

Pitfalls of the Modern Evangelistic Movements

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There are aspects of the current evangelistic movement which demand a critical and unfavorable review. Negative judgements on unwholesome practices have a legitimate role in the faithful service of the Christian mission. A serious theology of Christian mission, in a world where false prophets are sure to be, implies some dissent. To express dissent may imply Spirit-worked courage. On the other hand, dissent may imply jealousy, crippling fear, and a lack of joy in the positive mission of the church. To engage in unrelieved negative criticism of the church that surrounds us can lead to self-righteousness, denominational pride, an uncritical enshrinement of our own tradition, and a disdain for others which belies our professed appreciation for the communion of saints. Somehow as we observe what others are doing, we must be able to distinguish error and unworthy practices, and yet we must also be able to rejoice that Christ is being preached even if out of a heart that is not perfect. (Phil. 1:14ff) We must somehow integrate into our thinking Jesus' advice to John about a certain well-doer who was not one of Jesus' group. Jesus declined to vilify the man. He said to John, "Forbid him not: for he that is not against us is for us." Somehow we must try the spirits whether they be of God and rebuke what is not of God, and yet we must maintain our joy and confidence that wherever Christ is being preached, there sinners are being called to repentance despite the inconsistencies by which unworthy witnesses have dimmed the glory of Christ's grace.

The literature of the evangelistic movement is voluminous and of uneven quality. Too much of it deals with methodology and exciting evangelistic experiences; too little of it comes to grips with the theological questions which arise out of the Church's urge to proclaim the Gospel "in the world" without being "of the world". There is, then, much evangelistic material which causes dismay. But there is also evidence that God's Word is at work in the movement to purify its tradition and practice. There is evangelistic literature which brings joy and provokes repentance among all willing hearers of God's Word. The writer has attempted to fasten not only on the dismaying elements of the evangelistic movement but also on its joy and repentance provoking elements. The reason for this procedure lies in our common faith that new life flows not out of dismay with others but out of our own repentance. We therefore understand this paper not only as a call to be critical of others but a call to self-examination and to appropriate repentance. We agree with the Jewish evangelical Jakob Jocz:

All preaching, both within the Church and outside, is primarily preaching against oneself.

Preaching is always an embarrassment for it carries the indictment of the preacher.¹
And in a paper critical of others, we cannot but feel ourselves under indictment.

This is by no means a comprehensive or symmetrical criticism of current evangelism; not all aspects of evangelism find a due and proportionate share of attention here; others are altogether omitted. For instance, too little attention is paid to the question of the Sacraments and no space is given to consideration of Bible distribution societies and their principles. Lack of expertise in the field of world evangelism has forced me to deal only with what I am familiar. Lack of time, both for study and for delivery, has been another consideration.

So far as was possible, I have chosen to let the evangelicals speak for themselves and usually from that convenient symposium of evangelistic thought, *One Race, One Gospel, One Task*, which issued from the World Congress on Evangelism in late 1966. In this text the

evangelicals are seeking to counsel one another, and they do not omit criticism of each other. This provides me with the happy expedient of not needing to cast the first stone. What is even more important, it helps us to observe that wherever God's Word is at work, it is working effectively.

We shall divide our presentation into two general areas, theology and methodology, beginning with the former.

What is the theology out of which evangelism flows? Johannes Schneider, formerly of Humboldt University in East Berlin, teaches that the authority for evangelism derives from the Great Commission:

Authority for evangelism is grounded most deeply and finally in the risen Lord's Great Commission (Mt. 28:19)...He thus gave a comprehensive charge which bound not only them, but all others as well who stand in his service, to win the world for Christ!ⁱⁱ

We have no quarrel with this contention whatsoever. It is a proper understanding of the Great Commission. I quote it not to find fault with the evangelistic movement but as a prelude to a warning regarding our own encouraging of evangelism. There is a danger of replacing Christ crucified with Christ glorified in our practical, working theology. Missionary zeal is not derived from Christ's command but from His cross. When and if our pastoral emphasis changes from "Christ died" to "Christ commanded," we have reduced the element which gladdens sinners and turns them into ambassadors who will speak the truth in humility and love. Christ gave His commission to disciples who had tasted the bitterness of their faithlessness and the joy of assured forgiveness and life through the Cross. In the hand which pointed to the world and said, "Go," they could see the marks of the nails by which He had just suffered for their sins. The church which heard the Great Commission was the church in which Jesus labored mightily to teach the significance of the Cross. So the art which we, as good Lutherans, will still seek to cultivate above all others is the art of using the law and the Gospel of the Crucified to slay and to make alive. We believe that this bars repeating in the context of our paper because so much of the available evangelism literature comes from sources which sometimes tend to ground mission more on divine authority than divine grace.

The evangelistic groups are, however, concerned for consciences and warn each other against such "coercive urging" of evangelism as does not consider the difficulties involved.ⁱⁱⁱ Such procedure is described as a "cause for spiritual indifference" in the church. We can only appreciate this concern for individual consciences.

The use of the law in the form of high pressure persuasion tactics are an appeal to the religious man but have little influence on the repentant man. The religious man thrives on such use of the law as nourishes his self-estimation as a man of God. He is likely to become an excellent witness, an enthusiastic evangelist. But his services do not proceed from repentance and unrepentant wonder workers will only hear, "I never knew you."

Among us of the WELS there may be a temptation to appeal to the religious men in our midst by building pride in ourselves as the possessors of doctrinal purity. "We have the truth; let's go out and win the world!" may be our battle cry. Let us beware of "leading from our strength." We do better when we go out into the world in weakness like Paul who wrote 1 Cor. 2 (I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.) and 2 Cor. 13 (When I am weak, then I am strong.) If we want our witnesses to give answer of their hope in meekness and fear, if we want to root out overbearing self-assurance, then we will be wary of subtly grounding evangelism on *our* faithfulness, *our* conservatism, rather than on Christ's faithfulness, Christ's righteousness, and Christ's wisdom. If we cringe when certain evangelicals seem to protest too

much about “personal faith,” let us also shrink from proclaiming our corporate faithfulness and using it as a device to make our people bold. Both cases represent a kind of subjectivism which is alien to the man in Christ.

