of evangelistic programs with the avowed intent of presenting the Gospel in an informal manner. In their publicity material it was stated that the program was designed to interest the most casual listener. Featured on the program was a girl vocal trio presenting such stirring numbers as “I’ve Discovered the Way of Gladness” and “Throw Out the Lifeline.”

Now what can be said about such efforts to attract people to Christianity, efforts which in some cases are obviously designed only to lure people into the church? Those of us who have sat at the feet of Prof. John Meyer (and I guess most of us pastors have) have heard well how un-Scriptural such tactics are. Prof. Meyer impressed upon us well the warning contained in Paul’s second epistle to the Corinthians when he writes, “Therefore ore seeing we have received this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not; But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the Word of God deceitfully.” (2 Cor. 4:2) Yes, trying to lure people into the church by promising things spectacular Paul speaks of as using hidden things of dishonesty. People who resort to such tactics fall under Scripture’s condemnation of handling the Word of God deceitfully. And that is not true evangelism. These are merely efforts to swell the membership rolls by using every conceivable method to lure people into your midst. Such methods are completely out of keeping with the words of St. Paul who wrote in his first epistle to the Corinthians, “For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” (1 Cor. 2:2)

Another danger enters in when you are concerned only about membership drive. That is the danger of trying to attract members to your church who hold active membership in a different denomination or congregation. This you hear referred to as “sheep stealing.” And again the manual put out by the Evangelism Commission has some pointed words on this subject. It states, “We have no call to ‘steal sheep’ from other Lutheran congregations, nor to solicit members from other churches where Christ is still preached as the divine Savior. Instead, we are at all times “ready to give an answer to every man that asketh us a reason of the hope that is in us with meekness and fear;” but to endeavor to increase our membership by intentionally working in the midst of those who are being served by called ministers of the Gospel, is contrary to Christian ethics and must be considered building upon another man’s foundation. Our field of operation must be among those who have become delinquent or have fallen away, and among those who are not members of another Christian congregation.”

There is yet one more danger which we would like to include under this broad heading of permitting an evangelism program to become nothing more than a membership drive. In the course of the recent controversy which arose within the Synodical Conference, we came to the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod—with repeated instances of unionism on the part of individuals and committees in their midst. Time and again these admonitions were answered with the plea that they were merely trying to be faithful to the injunction of Scripture to witness at every opportunity. This unionism was defended by the plea of witnessing. Let us therefore state clearly that there are times to witness (many of them), but there are also times when we have no call to witness. God keep us from ever entering into an alliance with an anti-Christian group, an anti-Scriptural group or a heterodox church body with the mere plea that we are to witness. An evangelism program steered in such a direction would run contrary to the very Word of God which it would be claiming to follow.

Perhaps we could conclude this particular section with the observation that in witnessing to others about God’s wondrous plan of salvation, we are not to beg or not to coax people into accepting Christianity. Whom did our Lord ever beg to be a Christian? Certainly we hope with God’s help to win more people for the Savior. Certainly we want others to share our faith. But we want that to stem from conviction. We want such people to be convinced in their own hearts of God’s truth. It is a tragic mistake if people are given the impression that the Church needs them. It is quite the opposite; they need the church. Or perhaps the emphasis would be better if

we were to say: *God* doesn't need them, but they need *God*. Church membership is a most blessed privilege. And may our people never lose sight of that!

With that we turn to the second broad danger accompanying a program of evangelism. That danger we would conceive of as the church starting to take on the aspect of a well-oiled organizational machine—in other words, the church becoming over organized. Now obviously a church or a church body needs organization. We could not carry on any program of foreign mission work, we could not maintain any synodical school, such as this Dr. Martin Luther College, we could not maintain any institution of mercy, such as the Home for the Aged, if we were not organized. Organization began almost at the very birth of the New testament Church. When the work of the apostles took on greater proportions, when the membership of that early church mushroomed, the apostles simply could not keep up with the press of work. As a result an organization was set up. Admittedly, it was a small organization, and yet men were organized to tend to the physical needs of their fellow-Christians.

