

Strengthening Our Contacts With The Unchurched

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The topic you have assigned for this presentation proceeds out of the presupposition that our contacts with the unchurched are not what they ought to be or what they could be if we work at the problem. I agree with that. Our contacts do need strengthening. In fact, I have some rather strong feelings about this matter, and that is why I said yes to the invitation from your secretary even though my assignments calendar told me I should respectfully decline.

Perhaps a brief reminder of what happened to God's people in Old Testament times can serve as a good beginning point and at the same time provide us with an object lesson and a point of departure. Scripture designates the Old Testament church as the people of Zion. Gesenius says that Zion originally meant "a sunny mountain". In Aramaic it came to mean a citadel, a fortress built atop a sunny mountain. Not only is a citadel on a mountain top a place of safety for the people, but it is also a marker that points the way. God intended that His people and their temple on Zion should point the way to Him for all people. What He originally intended for them, and what they subsequently became are two altogether different things. They became isolationists who spent all their time inspecting their own navels supposedly preserving the purity of their unique monotheism for their posterity. They preserved the hulls and lost the kernel.

Something like that could happen to us too. In fact the need for a paper such as this one suggests that perhaps in part it has. We need to be aware of the double danger of insulation and isolation. We can get so busy and so intent on insulating our orthodoxy from attacks against it that we end up isolating ourselves from the world with which we are to share it. Or as President I. G. Frey once put it in a *Northwestern Lutheran* editorial, we may give the impression that we have degenerated into a historical debating society for the preservation of the Lutheran Confessions.

But we need to be equally aware of an equal and opposite danger, that of becoming so overly concerned about our image as a church that we forget what the church is according to Scripture. We develop a "public relations" consciousness and end up attempting to develop "the fine art of rubbing elbows with people without hitting their crazy bone," - as someone has defined public relations. We want to be in the public eye without being a cinder that causes the eye to smart, or even to fill with tears of shame and repentance. Doctrinal indifference is the chief characteristic of such a penchant.

So what we need is help to steer the ship of the church on a right course between the Scylla of orthodoxist isolation and the Charybdis of doctrinal indifference. My counsel will be colored by the fact that in my subjective opinion we have historically as a church body steered the ship closer to the shoals of Scylla than to the charms of Charybdis. I am taking your agreement with that observation for granted.

Now a word about the way we propose to handle the theme. The "our" in the theme was not defined for me. Does it refer to you, the pastors of mission congregations? Or does it refer to the congregations you serve? Or does it refer to the individual members of your congregations? My presentation will say yes to all three questions. So then, on to the subject:

STRENGTHENING OUR CONTACTS WITH THE UNCHURCHED

I. As a corporate congregation

II, As individual Christians

III. As pastors in positions of leadership and influence.

Pro-Logos

Our treatment of these three divisions will be preceded by and rest upon a summation of what Scripture says to us about our contacts with the unchurched. That the church is to establish contacts with the unchurched is of course exactly what the great commission is all about.

We will pass over the Old Testament simply noting in passing that for the reason we have already suggested, it is more instructive in how not to than in how to contact the unchurched. Individual prophets, of course, can teach us important lessons. From Jonah we can learn something about God's displeasure when we fail to fulfil His expectations. From other prophets, Elijah and Jeremiah just to mention two, we can learn the importance of telling unbelievers what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear, and doing it forthrightly without fear of consequences.

The New Testament lays down the broad principle that as Christians we are to let our light shine so that others may see our good works, and glorify our Father in heaven. We will have a considerable number of things to say by way of applying that broad principle as we proceed. St. Paul has something similar in mind when he reminds the Corinthian Christians, "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read *by everybody*. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (I Cor 3: 2 -3). Your life, together with the lives of your people, is an open letter, open for anyone and everyone in your community to read. God wants the letter to convey good news. But the looks on our faces and the attitudes we display toward others, especially outsiders, sometimes belie the fact that we are in the business of dispensing good news to the community on God's behalf. As letters, our lives frequently fail to communicate what God wants them to say.