Perhaps this is the time for us to speak of that strain in evangelicalism which makes so much of “personal faith” and the “personal decision” which marks the beginning of the life of faith. We suspect this terminology to be a reaction against church membership which is sterile and dead through unbelief or which has failed to grasp the “either/or”ness of Christ’s call—either we are for Him or we are against Him. This emphasis on personal faith seems to be an overreaction. A great deal of stress on the personal activity in faith may reveal Semi-Pelagian inclinations. An examination of evangelistic group writings reveals that in their theology some do carefully exclude human cooperation in the act of conversion; others, like Boston’s Harold Ockenga, freely admit to synergism.^{iv} Ockenga’s synergism is forthrightly opposed by fellow evangelical Theodore J. Stanley:

The origin and impulse of transition from death to life is not self-effort but exclusively the works of the Holy Spirit. Every attempt to ascribe the least function to human will—be it no more than a cooperation with divine influences—entails a denial of Scriptural insistence upon man’s total depravity. Rebirth implies total inability and passivity, for no one can contribute to his birth.^v

But even those who formally reject semi-Pelagianism seem to have an affection for the expression “personal faith.” To me the constant reference to “personal faith” seems unlovely. It turns our attention inward upon ourselves instead of toward Him who is both creator and object of faith. Let the believer so know his natural hostility to the Lord, let him so recognize the grace of God in turning him to his Lord, that he may decline to think of faith as his personal activity or decision. (Eph. 2:lff.)

There is no doubt that the groups which speak willingly in terms of “personal faith” tend to be aggressive in their evangelism efforts. The case seems to be something like this: Those who feel they have made a right personal decision naturally have a kind of boldness over against others who have not yet made the same decision; moreover their bringing of others to share the same personal decision gives them an assurance that they themselves have made a right decision. Let us immediately grant, however, that God’s Spirit is at work wherever His Word is heard, purifying hearts and purifying evangelistic zeal. We need the same purifying Spirit and implore His assistance. We may be sure that much Spirit-empowered mission work is being done within the evangelistic movement. At the same time, it behooves us not to imitate its faults or to multiply them with our own.

We have so far been discussing problems in the theology from which evangelistic fervor is derived. We turn now our attention to that theology which the evangelistic movement is busily teaching. Here, too, we need to have concerns.

Both Harold O. J. Brown and Harold Ockenga express their fear of reductionism and see it as a real danger in the evangelistic movement. Brown warns his fellow evangelicals specifically against a kind of “unitarianism of the Son.”^{vi} He even suggests that it is an overspecialization to contend that evangelism must center in the offer of propitiation.^{vii} He acknowledges Christ’s death as the consummate act of deliverance, but he would have the church be aware that it has other things to say. He seems to be saying that a simplistic, formalistic conception of evangelism as prescribed by most manuals is inadequate and unnecessary. It seems to me that this warning deserves to be well taken by the evangelistic movement and by us. It was hard for me to write that sentence. What can be more important to

say than “Jesus dies for us; Jesus is Lord”? Our hearts ache to repeat that Good News. And there can be no true repentance and faith that is divorced from Christ’s atonement. Nevertheless, man is a complex creature and sin raises in his heart a variety of barriers. We need not and ought not limit ourselves to a single weapon, even if the weapon we have chosen is the very best available. In St. Augustine’s case, we recall, the chief barrier to his Christianity was his inability to conceive of immaterial reality. When this barrier was broken down, he was ready to be made a Christian. To hurl the atonement at a man impetuously—take it or die—can be, if there is some barrier to his understanding, like hurling the Law at him; it can embitter and create new barriers. The Word reveals to us occasions when the heart of the Gospel was proclaimed quickly to men and they were quickly converted; but the Four Evangelists also reveal how slowly and carefully Jesus prepared His people for His ultimate self-revelation on Calvary. He did not thrust Himself upon them as Redeemer after fifteen minutes; He carefully nurtured them until one cried, “Thou art the Christ.” The Spirit is not always in a hurry to bring man to his knees by thrusting the whole weight of the cross upon him. He may prefer to set the cross at a distance and lead the sinner to it gently, teaching him first to know the route that lies between him and the cross.

We would be bearing false witness if we suggested that the evangelistic movement is totally committed to Gospel reductionism. But let us beware the danger which others have sensed as being symptomatic of contemporary evangelistic theology.

Another self-recognized danger among the evangelicals is identified as irrationality. Irrationality involves a rejection of reason and an unwillingness to use the mind and the tools of logic in religious inquiry, discussion, and proclamation. There is even some danger that evangelicals will make the mistake of turning to irrationalism to support their position of “belief in spite of the evidence.” If the historic faith is ever reduced to the level of something held in spite of fact and reason, it will not be a “greater faith” as existentialist theologians might put it; it will be an absurdity and a perversion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.^{viii}

We know that existentialism is friendly with modernistic theology but it is well to be made aware that it can sneak in the back door of evangelical theology as well. If we read Martin Franzmann’s *Romans*, we cannot but notice—without his ever saying so—that he is bearing witness to the Gospel in a way designed to recall existentialist readers back to the truth of Christ. He unfolds Paul’s words about Christ’s resurrection so as to stress the reality of the resurrection. The existentialist theologian might say, “The fact is that Christ’s bones are in the grave, but I will close my eyes to the facts. I will make a blind leap of faith and believe that Christ is risen though my faith admittedly contradicts the facts.” Franzmann opposes such theology; so do many within the evangelistic movement. Thomas F. Zimmerman, one of the leaders of “Key 73”, warns against

the subtle denial of all eschatology under the subterfuge of “realized eschatology.” Thus the end-time events of the New Testament, viz., the resurrection of Jesus Christ, his Parousia, and his judgement are denied objective realization in concrete human history. They are conceived as “realized” existentially and exclusively in one’s own present experience.^{ix}

Literature of the evangelistic movement contains much similar criticism of the new theology. Yet “existential” thought can slip in the back door while we are barring the front door against it. The existential flight into irrationality is duplicated by conservatives who protest they would believe the Bible even if it said that Jonah swallowed the whale. To me that is an unseemly glorying in irrationality and in our willingness to believe the irrational. The preaching of the cross is the

proclamation of a sober and coherent message. To exalt the irrational and marvelous nature of our faith as though we were willing to believe anything, is to distract attention from the foolishness of the cross which is wisdom even if it is not man's wisdom. I have little affection for the title or substance of a local T.V. program which certain evangelicals have named "I Believe in Miracles." The appeal to the marvelous and the irrational is a concession to the Jewish-minded. And to impress men with a religious miracle, namely, our willingness to believe the stupendous, is not the same as bearing witness to Christ.