Organization in the church is necessary, but it is also true that the church can become over-organized. It can result in a situation where the pastor serves as a master robot and the individual Christians as little puppets, with officials of the church pulling all the strings and pushing all the buttons. “It might be noteworthy to point out that in Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, a church body which we feel is fast losing its confessional moorings, there is deep concern that it has become over-organized, that its organizational structure is too centralized, that too much power has been invested in its boards and officials. In an unofficial publication of the Missouri Synod, *The American Lutheran*, Dr. Reuben W. Hahn, a pastor in that synod, has written “This concentration of power and authority is also bound to make it more difficult for individual members and congregations to realize their responsibilities and to see themselves for what they ought to be, the driving power of the organization. They will more and more be taking orders instead of giving them.” Another interesting quote comes from the Badger Lutheran where the Rev. William T. Eggers, likewise a pastor in the Missouri Synod, writes: “In nearly every aspect of life, our century organizes and crushes to death the spirit of man. Now the times, in one sense, also threaten even his last sanctuary—the church. Will Missouri stand in danger of organizing itself to death? Will the newspapers, perhaps a century from now, record her obituary? And will the post mortem (if any person still cares enough to do a post mortem) reveal that she died from the creeping paralysis which sets in when the virus or organizationitis strikes?” Most likely the question arises in our own minds, “Has this trend toward greater organization and greater centralization in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod also contributed toward the doctrinal laxity which has crept into its midst?” There are many who would be ready to answer that question with an emphatic “yes.”

This trend toward greater organization is, of course, a characteristic of our age. It is to a greater or lesser degree (usually greater) in all Protestant church bodies. Time magazine recently contained a review of a new book entitled “*The Suburban Captivity of the Churches*,” written by a University of Chicago professor, Gibson Winter. Prof. Winter describes this trend when he writes that America's new form of Christianity is the “organization church—the church that is not centered in its creed or its liturgy, or its pastor, but in activities and organizations ranging from nursery schools to softball teams.” He is sharply critical of the busyness which characterizes these churches—its elaborate fund raising, telephoning, canvassing, cooking—and he declares that all this drudgery has become “a Protestant system of penance... Members atone for their guilt by performing unpleasant tasks for the organization; to the extent the organizational network becomes a secularized penitential system.” This “new style of salvation by works,” says Winter, “is especially hard on young ministers. Preaching what it considers to be Biblical orthodoxy on Sunday, during the rest of the week it rushes about to oil the organizational machinery. Six days a week it enlists laymen for activities which promise salvation through good works. On Sunday, salvation is by faith through grace.”

In connection with such a heavy emphasis upon organization, there is danger that an evangelism program will be used as a tool for giving something to do to as many people in the congregation as possible. For that reason our first evangelism commission warned in its manual that evangelism in itself is not “activism.” It wrote, “Then too, it must be remembered that our object is not to make “super active” organizational members or mere “joiners” of those whom we attempt to win for Christ, but to instill that “faith in the Redeemer which worketh by love.” The mere striving to make a person active in church by giving him something to do, in order

to keep him busy, may make a fine impression; but we seek true sanctification, true fruits of faith which, can be accomplished alone through the Word of God by the Holy Ghost, who fills hearts with the love of the Savior.”

It can be said truthfully that the present Commission on Evangelism does not feel that it is its function to force down the throats of our people or our congregations a strictly regimented program of evangelism. To prepare such programs?—yes; to make available?—yes; to assist congregations or groups of congregations in establishing a program?—yes; but to force a program upon anyone?—definitely no! Nor is it our intent to prepare canned speeches or talks which people are to memorize and employ. It is our firm feeling that as soon as initiative is removed either from the congregation, or the pastor, or the laymen, the program immediately begins to deteriorate. To witness to one’s Savior is more than witnessing to bare facts; it is also witnessing to one’s personal faith in those facts. When a true child of God witnesses to the truth of salvation, there will also radiate from his testimony the many marvelous blessings which he personally has received from his Savior. Such a personal testimony we would in no way want to curtail or to impede by making our people mere puppets and telling what they are to say.

In this section we have by no means exhausted the dangers or abuses which can creep into a program of evangelism. We have, for example, said nothing about evangelists who center their message about the evils of liquor, or sex or such as communism. What we have tried to do is to spell out those dangers which we feel are primarily significant for us and for the work of evangelism we seek to do.