Effectiveness in our contacts with the unchurched requires that we imitate the strategy and the tact Jesus employed with the woman at the well in Samaria. He demonstrated a genuine personal interest in her. He didn't jump on her because she was morally reprobate or turn up a sanctimonious nose at her. He took the initiative. He reached out. He aroused her curiosity. He eliminated the barriers she thought separated them. And He paved the way for a communication with her which brought her into His Father's family. The Scriptures provide no better pattern to follow than this one for strengthening our contacts with the unchurched.

Our experiences with the unchurched frequently remind us of the truth of our Lord's observation, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves" (Mt 10:16). His proverbial counsel for such situations is that we are to be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." Responses fitly spoken which compel opponents to stop and think accomplish more than dogmatic assertions offered in take-it-or-leave-it fashion. Our Lord's counsel is reminiscent of Paul's statement about his determination to be "all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (I Cor 10: 22). The practical implications of those words with regard to an effective program for strengthening our contacts with the unchurched are almost inexhaustible. We could profitably spend our entire time offering an exegesis of those words and the context in which they occur, and then applying them to the subject at hand.

One other word of Scripture demands our attention, partly because it is the *key* to strengthening our contacts, and partly because it leads us directly into a consideration of strengthening contacts as a corporate congregation. In Paul's familiar chapter on unity in Ephesians 4, the apostle presents God's threefold call to His church. It is first of all a call to unity which evidences self denial (v. 2), secondly it is a call to a zealous pursuit of unity (v. 3),

and thirdly it is a call to make full use of the various gifts God gives in Christ for a fuller realization of this unity. The purpose behind the call, according to Paul, is that the church might operate as the mature and perfectly functioning body of Christ, the church's Head (vv. 4-16). Negatively speaking this necessitates that "we will be no longer infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching" (v. 14). Positively speaking it necessitates that "we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ" (v. 15). The words I omitted between the two verses I just quoted provide the key for our joint ministry as corporate congregation: "Speaking the truth in love," Paul says, "we will grow." I cannot think of any single thing more essential to the strengthening of our contacts with the unchurched than becoming more adept with the Spirit's help at speaking the truth in love.

I. As a Corporate Congregation

A. With that brief summation of Scriptural principles and practices, let us proceed to a consideration of the role of the corporate congregation in strengthening contacts with the unchurched. St. Paul concludes his discourse on unity in the body of Christ with his reference to Christ as the Head of the body, and then adds, "From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work ..." (Eph 4:16). That is an excellent beginning point for a consideration of congregational public relations. For it reminds us that the church as the body of Christ is an altogether unique organism. Its uniqueness demands that anything the church does in the area of public relations must benefit its unique character.

Our Community Identity - A Theory of "Public Relations"

Ordinary public relations could be defined as the procedures an institution employs to become more widely and more favorably known. P.R. experts have their ear in tune with public opinion, and they design their plans accordingly. The church dare never do that simply because it is not an institution unto itself. It is a body which functions under the direction of its Head. Its task is to interpret itself to the community in the light of the fact that Jesus Christ, its Head, is "all in all," that He is the Savior and Lord of all men, and that, "in him all things hold together" (Col 1:17). Let me repeat part of that to emphasize it. It is our task to interpret ourselves to the community.

As a congregation within a community, we are in the public eye whether we want to be or not. The question is: precisely what are we in the public eye? How are we identifying ourselves as congregation to the community? better yet, as Christ's church to the world of which the community is a part? Our Lord's mission to the world was a mission of love. We identify with Him. His mission of love is now our mission of love. Is that the way the unchurched in our community see us? Or does that get obscured at times by a consuming concern for purity of doctrine?

Applications of the Theory

B . What follows is a group of random unconnected thoughts which came to mind as I reflected upon the theme in the light of the church's task to identify itself in the community and to the world as Christ's church engaged in a mission of love.

1. Our Image Among the Unchurched

In any group of people, various personality types are present. One person may be shy and retiring, an introvert who has difficulty in relating to other people. Another is more outgoing, a personable sort, pleasant, not an extrovert necessarily, but one who has little difficulty relating to other people. Congregations are like people. Each one has a personality of its own. The epistles of Paul as well as chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation substantiate that. With people, certain types of personality attract, others repel. So with congregations. What kind is yours? When you have answered that one, then ask yourself: to what extent is my congregation a reflection of me? And why? I preach and I teach. What do my preaching and teaching project? Are my people somber Christians or radiant Christians? Outgoing or cloistered? Have they been taught to play offense as well as defense, or like the [1978] Packers, are they a better defensive team than offensive team? Or are they equally adept at both?