The appealing nature of a flight from reason shows itself today in other ways and preeminently in the tongues movement. Sentimentality has here taken precedence over mentality. The mind has been denied its proper role in man's religious experience. Paul contradicts this tendency politely, evangelically, but firmly. He argues that the worship assembly profits only by speech which is intelligible to man's mind. He respects man's mind as a gift of God to which the witness of Christ may and must be addressed intelligibly if it is to be effective. He discourages glorying in irrationality and he accentuates God's plan to convey His grace by an intelligible Word. It should be here conceded that the tongues' movement is present in, but not coextensive with, the evangelistic movement. Many evangelicals regard it as a danger to the Gospel.

The appeal of the irrational can also lead to defensive anti-intellectualism. The mark of such a disease is uncharitable suspicion of learning and of those who seek learning in order to master the intellectual world in which they are placed. Anti-intellectualism could not have produced or even welcomed an Augustine or a Luther. Christ's believers need not flee the knowledge to which human wisdom has attained; they need only to sit in judgement upon it. And men who have the "mind of Christ" are able to sit in judgement on the very best of human thoughts; dedication to learning is no liability to Christian judgement. When anti-intellectualism arises out of the fear that learning and faith are incompatible, the "professional" ministry becomes suspect, or else the church leaves scholars and scholarship to become the devil's fertile field where no Christian dares to evangelize.

However a church may choose to make its existential leap into darkness, by anti-intellectualism, by supernaturalism, or by modernism, it dishonors the God who has created us with all our faculties. It hampers that sober meaningful witness by which Christ has always been able to win men's hearts and men's minds, whether they be Jews, Greeks, or barbarians.

Another area of theological concern in the evangelistic movement is its unhealthy emphasis on the Holy Spirit. It was good to note that within the movement there is recognition of this danger and an attempt to correct it. A secretary of a discussion group at the Berlin Conference reacted to the debate in his group by noting that it "did nothing to dispel the old and perceptive complaint that the doctrine of the Spirit is the Achilles' heel of Protestantism." And a certain Dr. Edman, "stressing that in all things Christ must have preeminence warned against an unwholesome concentration on the Spirit in theology and in the Church."^x His point was that the Spirit does not work to make men talk about Himself but to bear witness to Christ. Men who are always prating about the Spirit in preference to the Word of the Cross come close to deserving the Luther-like structure that they eat their Holy Spirit "feathers and all."

A surprising problem among the evangelicals was the discovery that some of them will not cling to the principle of salvation by faith in Christ alone but will grant the possibility of a Jew's being saved or of Plato's receiving the Gospel in hell.^{xi} We need not disdain the evangelicals for this failure. Year after year I find myself struggling to let Romans 1:18-32 impress itself on our college students. They seem amazed and non-plussed by this chapter and by the rigidity of Paul's "without excuse." Their confusion is understandable. While our catechism

has introduced them to Acts 4:12 (Neither is there salvation in any other...), it has not introduced them to God's natural revelation and the blameableness of the man who suppresses it.

Another area of theological concern in the evangelistic movement is infant baptism. A good many evangelicals regard it as the bane of the modern church. Others defend it properly and even beautifully. Let me only suggest that it might be well also for us to study the Scriptural understanding of Baptism. In our mission programs we have come to minister to many unbaptized children of unchurched families. We do well to study the Word concerning Baptism that our practice in bringing these children to the font may truly serve the interests of God's grace.

Our most distressing concern for the evangelistic movement is its confusion of Law and Gospel, its turning the Gospel into a new Law. Not every witness, of course, shares this fault, but it is a common one. Let me illustrate by referring to one of the better tracts from Chich Publications, "This Was Your Life." As we read this cartoon-style tract, we note a vivid preaching of the Law and then, near the end, an effort to proclaim the Gospel. The "Gospel", however, is of the kind that Luther would have abhorred. "Love the Lord supremely, then you will become a new creature," an "evangelistic" tormenter cries. That is no Word for the self-despairing sinner; it is a Word to delight the religious man, the moral man, "the righteous man who needs no repentance."

When we turn to the last page we find the Gospel again converted into a commandment. It is presented not as a Word of promise to create faith and life, but it is presented as something "you must do," the minimum condition which God has placed on the acquiring of salvation.

Other tracts from the same publisher reveal more faults. They tend to portray sinners very coarsely and saints very saintly. Some of them contained extremely sectarian viewpoints. They stressed the inner feeling that is generated by "the Christ in us." And they tended to be vaguely sensationalistic.

We must admit that we, too, have been sensationalistic in choosing Chich Publications as our paradigm. There are better tracts than these being used by the evangelistic groups. Yet many of them will share the same faults as these on a less grand scale. Perhaps the tracts I have been discussing have some small merit. They are readable and they make a point. If they are guilty of caricature, they at least use it in a medium where caricature is expected.

In our review of the tract we have already begun to enter into a discussion of our second area of concern, evangelistic methodology. We have some concerns about the methodology that is being employed not only in evangelistic literature but in evangelistic speaking, not only in mass evangelism but in person-to-person evangelism. Most of the remarks in the following section relate to individualized evangelism more than to mass evangelism, to spoken evangelism rather than to literary evangelism.

