

Proselytizing

By Wayne L. Fischer

[Delivered to the South Central Pastor-Delegate Conference Birmingham, Alabama, October 1-3, 1979]

Week after week and month after month, we preach our sermons to our people. Surely, just about as regularly, we preach about evangelism - mission work. Yet the time comes when we gear up for a special mission emphasis service. We ask the Holy Spirit to fill us with zeal and drive to prepare our services. Then we pray that He would use our work as a tool to bring forth laborers into the field. Then pastor and congregation alike robustly sing "Let none hear you idly saying, 'There is nothing I can do,' While the souls of men are dying and the Master calls for you. Take the task He gives you gladly, Let His work your pleasure be! Answer quickly when He calleth, 'Here am I, send me, send me!'"

After the service we feel filled with desire to serve the Lord and we want to share Jesus with everyone. One particularly zealous member comes up and says, "Pastor, God has blessed us and I want others to have the same blessings of God's Word and Sacrament in their truth and purity. I am going to try to get my Baptist friends to come to our church were they can be fed in the right way." Now what do you say? "No, you cannot do that." "That isn't what I said, was it?" Sanctification is a working of the almighty God through which He would direct the desires of His saintly children, and part of such divine sanctification does not include the unsanctified act of proselytizing another's sheep.

Surely none of these responses are all that good. But they do point out the reason for this paper. Zeal for the work of the Lord is commendable, and yet that zeal needs to be properly directed, including the work of evangelism. Scripture boldly tells us, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience." (1 Peter 3:15,16) Always is a strong word, but taken out of the context of this passage it can be over emphasized, and it can in fact lead to sinning. Yet, just how intent God is that His message is proclaimed can be seen from Ezekiel 3:16-21 "At the end of seven days the Word of the Lord came to me: 'Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel: so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin: but you will have saved yourself.

"Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, and I put a stumbling block before him, he will die. Since you did not warn him, he will die for his sin. The righteous things he did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the righteous man not to sin and he does not sin, he will surely live because he took warning, and you will have saved yourself." As God's messengers we are not requested to tell God's message if we feel like it or if we cannot think of something better. God always has the best ideas and His spokesman are His ambassadors. Ambassadors are to speak whatever message they are given and in the manner in which they have been told. Just as an ambassador for the President of the United States gets in trouble when he oversteps or sidesteps his responsibilities, so God says He will hold His ambassadors accountable for every soul for whom they are responsible. Each ambassador is under solemn obligation to proclaim God's message at every opportunity God gives. A strong desire to share the Word of God in a God-pleasing way is the heart of true evangelism.

The term evangelism can have different meanings, In the wider sense it means to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We evangelize in this way every Sunday morning and at every Bible Class and every time we share our faith with one another. But evangelism can also have a meaning in a narrower sense. In the narrow sense to evangelize means to reach and teach the unchurched through and with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the fulfilling of Jesus' great commission to "go and make disciples of all nations." We are to share God's

Word as He has directed us. To share His Word in a manner not pleasing to God is not God-pleasing. We have come to call one wrong way of sharing, *proselyting* or *proselytizing*. A more complete definition will be given later.

At this point let me point out that this negative idea of a proselyte is some thing new. In the Old Testament anyone converted to the true Jewish faith was called a proselyte. When some individual converted from heathenism to the true faith, that was cause for rejoicing. The Greek word for a convert to the Jewish faith is “prosh/lutov”. When the Septuagint was translated, prosh/lutov was used 77 times for the Hebrew רְגֻזִים .¹ In fourteen other situations a different Greek word was used for רְגֻזִים . The idea was that a proselyte was a foreigner who had come into the Jewish family.

In the New Testament, prosh/lutov is used only four times: Matthew 23:15 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.” Acts 2:11 “(both Jews and converts to Judaism); Creatans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” Acts 6:5 “This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.” and Acts 13:43 “When the congregation was dismissed many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.” In each of these, the Word is used to speak to one who was a convert to the Jewish faith. In all the Acts passages, the proselytes are spoken of very highly. In the Matthew passage, Jesus condemns the Pharisees for their efforts to make proselytes. Even there, the proselyte is not condemned, but the fact that the Pharisees were only-interested in converting people to their perverted ideas, and as such they would be no better off than if they had left them in gross heathenism. These are all of the times that this Word is used in the New Testament. Never is the verb used. So when we talk of proselyting we cannot refer to chapter and verse and say that in such a passage God defines and passes judgment on the act of proselyting. Yet the Scripture is not silent on this idea. We must listen to what God has to say and then in faith follow His Word, just as we believe in the Trinity, even though that particular word is not used in the Scriptures.