I think some of those questions will answer themselves if we ask, what kind of an image generally do our churches and our Synod have here in the Midwest? We sometimes lament the fact that people know more about what we are against than what we are for. The unpopular stand we take on certain issues does not necessarily necessitate a negative public image. The manner in which we present it will have much to do with whether unchurched people gain an undesirable impression about us. We can be positive about negative stands we feel compelled to take.

That is suggestion number one for strengthening our contacts with the unchurched as a corporate congregation. Let our congregations work at presenting a positive image to the community. Let it be clear that our churches are places that minister to human need, places that offer help for the problems and tensions of life. We are a doctrinal church, and by the grace of God we intend to remain that. But that does not mean that we must therefore present our church primarily as a place which will help others get straight on doctrine. Orthodox doctrine is never an end in itself. It is always only a means to an end. It serves to insure that our ministry to the world will remain a ministry of the forgiving grace and love of God to the world.

2. Our Role in the Community

What we have just said about our public image and the need to change it where it is not properly representative necessitated that we define briefly what our God-assigned role is within the community. Our churches are God's arms of love open to the halt, the maimed, and the blind inviting them, compelling them to come in. That means exactly what it says, namely that our posture is one of openness, one of concern and compassion for all, not just for some, not just for those who are enough like us to fit in. But again, we tend rather to give others the impression that we are an exclusive club for a special breed of saints. Our concern for pure doctrine (and thank God for it) can lead us unwittingly to think that we are in a class by ourselves. We may well be, but why broadcast that to the community as though that is the role into which our Lord has cast us. Without intending to do so, we end up losing sight of our role as a congregation and view the unchurched as an enemy to be attacked rather than as an unfortunate victim who fell among the thieves and who needs someone to bind his wounds and to take him off to the inn in good Samaritan fashion. That is suggestion number two: let's examine carefully our role in the

community and be certain we do not just give theoretically correct answers which are not practically implemented by our people.

3. Our Need For Clear Objective and Goals

The Home Missions Handbook produced by the GBHM requires that mission congregations draw up clear statements regarding a congregation's reason for existence, its objective, together with a set of goals for the realization of its objective. I am familiar with a congregation in which that was conscientiously done, and then shelved forthwith. It fulfilled a requirement, but it is not now serving the people. It is not functioning in a manner that helps God's people to think consciously about the cooperative part they play in God's kingdom building activity. Consequently members tend to be only passively involved in their church rather than actively involved. Mission work is for missionaries. They are content to sit in the stands and to applaud and to support the members of the team out on the field of home and world missions—hoping they keep us, if not in first place in the standings, at least out of the cellar. Maybe we could call it corporate-itis. It's a form of spiritual botulism. It's a disease that often commences after a mission congregation has its site and chapel, and a certain identity, a modicum of growth and a feeling of comfortableness which allows people to settle down at ease in Zion unheeding of the woe the Lord pronounces on us for that.

Strengthening our contacts with the unchurched may necessitate that we begin at home by combating corporate-itis. We must want to make contacts with the unchurched before we can strengthen the contacts we endeavor to make.

4. Our Churches Must Not Be Lutheran Monasteries

Back to the matter of doctrinal integrity once more. When we extend the saving hand of God to the unchurched, it had better be a firm hand which takes hold with a firm grip. That makes sound doctrine an absolute necessity. But for what? For the benefit of the person to whom we reach out, of course. There's no point in pulling him out of the water into a leaky life boat that will sink before it gets to shore anyway. So sound doctrine offers insurance of a seaworthy craft. It says, "We've got something worthwhile, something you desperately need."