Earlier in this paper we indicated a regret that so much evangelistic literature rehearsed only the methodology of evangelism. Some members of the evangelistic groups seek to caution their fellows against too great a preoccupation with the "how to" of evangelism. Ian Rennie writes:

Finney and the frontier evangelists again adopted new methods. Protracted meetings, the anxious bench and anxious meetings, and all-night prayer meetings were utilized as effective ways of reaching early 19th century America. The new departure with Finney was to exalt methods to the level of abiding principles. Just as God would bless the right message, he felt, so God would accompany the right methods with his power. Method guaranteed success.^{xii}

Method had come to be regarded as the critical factor in success so when it failed, Rennie writes, there was a sense of frustration, a feeling that God had not been faithful.

There is another article from *One Race, One Gospel, One Task* which will surely find a warm response among us. It was written by a Presbyterian, Richard C. Halverson, and it is a reaction against the emphasis of method.

Evangelism never seemed to be an “issue” in the New Testament. That is to say, one does not find the apostles urging, exhorting, scolding, planning, and organizing for evangelistic programs. In the apostolic Church, evangelism was somehow “assumed” and it functioned without special techniques or special programs. Evangelism happened! Issuing effortlessly from the community of believers as light from the sun, it was automatic, spontaneous, continuous, contagious.

Roland Allen, Anglican missionary to China (1895-1903), parish pastor in England, and missionary author, contrasts the contemporary with the New Testament evangelistic approach as follows: “When we turn from the restless entreaties and exhortations which fill the pages of our modern missionary magazines to the pages of the New Testament, we are astonished at the change in the atmosphere. St. Paul does not repeatedly exhort his churches to subscribe money for the propagation of the faith; he is far more concerned to explain to them what the faith is, and how they ought to practice and keep it. The same is true of St. Peter and St. John, and of all the apostolic writers; they do not seem to feel any necessity to repeat the Great Commission, and to urge that it is the duty of their converts to make disciples of all nations. What we read in the New Testament is not anxious appeal to Christians to spread the Gospel, but a note here and there which suggests how the Gospel was being spread abroad...for centuries the Christian Church continued to expand *by its own inherent grace* (underscoring is Halverson’s), and threw up an unceasing supply of missionaries without any direct exhortation” (Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962, p. 6)...

The sense of spontaneity and of effortlessness is inescapable in these accounts of additions to the primitive Church. As the “word of God increased,” as believers in fellowship “were edified” and “walked in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost,” as they were “established in the faith,” converts were “added daily.” Because of its spiritual health, the apostolic Church experienced exciting and effective evangelistic results with monotonous regularity. It is a safe assumption that evangelism is inevitable in a spiritually robust congregation. Failure to be evangelistic or “mission minded” in the New Testament sense betrays a poor spiritual condition. The way to evangelistic vigor is not some special emphasis or program, but rather repentance and healing and nurture. The very necessity for organizing special evangelistic efforts betrays the deep need of the Church for renewal. One might as well exhort a woman with a barren womb to have children as to exhort a sterile church to evangelize or respond to missions.

Evangelism was not optional in the New Testament; Jesus did not say “...ye *may* be witnesses unto me after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you.” Nor on the other hand was evangelism coercive. Jesus did not say “...ye *must* be witnesses unto me...” Rather,

evangelism was inescapable! Jesus said, “But ye *shall* receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: 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). That is to say, the Spirit-empowered Christian was a witness, not because he elected to be or was compelled to be, but because the divine witness indwelt him and worked through him. They did not witness because they had to but because they could not help it...

Those early disciples were no less human than we, no less subject to temptation, no less dogged by human weakness and inadequacy. They had none of the so-called advantages we enjoy in our contemporary churches because of nineteen centuries of history and tradition; their world was certainly no less hostile to the Gospel of Christ than ours; yet with their witness they “turned the world upside down.” They were of one mind. Their witness was unanimous because their infilling with the Holy Spirit was unanimous. Their witness was unanimous because they “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42).

The Anglican commentator, W. H. Griffith Thomas, has said, “It is a fact perhaps a significant fact, that throughout the epistles of the New Testament, where naturally, we find full instruction for Christians, there is only one exhortation to do the work of evangelism (II Timothy 4:5); while appeals to carry out the duty of foreign missions are equally conspicuous by their absence. On the other hand, the Christian life, its provisions and possibilities, its secrets and methods, its duties and responsibilities, will be found emphasized everywhere. Is there any connection between the silence and the emphasis? May it not be a reminder that when the Christian life is what it should be, the duty of evangelization at home and abroad will be the natural and necessary outcome, as effect to cause, as stream to source?”

The New Testament clearly shows that Jesus expected every disciple to be an evangelist in the sense of being a witness; this expectation was certain of fulfillment moreover, because of the promised Holy Spirit who filled all the disciples waiting in the upper room and apparently all who were subsequently added to the fellowship. It is likewise abundantly clear in the New Testament that despite their weak and sinful humanity, those early Christians were often found exhorting and encouraging one another, confessing their faults one to another, praying for one another and bearing one another’s burdens, honoring and esteeming one another better than self. Whatever they did individually in their witness for Christ, they shared with others who prayed for them and studied the apostles’ doctrine with them. In short, fellowship was essential to their witness. Indeed, authentic Christian fellowship was the matrix of New Testament evangelism. Witnessing proceeded out of fellowship, forward and into fellowship. “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ” (I John 1:3)...

The world has nothing to offer that is comparable to authentic Christian fellowship, no social structure or unit or function which corresponds even remotely. Lodges, clubs, fraternities, secret societies, taverns, bars, and so on, are the best that secularism can provide, and surely they fall infinitely short of the satisfaction and fulfillment brought by

Christian fellowship. Exposed to this unique spiritual relationship, contemporary, sophisticated, pagan man finds a quality therein completely lacking in any other associations. In and of itself, fellowship in the New Testament sense is a testimony to the world, a demonstration of the efficacy of redemption. The unregenerate man finds it attractive, compelling, fulfilling. This explains, partially at least, Luke's observation that the early disciples "had favor with all the people" (Acts 2:47).