Permit me to use this opportunity to state also that every member of the Evangelism Commission (without exception) is acutely conscious of these dangers. Hours upon hours (and this is no exaggeration) have been spent in efforts to safeguard our program of evangelism. By God’s grace and with His help we feel that the work which is being done is, in the words of our synod’s resolution; “in keeping with our theology and practice.”

Yes, the dangers are there. We recognize them. But let us remember that there are dangers in connection with every phase of the church’s work. There are dangers in connection with our synodical schools. There are dangers which accompany the mission work we do on foreign soil. There are dangers in having synodical publications which are “Meditations” or “The Northwestern Lutheran.” Where could a person possibly expect to find himself free of dangers? And how unfortunate, yes, how tragic, it would be, if we would permit the mere presence of danger to sidetrack us from carrying our Savior’s command that we serve as His witnesses. How tragic if we were to use these dangers as an excuse for not seeking to do our Savior’s will. God help us to do that will, and to do it gladly and diligently.

III. Its Blessings

The blessings of a Christ-centered program of evangelism should be quite obvious to all of us. This is a program which we know will be blessed with success. It is a program which we know will bear fruit. We know that because our Lord has promised it. Our Lord has given us the unrestricted promise that His Word will not return unto Him void, but it shall accomplish that which He pleases and it shall prosper in the thing whereto He send it. (Is. 55:11) Thus a program of evangelism is unlike a business venture. When people embark upon any kind of business program., there are almost always calculated risks. There is, to be sure, the possibility of rich financial returns. There is the possibility of outstanding material success. But there is also the possibility of dismal failure. What a most marvelous blessing, then, that our Lord gives us the encouragement that witnessing in His name will not result in failure.

This does not mean, of course, that we now will expect people to flock to our churches in response to our witnessing. We are to realize that the success which the Savior promises might not even be apparent to our eyes. We must exercise care that we do not try to measure our work in terms of material or visible success. Naturally our hearts become glad and even excited when the Lord uses us as instruments in bringing lost sinners to repentance. Surely there was great rejoicing in the city of Jerusalem on that day of Pentecost when Scripture tells us “and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.”(Acts 2:41) Yet it is also possible to become far too extreme in one’s enthusiasm.

A tract which recently came in the mails is a case in point. Describing an instance where witnessing was done on a train, it was stated, "A college house mother and her two Minnesota friends listened to the plan of salvation for one hour, and accepted Christ." "A burdened wife who had a drunkard husband came over and asked if we would explain how to get to heaven and win her husband to the Lord. She sweetly received the Lord in five minutes and took tracts to begin personal work in her home town in Missouri." And there followed case after case, with one given the distinct impression that as soon as the word Christ was mentioned, people became eager and enthusiastic to receive Him. This, of course, is an extreme illustration. Yet even in our own midst the success in evangelism work can sometimes be pictured in a far too rosy way. In efforts to stir up enthusiasm for the work of evangelism, a thrilling picture is painted, with the work viewed as one big success story.

Here as in all things it is important to remain sober-minded and to keep our feet on the ground. Just as we want to remember our Lord's words of encouragement, so we also want to remember His words of warning. When sending out His twelve disciples, Jesus told them, "Behold I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. But beware of men; for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues; And ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles." (Matt. 10:16-19) Yes, the disciples were to be ready for a hostile reception, far more hostile perhaps than what we would have to expect.

Let us realize also, however, that in many instances the disciples were received far more cheerfully and enthusiastically than we can anticipate. We should not choose to ignore the fact that the world in which we live today is much different than the age of the disciples. Although we have many advantages the disciples did not enjoy, so, too, we today have disadvantages. The Gospel of salvation is by no means a completely unknown thing with the people of our country. They have been subjected to many forms of Christianity, in most cases they may even have developed strong prejudices against the Lord Jesus or Christianity in general. They might have well-molded opinions, formed long before we ever have the opportunity to speak to them. In their own communities they have occasion to observe various types of churches. These different types of churches point to the divided state of Christendom. They perhaps have been subjected to irritating visits from Mormons or Jehovah Witnesses. We would be worse than naïve if we would expect people to become immediately responsive as soon as we open our mouths. Rather than a response we might experience instead a sharp rebuke.