Let us try to arrive at a working definition for proselyting, or proselytizing. Most dictionaries will give a definition which means to convert someone from one particular persuasion to another. In the field of religion, it would mean to convert someone from one religious belief to another.

But this term has acquired quite a particular meaning in addition to the above mentioned ones. John H.C. Fritz has defined it as such: “visiting members of a Christian congregation of another denomination with the intention of persuading them to leave that congregation and denomination.”¹ Professor Carl Lawrenz, in his well-known paper spoke of the narrow definition of proselytizing and wrote,

This use restricts the term “proselytizing” to the activity of converting or attempting to convert someone from a heterodox Christian faith to orthodox Christian faith. Yes, the restriction goes even further. This use of the term “proselytizing” is meant to pertain to such activity only insofar as it is reprehensible and not a proper way of carrying out the great commission entrusted to all believers, individually and collectively to preach the gospel to every creature, to make disciples of all nations and to teach them to observe all things which the Lord has commanded.²

I believe that this is a workable definition and the one upon which this paper will proceed. One point of clarification is that when the term “faith” is used in this definition as in “heterodox Christian faith” or “orthodox Christian faith” the term means the statement of belief of such a body.

Whether or not we ought to seek to get a person under our spiritual care, then, has to do with that person’s spiritual connections. At this time a couple of passages need to be recalled which will help direct our

¹ Fritz, John H. C. *Pastoral Theology*, Concordia, 1945. pp. 64-65.

² Lawrenz, C. “A Definitive Study of Proselytizing.” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 73, No. 1, p. 26.

thoughts. In the tenth chapter of his letter to the Romans Paul wrote, “The righteousness that is by faith says ... ‘The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,’ that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you are saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame,’ for there is no difference between Jew and Gentile - the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” The words which Paul quotes are from Joel 2:32 reaffirming that anyone who believes in Jesus Christ is saved. Isaiah also wrote about the infallible mark of a group which has real believers. In chapter 55 he wrote: “As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

In these passages the Lord clearly tells us that wherever the Gospel is preached, wherever the sacraments are rightly used, there are believers. Be their faith ever so weak, so mixed up, if there is a spark of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior, they are saved. There may be wolves in the midst of some congregations or church bodies, but that does not negate the power of the Word of the Lord. If the Gospel message of Jesus Christ is presented, even in spite of the corrupt clergy, there we must confess that there are believers, that that group is a Christian group, and as such those people are members of a Christian congregation, so hands off! And hands off means not interfering with the work of their leader.

Jesus’ own disciples questioned this very point.. John was listening as Jesus was explaining the humility which marks someone who is great in God’s kingdom. John remembered an incident while he had been out making evangelism calls. “Master,” said John, “we saw a man driving out demons in Your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us.” (Luke 9:49) Had John done right or wrong? After all, the man was suspect because he wasn’t affiliated with the disciples. We cannot be sure what John was suggesting. It is possible that the man did not even really believe in Jesus but was one such as Jesus spoke about when He said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (Matthew 7:21-23) Or perhaps John meant that the man was a believer who was not clear or straight on all points of doctrine. Whatever the reason, the man was not one who had joined the disciples. Jesus did have an answer for John. “‘Do not stop him’, Jesus said, ‘for whoever is not against you is for you.’” (Luke 9:50) Whatever the problem was, still God’s kingdom was being served by this man, even if he were heterodox. Trying to stop him, to interfere with his work, Was wrong.

I am just as worried about those people in heterodox churches as you or any other Christian. I have made the statement that I only hope that the Lord will take those true believers out of these heterodox churches to Himself in heaven before the false doctrine of that church poisons their soul. I know that God has graciously blessed us by permitting us to have the Word and Sacraments in their truth and purity. I know that everyone would benefit from a pure connection with God’s Word. And surely God knows this fact today just as He has known it from eternity. Yet think for a while on God’s activities. Throughout the Old Testament times God limited His sphere of activity even though many, many people died eternally without faith in the Savior. With relatively few exceptions, God centered His proclamation of His Word on His people.

We can also take a look at our Lord Jesus. He is the Savior of the world. If anyone knew how much all people need a Savior, it was Jesus. Yet what about His activity? He said, “I am only sent to the lost sheep of Israel.” Jesus said that His activity was also limited by the extent of the mission on which He was sent. Jesus absolutely knew the lost condition of all mankind and He is the Savior of all mankind, yet He said that He personally would evangelize only where He was sent. I am not saying that God wants anyone to be subjected to false doctrine. I am not saying that we as true believers ought not to be concerned about the eternal welfare of

members of heterodox churches. But we are still servants of our Lord and His will is to be followed, even if I don't understand.