In the apostolic Church, the relationship between believers and God and between fellow believers was paramount. The light and warmth and love and forgiveness and acceptance that emanated from that unique community penetrated a jaded, bored, loveless, weary culture and awakened the spiritual hunger of both Jew and pagan. "Lo, how they love one another!" it was said of them; sinsick, fed-up men tried to understand the strange and inviting quality of life that marked the disciples. In such an appealing atmosphere, lost men were ready to hear those who could not "help but speak of the things which they had seen and heard."

Today in personal evangelism the tendency is to ignore the relationship within the Christian community and to be preoccupied instead with the individual Christian's relationship to those outside of the Church. As a consequence, one of the greatest stumbling blocks to the world outside the Church is the way Christians treat each other. It is not inconceivable that today's world might be inclined to wince with some justification as it views the Church, "lo, how they dislike one another!" The faithful work of zealous Christians in personal evangelism is often neutralized by the attitudes and actions within the Christian family. The corporate image of the Church often nullifies the faithful witness of individual members. And there is that peculiar phenomenon, the zealous Christian who in his desire to do personal work, walks a guarded, careful way among unbelievers, but who within the Christian community acts like the devil himself.

Jesus said, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). In his lesson on prayer (Matthew 6:6-15) Jesus underscored one petition in the model prayer, as if to cite it as essential to Christian conduct: "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." In regard to an offering as a part of worship (Matthew 5:23, 24) Jesus cautioned, "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." Paul's description of the delicate balance that God in his sovereignty has achieved in placing each member of the body (I Corinthians 12:18-26) suggests the gentlest, tenderest of relationships among Christians: "...the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it." Roland Allen describes the spontaneous expansion of the Church as something which "follows the irresistible attraction of the Christian church for men who see its ordered life, and are drawn to it by desire to discover the secret of a life which they instinctively desire to share" (*op. cit.*, p. 7).

All evangelism is born out of such a relationship, and personal evangelism in the true New Testament sense will be the inevitable and abundant fruit of such renewal in the Church. Outside of this context, methods of personal evangelism can be perilous indeed. Methods wrongly born may attract, indoctrinate, and regiment certain zealous persons in a way that produces self-conscious “spiritually elite” individuals preoccupied with “results,” who tend to think of themselves as superior to those not so inclined.

This kind of situation militates against the fellowship and hence defeats witness; moreover, it tends also to suggest to the rest of the Christian community the false view that apart from a special course in personal work and in mastering evangelistic methods, one is not qualified to bear witness to an outsider. We do not discredit methods properly taught and practiced (the Holy Spirit uses means); we insist, rather that they always be kept in the context of the total life of the Christian community and subordinate to the ministry of the Spirit of God within believers as individuals and as a body.

Evangelism in the finest New Testament tradition is the vocation of every believer; for this calling, the Holy Spirit of God will equip him through “the apostles’ doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers.” Any methodology which produces a kind of semi-professional class of evangelist within the Christian community, implying that personal evangelism is limited to those who have the time and/or inclination to take special courses and learn special methods, militates against total involvement, justifies those who default and discourages those unable to enroll for and master certain evangelistic techniques. In such a situation, the distinctive feature is not one’s relationship to Jesus Christ, to the Holy Spirit and to others in the Christian family, but rather an artificial “system” which, however effectively used by its proponents, tends to make all others, voluntarily or involuntarily, feel useless so far as evangelism is concerned.

The one completely safe and dependable manual on personal evangelism and witness is the New Testament; yet the fact remains that the more one studies the New Testament the less one can deduce from it a system of personal evangelistic methods. Jesus employed a different approach with each person. He reminded Nicodemus that he “must be born again;” so far as we know, Jesus never said these words to any other. He spoke quite differently to the Samaritan woman at the well. And with the rich young ruler or the questioning lawyer he again used entirely different techniques. His dealing with the man born blind was different, not only from the approach used with others in general, but even that used with other blind men. Jesus dealt with no two seekers alike. His ways with men were as diverse as those to whom he spoke and with whom he reasoned. One factor alone remained constant in Jesus’ contacts with men and that was his personal presence. This self-same fact of his presence, incidentally, is guaranteed every personal evangelist who labors in the fullness of the Holy Spirit (II Cor. 2:14,15).

Andrew’s approach was different from Peter’s and both men in turn were unlike Paul, this one who determined to be “all things to all men, that he might by all means save some.” Neither Peter nor Paul lays down systems or methods, except in the most general sense, whereby their disciples might propagate the Gospel. “The things that thou hast

heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also,” Paul had exhorted his young disciple Timothy, and that was the extent to which he passed on his methods to his disciples. They were to transmit a message to men who in turn would transmit it to still others; just how this message would be propagated was left to the personality and gifts of each messenger. No one, in fact, was so emphatic in insisting on the diversity of each Christian’s witness as was Paul. “For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. For...we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office...” (Romans 12:3-4). He besought every Christian to “walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called.” He wrote, “But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.” He portrayed “the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part...” (Ephesians 4:16).

Paul comprehended the marvelous diversity in the body and the interdependence of each part: “If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?” Then Paul asks with irresistible logic, “If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?...And if they were all one member, where were the body?” (I Corinthians 12:15-19. Diversity is of the essence in the unity of the Church, and to destroy this diversity is to destroy the unity! However noble their purpose, we must beware of institutionalized methods that indoctrinate and regiment and fashion every Christian into a common mold or a carbon copy.

Paul’s understanding of the mission of the Church is most clearly given in his letter to the Ephesians where he describes Christ’s giving of gifts to men: “...he give some, apostles;...and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-12). Each Christian is “equipped for the work of ministry” as he is empowered by the Holy Spirit and instructed in the apostles’ doctrine, in fellowship, in breaking of bread and in prayer with other disciples. He becomes able to testify to the reality and relevance of Jesus Christ on the basis of personal experience. He becomes able to communicate to others the facts concerning Jesus Christ upon which this personal relationship is based. Taught in the Scriptures, he has a defensible faith and is able “to give answer to him that asks, the reason of the hope that is within him.” He does this in his own distinctive way and with his own choice of words among those with whom he is associated wherever the Lord “sows” him in the world. “Spontaneous expansion begins with the individual effort of the individual Christian to assist his fellow, when common experience, common difficulties, common toils have first brought the two together. It is this equality and community of experience which makes the one deliver his message in terms which the other can understand, and makes the hearer approach the subject with sympathy and confidence—with sympathy because the common experience makes approach easy and natural, with

confidence, because the one is accustomed to understand what the other says and expects to understand him now” (Roland Allen, *op. cit.* p. 10).