The doctrinal integrity of our churches must therefore never become a challenge with which we confront the unchurched, as though we are saying: Here we are, safely ensconced behind our sturdy fortress-like walls of protection. See if you can qualify for a place inside by scaling our wall. Obviously we find the thought of consciously operating that way abhorrent. But subconsciously we may be allowing something good and necessary (i.e. our concern for sound doctrine) to be projected to others in a manner we do not intend. The unchurched may then view our churches like Lutheran monasteries, just as forboding and forbidding to them as Roman monasteries are to us. God forbid that such should ever be the case. But we need to face the fact that something good in and of itself can become something misunderstood and misused in a way that weakens our contacts as churches with the unchurched. It will help us to remember something Kenneth Kantzer said in an interview as he took over the reins of editorship of *Christianity Today*. "It is easier," he said, "to attain a beautiful system of theology than to become a beautiful saint." (C.T. 4/7/78, p 22).

5. Our Buildings and Grounds

A fifth point can be dispensed with quickly in passing. Clothes make the man, it has been said. Appearances do count once more now that the decade of the 60's is behind us. So does the outward appearance we project to the unchurched with our buildings and grounds. A well-kept church and a well-groomed lawn make a positive impression. They are inviting to those who pass by even if they are old. We have several like that in the vicinity of the Seminary.

A slovenly looking church and lawn on the other hand offer an uninviting unfavorable appearance. They suggest an indifferent attitude. They say to the unchurched, "We don't care about ourselves; why should we care about you?"

Perhaps there are additional things we could do to strengthen the corporate hand we extend as congregations to the unchurched. (e.g. the entire subject of publicity, newspaper, radio, etc.) But in my judgment the five we have just covered are the most necessary. It is time to apply the question of the theme to the individual Christians who make up the membership of our congregations. What needs to be said about strengthening our contacts with the unchurched

II. As Individual Christians

A. The Numbers Problem

Those of you who have had the privilege and the pleasure of serving in beginning mission congregations will know that in the formative period of the congregation's life, everybody pulls together. Each member knows he is expected to do his part. Growth and development toward maturity depend on the personal involvement, not just of the pastor and a selected few others, but on everyone. And it is easy to see that. Members sense it without being told. It is part of the spirit of vitality which characterizes most mission congregations.

Mission success however takes its toll. Often with growth comes a diminution of that mission spirit. When a modicum of size has been achieved, what once was everybody's business becomes nobody's business. An extroverted church begins to show signs of introversion, and one consequence is a weakening of contacts with the unchurched.

B. Solutions

1. The importance of a one-on-one approach to the unchurched.

The answer to the problem lies in a conscious effort to keep that mission spirit alive and well in the growing congregation. That requires a teaching and training program which keeps members mindful of the fact that contact with the unchurched is chiefly a one-on-one effort. Our people can be trained to think of life's succession of days as a succession of new, God-given opportunities to contact unchurched people for Christ, not for our church but for our Savior. There's a difference you know, a vital difference which shows up both in our method and our approach. One approach suggests to the unchurched: we want to incorporate you into our corporation. The other says: I want you to know my Friend. One suggests: "We need you." The other suggests: "You need Him." So for one thing, we can strengthen our contacts with the unchurched by coaching our people in the know-how of Savior-talk in place of church-talk in one-on-one situations. That point brings to mind the results of a survey I read earlier this year in the LCA's "The Lutheran." That church body's Office of Planning and Research conducted a nation-wide survey among Lutherans. One of the survey questions asked: "If your pastor asked you to contact three unchurched persons or families in your neighborhood to introduce them to

your church and to invite them to worship with you, would you be willing to do so?" Responses indicated that 19% would be willing and were capable of doing so. Another 33% indicated that they were willing, but with reservations. That is just over half. A second question asked: "If your pastor asked you to contact three unchurched persons or families in your neighborhood to share your faith with them and to interpret the Gospel to them, would you be willing to do so?" To that question only 11% said they felt capable and willing and only 25% said they would, but with reservations.

How would your members respond to those two questions? My guess is that the figures would tell us we have a job to do, a big job. Perhaps we are employing a system which trains our people to know the truth, but not also how to share the truth. The body-life movement within Protestantism has demonstrated that Christians can be trained to share as well as to know. And Lawrence Richards' *A Theology of Christian Education* presents an educational methodology to implement that kind of an educational approach. I submit, then, that we could strengthen our contacts with the unchurched by increasing the number of our people willing to make those contacts, and by equipping them to make such contacts effectively.