So to expect spectacular material success would not only be unrealistic. Worse than that, it would be ignoring the warnings and the cautions of Scripture. But let this not deter us. The work of evangelism carries a most wonderful blessing. It will bear fruit. It is true that we might not be present to see that fruit. That was the admission of St. Paul. He indicated that at times he only sowed the seeds. Writing in his first epistle to the Corinthians he says, "I have planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor." (1 Cor. 3:6-8) That we shall always see the visible blessings of our witnessing is not the promise of our Lord. But He does promise faithfully that these blessings will result.

Furthermore, the blessings of witnessing are not only to be restricted to those who are the objects of our witnessing. Rich are the blessings which attend the witness himself. Would it be hard to picture the deep joy and satisfaction which come to the child of God when the Lord has used him as an instrument in delivering one of his fellow-men from the clutches of Satan to the waiting merciful arms of his Savior? Bear in mind that we are not here speaking about reasons we are to witness. Personal joy and satisfaction is not a motivation for witnessing to our fellow man. Our motivation was summed up perfectly by the apostle Paul when he wrote, "For the love of Christ constraineth us." (2 Cor. 5:14) No, here we are speaking about the blessed fruits of evangelism. And surely the joy of the witness himself is one of these fruits. When the seventy returned from their first missionary activity it is said that they "returned again with joy, saying 'Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through Thy name.'" (Luke 10:17) Jesus, in fact, promised such joy. In John 4:35 we have His words, "Behold I say unto you lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest. And he that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together."

We could also think of other blessings which come to the child of God as he witnesses to his faith. There is also a strengthening of his own faith. In declaring God's message of salvation to others he becomes more firmly grounded in those truths himself. It has even been said that the evangelist is often his own first convert. The one who seeks to witness finds strong encouragement to go forth in his Savior's name. He becomes more consciously aware of the real needs of his fellow man, and he perhaps also becomes more consciously aware of his own church's efforts to supply these needs. Yes, he might be led to see ever more clearly that the basic function of the church, the real purpose of the church is to proclaim God's message of salvation for a lost mankind.

It would be a mistake, however, if the laymen present here this day and hearing these words would gain the impression that the purpose and blessings of an evangelism program are designed only for them. Do only laymen need encouragement and instruction for serving as witnesses for their Savior? Hardly. I would unhesitatingly be the first to admit that I have often been a pathetic witness to my Lord. And I feel safe in saying that every other pastor present in this room would be ready to make the same admission. When we see Simon Peter standing in that courtyard, denying the very Savior who was about to shed his life's blood for the sins of the world, we would be ready to confess, "But for the grace of God, there stand I." A Christ-centered program of evangelism will have meaning and it will have blessing for clergy as well as laity.

There is also a note of urgency attending a Christ-centered program of evangelism. Our sojourn here on earth is a brief one. Scripture says, "Man that is born of a woman is of a few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down; he fleeth also as a shadow and continueth not." (Job 14:1,2) With man now reaching into the outer confines of space, with the threat of a devastating nuclear war constantly rearing its ugly head, we as Paul feel like men "upon whom the ends of the world are come." (1 Cor. 10:11) We think of our Lord's words concerning the last times "And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth; for the powers of heaven shall be shaken." (Luke 21:25,26) How deeply conscious this makes us of the lost souls that surround us in this world. It has been estimated that 1700 million people are at this time living and dying in unbelief. Every minute of this day and every day 68 people perish in unbelief. It would be estimated that on this day, June 12, 1962 1,440 people will plunge to the depths of hell. Not all of these people live on the continent of Europe or Asia or Africa. A good many of them live right next door. These are the people we hope to reach with the a Christ-centered program of evangelism. These are all people whom the Savior loves, people for whom He shed His life's blood, people whom He would have "to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." A Christ-centered program of evangelism is not only important; it is urgent. Tomorrow is too late to win a soul that will be in hell tonight. For this program we earnestly seek your interest, your cooperation, and your help. Above all we urgently solicit your prayers.