Now empowered by the Holy Spirit, the Christian becomes a witness for Christ in everything he does, wherever he may be, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week...He recognizes he has been “apprehended by Christ” for a purpose and like Paul seeks to “apprehend” that purpose. All he does, even the trivial, mundane things of life, he does to the glory of God. He believes that he is where he is, not by the accident of circumstance, but by the sovereign placement of God. His witness begins where he is, in what he is doing, among those with whom he associates. Spontaneous expansion is “the expansion which follows the unexhorted and unorganized activity of individual members of the Church explaining the Gospel which they have found for themselves...” (Roland Allen, *op. cit.* p. 7).

The methods of evangelism are legion. They are as numerous and diverse as the vast number of persons to be reached plus those who are to reach them. The worldwide task of evangelism will be realized, not by organizing for evangelism as though it were a department of church life requiring increased emphasis and effort but by the renewal of the Church with a fresh infusion of the life of the Spirit.^{xiii}

We have quoted the essay at considerable length because we consider it a remarkably apt criticism of a movement which, since the 1950's has been producing score upon score of sleek “how to” manuals and carefully organized programs for congregational mobilization. It is a supreme critique of the methodology of modern evangelistic movements. We believe, however, that the essay deserves some criticism.

First, I question the appropriateness of saying that “the Christian Church continued to expand *by its won inherent grace.*” (Emphasis Halverson's) The statement may be altogether harmless but its larger context suggests that Halverson is in strong sympathy with the concept that the church creates the church. There is, of course, a good deal of truth in that concept but it needs to be balanced by, and subservient to, the truth that the Word creates the church. The Word is the means of grace by which the Spirit calls, gathers, and enlightens His church on earth. It is true that Peter writes, “Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the Word, they may be won over without talk by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. (3:1,2) This passage is an effective reminder that the Christian is not “all mouth.” It is a warning against verbal insistence and persistence, the verbal pressuring which embitters men more than it draws men to Christ. There is no question but that the evangelistic movement needs a greater sensitivity to this concern in witness. At the same time, the concept of unspoken witness can be overworked. Modernism carries with it, though not always, a tendency to think that the greatest grace we can show our neighbor is to live the Christian life in his presence, to let him experience the “Christ in us” as we order our lives by love. The modernist is not likely to see the proclaiming of God's historical acts in Christ Jesus as a crowning work of neighborly love. After all, the Christ event was only a paradigm experience and the same experience is now being communicated to the world through our own lives of faith and love. The declaring of a unique redemptive act in Christ Jesus is hardly crucial in this theology. But as critical as the good life of the church is, it is not the church's charismatic presence in society which saves; it is the Church's word of the crucified Christ which saves, and to reveal His dying love is the church's highest act of love.

Perhaps our own synod stands in as much danger from modernist influence on this point as from fundamentalist influence—but for different theological reasons. It may be that our church’s recent history has led us to think of the world round about us as peopled by Christians who know the Gospel but are maliciously perverting it and therefore our highest duty and calling is to avoid talking religion with them. Our labor to preserve the Gospel may have so absorbed our interest that we have failed to recognize the growing paganism that surrounds us. As a result the neighborhood may appear more a forest filled with sly wolves than a “field white unto the harvest.” The fear of casting our pearls before swine may be overcoming our joy in turning sinners from their error. The fear of making ourselves, unwittingly, guilty of false doctrine may be overruling our Spirit worked joy in confession. The fear of knowing less about the Gospel than others, though we claim to be possessors of the truth, may be embarrassing our people into an avoidance of any serious profession. The only remedy for such fears is teaching that flows from careful preparation, otherwise we find ourselves gloriously reliving our heroic struggles of the past without helping our people to understand and to have compassion for the worldliness and paganism of the present.

Even today, on Orthodoxy Sunday, when the 843 victory over Iconoclasm is celebrated, one hears the priest of the Orthodox Church solemnly intoning an anathema on all who violate the Seven General Councils and “who cast down images” in the church. Meanwhile a Jewish family in the neighborhood remains unevangelized and offended at Christianity because the one church it knows “worships idols,” as it seems. That criticism seems harsher than is fair but it was made by a Jewish Christian whose parents lived near the church and were never confronted by the Gospel. It is possible for the church to become the prisoner of one of its historical moments. But there is only one historical moment to which the church is rightly captive. That moment is the passion-resurrection of Jesus Christ when the angel invited Jesus’ friends to “come and see” and to “go and tell.” Our people need not be plagued with harangues on personal evangelism, but we should be aware that we need to give them a perspective on their neighborhood and on Christ’s mission which will lead them to see their neighborhood as a harvest field. They must know first, that none of their labors in the Lord are vain and unappreciated, and secondly, that there is no harvest for the Lord without sharing the Good News of Christ.

Another aspect of Halverson’s essay which merits critical comment is his idealization of the early church and concomitant canonization of its preinstitutional forms. If there was no “necessity for organizing special evangelistic efforts” in the early church, neither was there need for organizing a drive to acquaint people with the merits of the Christian day school; nor was there need for organizing a program of liturgical review and revitalization. If there was no evangelism manual in the early church, neither was there a 247 page catechism to help heads of households teach their children; nor was there a pastor’s Pocket Agenda or a committee to revise the Agenda.