There are many things which God permits which I don't understand. Why would God permit a government like communism? Why would God permit a ruler like Idi Amin? Why would God permit a bumbling sinner like me to handle His precious Word? I just don't understand. But in His divine wisdom He has permitted all of these things, just as in His divine wisdom He permits heterodox churches with their false prophet shepherds to exist for the benefit of the salvation of His children.

Oh, yes, those shepherds who are really wolves are also permitted by the Lord. Their calls are just as valid as the ones which you and I have received. Fritz wrote these words (pp42-43):

Do the modest circumstances of some Christian congregations or the great corruption which is found in others invalidate their call? No; because the call is given its validity by the fact that the Lord has given the right to Christians to extend a call no matter how crude they are or may appear to be, and notwithstanding the fact that among them also hypocrites may be found who join them in extending a call. Says the Seventh Article of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession: "In order that we may not despair, but may know that the Church will nevertheless remain (until the end of the world), likewise that we may know that, however great the multitude of the wicked is, yet the Church (which is Christ's bride) exists, and that Christ affords those gifts which He has promised to the Church, to forgive sins, to hear prayer, to give the Holy Ghost, this article in the Creed presents us these consolations." Triglot, p. 229. Says Luther, "God will not be bound to numbers, greatness, high standing, power, or whatever may be personal with men, but will be only with those who live and keep His Word, though they may be nothing more than mere stable boys," *Wider das Papstum zu Rom, vom Teufel gestiftet*, 1545. If to make the call valid, the extending of a call would have to be free from everything that is sinful, we should, says Spencer have to suffer *infinite conscientiae laquei* (infinite pangs of conscience); for who could at all times determine just what the procedure of calling has been in every case and whether, on the part of those calling or on the part of him who received the call, not much that is merely human has been permitted to enter in, or whether or not, on the part of both, the divine Law has in more than one respect been transgressed? . . . Speaking of the *vocatio externa* (for only such comes into consideration; the *interna* comes into consideration only as far as the conscience of the person called is concerned), it is sufficient *ad ratum ministerii* that a call be extended by those to whom God has given such power. If the *vocantes* are such as really have the *ius vocandi*, their call is valid.

Also a call extended by a heterodox church is valid, because the people extending the call are doing so in so far as they are Christians and not in so far as they are members of a heterodox church.³

In Luther's lectures on Galatians he said:

It is not lawful for me to forsake my assigned station as a preacher or to go to another city where I have no call, and to preach there ... I have no right to do this even if I hear that false doctrine is being taught and that souls are being seduced and condemned which I could rescue from error and condemnation by my sound doctrine. But I should commit the matter to God, who in His time will find the opportunity to call ministers lawfully and to give the word. For He is the Lord of the harvest who will send laborers into His harvest; our task is to pray. ("Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." Matthew 9:38)⁴

³ Fritz, pp. 42-43

⁴ Lawrenz, Carl, p. 35

The question has been raised as to whether or not the doctrine of the call ought to be part of the considerations on a paper on proselytizing. Jesus certainly taught Biblically. He based His activity of gaining souls on His “call” to the lost sheep of Israel. In Ezekiel, Chapter 3, we heard of God’s insistence of having His message proclaimed by His ambassadors. Permit me to repeat verses 16 and 17, the first verses of that section: “At the end of seven days the Word of the Lord came to me: ‘Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel, so hear the word I speak and give them warning for me.’” This entire selection comes from the context of Ezekiel’s call as a prophet—a “watchman for the house of Israel” to “give warning to them.”

But we live in the New Testament times, and we have Jesus’ great commission to “go and make disciples of all nations.” Precisely! We are to “go and make,” not exchange and purify, as we fulfill our calling to preach the Gospel on our evangelism calls.