The process of institutionalization began, however, as soon as the church grew in numbers and age. With it came that fragmentation or compartmentalization of the Church’s mission which Halverson too much bewails. The apostles became too busy to take care of the church’s total program of ministry so the congregation appointed additional helpers. The labors were divided. Did the apostles, drawing on their own experience, provide these new laborers with guidelines on how to begin and conduct their special ministry? Did this appointment of individuals “suggest to the rest of the Christian community the false view” that it was incompetent for ministry? Did this selection of a few imply that the “waiting on tables” ministry was “limited to those who have the time and/or inclination?” Did it “militate against total

involvement” of the congregation? We prefer to think there is a way to pinpoint responsibility for a structured program of ministry or evangelism without debilitating the rest of the congregation. We may have a sentimental longing for the “natural evangelism” of the very early church; but when the church has become a landholder, a legal corporation, a structured institution, it seems only “natural” that the various ministries should partake of that structure in some measure. It seems only natural that the congregation should seek our Spirit led men and say to them, “The structured ministry of the Word which we have undertaken is overburdened and needs your assistance. Here is a manual that describes the ministry of evangelism. It will help you to fulfill your ministry in an orderly way. In addition, our pastor will equip you for your ministry by guiding you into the Word.” So long as the Lord gives us an orderly and peaceful life, so long as He gathers His church in substantial numbers, just so long, I expect, the church will continue to divide and structure its ministries. Evangelism, too, will proceed well with the benefit of structure. Only let the congregation be carefully taught that the whole of our life is God-pleasing worship whether it be in a barn or in an office or in a structured ministry. Let the congregation be taught that the structured ministries of the church make up only a very small portion of the total ministry by which God is glorified in His people. Let the people be taught that the New Testament church does not wait for men to come to it; it goes to men. Philip went to Ethiopia, Paul went to Corinth, the earliest believers went to the temple where Jesus’ enemies abounded. None of them went by invitation or they would never have gone; the world does not often invite the church’s ministry. When the people have been taught the respective roles of structured and unstructured ministry, and especially when they have been taught the Gospel in its killing and creating power, in its variety and richness, then it would seem that our congregations should be able to conduct a structured, as well as an unstructured, ministry. Evangelism manuals and programs can be instruments for evil among an unspiritual people or in the hands of a pastor insensitive to the Gospel, but they can be instruments of service among humble servants of Christ. Care need only be taken that structure serves, and does not replace, the spirit of the Gospel.

Almost everything else that Halverson says about contemporary evangelism is worthy of careful note. And his depreciation of methodology and legalistic exhortation is worthy of double honor. If in two areas he has over-reacted to evangelistic abuses, he is easily forgiven. His over-correction is probably less dangerous than the original error.

Some evangelicals offer more specific, and brief, criticism of current methodology than Halverson. C. Stacey Woods, for instance, writes:

A modern phenomenon in evangelism is the attempt to induce decisions or professions of faith in Christ by employing the techniques of American salesmanship and psychology to bring about such commitment. Such practices are in disobedience to the teaching of I Corinthians, chapters 1 and 2. Special methods which are said to ensure results, formulas and the infilling of the Holy Spirit, short steps to becoming a Christian, easily can falsely simplify the divine message and attempt to confine the Holy Spirit to your structures. The Gospel must always be proclaimed with a view to the salvation of men, but also with a view to the glory of God—not only the salvation of men, but in the way the message is proclaimed, so that faith never rests in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.^{xiv}

John W. Alexander adds:

In my opinion, it is possible to get “decisions” without getting people deeply enough into the Word. Too many of these “decisions” can be less than genuine regenerations.^{xv}

My only caution about the above comments is that we should not deduce from them that there can be no teaching of evangelism. It would seem to be a natural part of effective Bible teaching to review how Jesus and the apostles, in their concern for men, sought to apply the law to the Gospel, and how they knew when to be courteous and when to be curt.

As for the other warning enunciated by both Woods and Alexander, it is altogether in place. We do not want to deprive men of the time to “count the cost” of discipleship. How genuine is the profession or commitment that has failed to count the cost? A few minutes of soul searching may not suffice.

The longer I walk this world with God, the more I realize how complex the problem of world evangelism really is. I see men struggling to integrate their faith with their cultural heritage, their loyalties, their nationalistic attitudes, and their responsibilities to self and family and community—and I see how infinitely deep and involved this problem is.^{xvi} In the last few years my mail has been sprinkled with strongly eschatologically oriented evangelistic materials. Such materials generally come from the fringe of the evangelistic movement and find censure within the movement itself.

Two kinds of preaching of eschatological truth must be avoided: (1) rehearsing merely the fear aspect in judgement, unloading only the emotional cargo of the subject without giving instruction in repentance and faith in the Gospel; (2) reduction of eschatology to an “exact science” alleging a detailed knowledge of future events and personalities in such a way as to pander to the curious rather than to present them with Christ as Lord and Savior.^{xvii}

Some of the “how to” manuals strongly urge evangelists to speak about “what Jesus means for me.” This may be a reaction against parrot talk which begins, “Well, our church teaches... And our pastor always says...” It may also be an effort to divorce the speaker from a cold recitation of memorized facts. Whatever the reason behind the advice, it can lead to unfortunate results. If it leads the evangelist to speak about highly personal experiences with Christ, he may speak with animation, but he misses the whole point of evangelism which is to tell what the Father did in Christ for every man. If we stress what we feel or what has happened to us, we are not necessarily adding interest to the Christian evangel. The evangelists of the Bible remained almost hidden behind their message, and they were not ineffective. Their example seems to be worthy of imitation.

Evangelists do not agree on how to deal with the man who has been evangelized and has made his commitment. Some feel that new converts should go through a probationary period before being received into the church. Others ask, “Who are we to sit in judgement upon another person’s sincerity, motivation, and commitment?” The most telling criticism of current post-evangelistic practice comes from the pen of C. Stanley Wood.

If care goes into the preparation of an evangelistic campaign, surely equal—and even more—care should be given to ensure that those professing Christ are received by Bible-believing churches, and not by apostate congregations that falsely bear the name of Christ. These New Testament churches must instruct babes in Christ more fully. Therein lies the failure of many evangelistic campaigns and of many churches involved in the task of evangelism. The root of this problem is doctrinal, not situational. There are those whose evangelistic activity betrays an essential pelagianism, and whose Augustinianism commences once a decision has been made. Those thus professing Christ are said to be eternally secure. Salvation is regarded as a fire-escape from hell to heaven, rather than the goal of presenting every man perfect in Christ Jesus.^{xviii}

Perhaps we have ignored too much an amorphous evangelistic movement that is very different from the others and must suffer different criticisms. If we have ignored the Jesus Revolution, it is not because it is unimportant, but because it is so different from the mainstream of practice. We will only mention that

For the most part the movement does not depend upon charismatic personalities, although some of these are involved, nor upon fiery oratory. It is spread primarily by one young Christian talking to another young person.^{xix}

The movement thus testifies to the fact that unsophisticated people giving witness of their “gospel” can spread their faith from one end of the continent to the other without high powered, high pressured organization. But, of course, the movement did receive terrific impulse from the mass media and especially from the Superstar record.

Having called attention to many problems within the evangelistic movement, let me conclude with a more positive judgement and one that may be particularly relevant to us who were young and impressionable at the time we were engaged in controversy with the Missouri Synod. At the time we kept hearing—and, in the context, properly—that if we are not united in the doctrine of the Word, there is no point in our talking to one another; we have no common basis for discussion. If we transferred that principle from its rightful realm to our work in evangelism, we were likely to feel uncomfortable when talking to men who demonstrated no respect for the Scriptures. We may have even felt it useless to speak to them. Here the manuals serve us well in reminding us that we have a great many things to say to people who reject scripture as a divine authority. We can still tell them about our Father Who is a far more wonderful God than any the philosophers have created by their very best thoughts. We can still tell them about the Son Who gave His life for sinners. And we can tell them about His Comforter. We can learn from the manuals that, in approaching the lost, there is room for much calm and unangry, humble and respectful disputation that seeks to clarify man’s perilous predicament and God’s radical rescue. There is no God so suitable to men’s hearts for He made them to be knit with His. There is no other God whose nature so well helps us to understand the events of history for He is its Lord. With so great a God there is no reason for us to be defensive or apologetic in speaking of Him to the lost. With so great a God there is no reason for us to manipulate men by high-powered salesmanship. And since we ourselves would be lost except for God’s grace, there is no reason for us to be overbearing and disdainful as we share the Good News. Our patient God deserves patient witnesses.

The title of our paper implied that its content would contain criticism. I hope that it has not been loveless and judgmental. Let us be careful of criticism. It is easy for us to criticize people who are working hard to serve. Their efforts lay them open to criticism. We are too prone to think, “I like my way of doing nothing better than I like your way of doing something.” On the other hand, men who are proud of their evangelistic efforts can too easily criticize those who *seem* to be doing less—and who can prove it? Pride criticizes easily; humility “speaks the truth in love.” And while we want to avoid careless criticisms we do not want to omit to speak to one another the truth in love. In the last years the neighborhood has changed the family patterns have changed. Concepts of ministry have also changed or are changing. If we are to minister to changed neighborhoods and to changed families by a changing ministry, we must take counsel with one another. We must prevent each other from spinning our wheels uselessly. It will not do to stand aside and criticize each other thoughtlessly. We must explore the Word together and we must take counsel together that our ministry may be joyous, obedient, and fruitful in proportion to God’s blessing.

Concluding Comments

Within the evangelistic movement there are practices and doctrines which are divisive, sectarian, for they compromise the Gospel. To imitate the movement indiscriminately will to become evangelistic at the expense of truly ecumenical, catholic, and Lutheran doctrine whose genius it is to let the Gospel of repentance create, transform, and energize the church. It is also Lutheran not to let disagreement over outward customs and forms divert the church from its mission and dissipate itself in heatedly arguing contending tradition. There is no doubt that among us there are divergent attitudes regarding the practice of evangelism; and there is danger that a paper which has a critical thrust may serve more to polarize our opinions and aggravate our suspicions than to lead us into careful study, humble self-appraisal, patient discussion, mutual understanding, and a joyful partnership in a mission which recognizes diversity of gifts. Therefore, to those who are enthusiastic about “new” trends in the ministry of evangelism I have been trying to say, “Be careful that your eager, well-meant ministry does not undermine the Gospel by subtly appealing to the religious man, the Pharisee, rather than the repentant man. Be careful not to judge or set yourselves above others who do not share your concept of evangelistic ministry.” To those who are set against “new” ideas of ministry I am trying to say, “To reject our brothers’ efforts to give us counsel in our ministry may be an act neither of wisdom nor love. The tradition of ministry to which we are attached needs to be tested against the Word no less than other traditions. And we need to be as open to changing patterns of ministry as the church of the Acts of the Apostles.”

The Evangel is Good News not regimen. There is room, then, for a great deal of diversity in evangelistic practice. What we want to avoid is converting our own chosen way of practicing it into a regimen to which others must adhere lest they be regarded as unenlightened or un-Lutheran. If there is an important regimen to which the Gospel commits us, it is to Christ-like self-emptying; and even that is not a regimen which we submit to so much as it is one that is created in us. The empty, the hungry, the poor, the unproud, will find a way to give and receive counsel and encouragement for they will “continue in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.” And from their weakness, confessed and shared, the Spirit will cause His mission to proceed and to prosper.

Select Annotated Bibliography

The number of manuals is legion. Below are listed only those which I have recently become familiar with or those which seem to me more substantial or more theologically significant. Familiar old titles from NWPB or CPH are generally omitted.

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ⁱ Henry, 191.

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- ii Henry, 5.
 - iii Henry, 217.
 - iv Henry, 217.
 - v Henry, 164.
 - vi Henry, 105.
 - vii Henry, 106.
 - viii Henry, 104.
 - ix Henry, 66.
 - x Henry, 49.
 - xi Henry, 192.
 - xii Henry, 185.
 - xiii Henry, 343-353.
 - xiv Henry, 205.
 - xv Henry, 360.
 - xvi Henry, 21.
 - xvii Henry, 66.
 - xviii Henry, 204.
 - xix Jesus Revolution, 20.