But did Jesus really follow this practice? Twice we read in the Bible that Jesus described some people as “sheep without a shepherd.” (Matthew 9:36, Mark 6:34). Did not those people have a shepherd? We cannot say absolutely. Perhaps they were unchurched. Perhaps they were churched and had shepherds who did not proclaim the Word of God. Such today would be members of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Buddhists, Moslems, etc... Or perhaps the people had shepherds who told some truth and some false teachings. Such today would be members of churches as Catholic, Baptist, Buddhists, Moslems, liberal Lutherans, etc. Whatever the case was, in both cases the people came after Jesus and asked Him to teach them. In the Mark account they even ran around the lake to get to Him when Jesus had specifically set sail to get away from the crowds. The people came to Him and asked Him, called Him if you will, to teach them. Jesus was then simply stating the fact the people either had had no believing shepherd or had renounced their shepherd and sought out another who would faithfully teach them. Those people were part of Jesus’ call to the “lost sheep of Israel.”

These words can be disheartening if we take them to mean that there is nothing we can do in an attempt to bring the Word in its truth and purity to the members of heterodox churches. But such is not the message. There is much which can be done. The work which is being done by our radio research team will give us just some of the ways in which the Word can be spread to all people. The mass media provides many opportunities which we can use to share the message of Jesus Christ, without being meddlers. For we read in 1 Peter 4:15: “if you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.” This is a general passage but it surely applies to the area of evangelism also. We would not think of trying to get members from a sister congregation because we think that we are more gifted than our brother pastor. This would be arrogant sheep stealing. So also we are not to try to get members from another congregation, even a heterodox one, by meddling in the affairs of a called worker. When shepherds are called to flocks, they are told, “Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit had made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God.” (Acts 20:28) Our flocks are our own business. God has made you responsible for your flocks. God has made me responsible for my flock. Our call is to place hedges around our flocks. For anyone to ignore this is to become guilty of meddling in another’s business. This passage from Peter is just one passage. However, if we truly believe that the Bible is God’s inerrant, inspired Word, then one passage is all we need to say and believe, “Thus says the Lord.”

So how does this affect our evangelism work? How does the Scriptural statement against proselytizing control what we do on our canvass/witness calls? I do not think that there is any pat answer which will cover all cases. We are dealing with two doctrines of Scripture: to preach the Gospel and the doctrine of the call. If we honestly hold both doctrines and then proceed with love for our Lord, we simply ask God to bless as well as to direct our labors, As we go from door to door we will need to remember that God has room in heaven for others than replicas of Martin Luther. We will need to remember that we cannot here recognize the *Una Sancta*, nor can we on a canvass/ witness call determine if each person is a member of the *Una Sancta*. We also need to take note of the full confession. Not only ought we to listen to what they say as we have dropped in on them without warning, but let us remember that their church membership is also part of their confession. If their church membership is not confessional then ought we commune anyone who comes to a service and says “I agree with

what I heard today?” Such a practice, we would certainly condemn. So let us be consistent. Listen to their statement of faith and proceed in the fear and love of the Lord.

Motives are an important part of an evaluation of any method you or I may use. If we ask a person whether he belongs to a Christian church and he says that he is a member and attending a Christian congregation, then we have no right to try to get involved in his spiritual care. We have the great privilege to express the reason for the hope we have., We pray that we never deny our Savior. Could we perhaps faithfully spread the Gospel in this manner: After finding out that someone is a member of a Christian group, to say: “Thank you for your time. We are surveying this area to find those who do not know Jesus Christ as their Savior so that we might share with them the truths of the Bible which tells us that all are sinners, but that Jesus has died for the sins of all people and all who are brought to faith in Jesus as their Savior will spend eternity in heaven with our loving God.”

But again, why would you say something like this? If it is simply to let the people know what you are doing, and to share your faith with them, then go and share. If your motive is to try to get them to open the door so that you can do pastoral work then you are a meddler, no matter how noble your concerns may sound.

Many are the people who have mixed-up shepherds. Many are the people who are getting a watered-down Gospel, or a poisoned Gospel. Let us pray for them and their shepherds, and stand ready to teach them whenever they come to us as the crowds came to Jesus.

Many are the people who are without the Gospel and the message of the forgiveness of their sins in the blood of Jesus Christ the Lord. Let us make haste to reach these people who are truly our responsibility. Such people have no Word of Life. Such people have no Christian guidance. If we are about the work of reaching those people who are truly our mission field, we will not have time to be proselytizing.

Bibliography

Concordia Theological Monthly, (V.4, no.10, Oct. 1933), “Proselytizing, a New Problem,” Theo. Graebner, pp 755-759.

The Holy Bible, NIV.

Pastoral Theology, John H. C, Fritz, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO. 1945.

Theological Dictionary of the New Testament) V 6, G, Kittel & G. Friedrich, Eds., Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI 1971.

Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, (V. 73, no.1, Jan. 1976), “A Definitive Study of Proselytizing,” Carl Lawrenz.