2. Apologetic training

Probably the reason why so many Lutherans indicated a reluctance in the LCA survey to contact the unchurched was a feeling of inadequacy in coping with the arguments of the unchurched. Developments in recent decades have compounded that problem. John Warwich Montgomery makes the point somewhere that the borrowed capital of Christian presuppositions on which western civilization is living is running out. That means among other things that the starting point today in our contacts with the unchurched is often different from what it was a generation ago. Then more often than not God was a given. You could start with God and go from there. Secular humanism and naturalism have in many cases eliminated that starting point. That makes apologetic training more of a necessity. We received polemical training at the Seminary in my time, but next to nothing one could call apologetic. And in my teaching I imparted some of my polemical training to my people. I even prepared a special course to help Lutherans from other backgrounds know what we stood for and where and why we differed from other Lutherans. But I offered little help to my people in their efforts to contact others who were not only not Lutheran, but agnostic in their convictions.

So I suggest that another thing we need to begin to do is to become more familiar ourselves with that division of systematic theology which we designate as apologetics, and then to incorporate what we learn into our teaching in the same way we incorporate polemics into our catechism, adult, and Bible classes and into our work with the youth in our congregations. Before you can pursue a contact with the unchurched, you must have some confidence about how to make that contact. Apologetics can help us with that.

3. An intensified reading program

That leads me directly into another point for consideration. My association in a former parish with people from other backgrounds, both Lutheran and otherwise, impressed on me the fact that somewhere, somehow, those Christians were encouraged to read Christian literature. Members were continually asking me whether I had read this or that new book on the religious bookshelves in the book markets, and offering to share their copy with me. I don't think that is generally true of people trained in our churches and schools. Not surprisingly, my members who were the most avid readers were also usually the most willing and the most effective members in the congregation in making contacts with the unchurched.

So I offer as another suggestion the point that probably we could help to strengthen the contacts of individual members with the unchurched by encouraging them to read more Christian literature, literature which will help them to gain the kind of confidence they need to establish and to maintain contacts with unchurched neighbors and friends. By encouragement I have in mind specific programs within the congregation which will produce results, not just laying NWP's home supplement out for people to pick up on the narthex table.

4. Warmth and friendliness, smiles instead of scowls

The point about displaying a warm and friendly disposition toward outsiders has been made so often before that it ought not need mentioning again. But I must, not because I intend to develop it as something essential to strengthening contacts with the unchurched, but because I feel impelled to call attention to one aspect of the problem. In older congregations unfriendliness is no doubt the result of years of conditioning which makes it extremely difficult to change. But this is a Missionary Conference, and presumably many of you are not serving conditioned congregations. Is it possible that the posture of our people is an extension of our own? Do we succeed only minimally in communicating to our people the joy Paul succeeds in communicating so effectively to the Philippians. Are our people mirrors in the narthex of what the pastor is in the pulpit?

We are not advocating gimmicks to get ushers and others to become backslappers and glad-handers who greet unchurched visitors with a rowdy: Hi ya there, glad ya all could come. We're merely suggesting that ushers who smile are preferable to ushers who don't. Stiffness turns people away, not on. Visitors equate stiffness with isolation and insulation, both of which keep warmth from circulating. Again I say, we ought to locate the church's main radiator in the pulpit. A smile or two in the pulpit may produce a proliferation of them elsewhere. This may be just a little thing, but it could go a long way in strengthening contacts with the unchurched.

Now that we have pointed the finger at the pastor and his influence on individual Christians within the congregation, let's expand that point and consider further applications of the theme to ourselves

III. As Pastors in Positions of Influence and Leadership

Again, the points I am about to present are random thoughts which came to mind over a period of time as I reflected upon the theme for this presentation. No order of importance is implied or intended in the manner in which we will treat them.

1. The new life in Christ - what is it?

In recent years I have become increasingly aware of a condition we might call a spiritual myopia regarding the new life in Christ. I began to be aware of it when I observed an apparent difference between the way in which Christians trained in our circles (including myself) represented the Christian view of life and the way Lutheran Christians in my congregation, trained in other circles, represented it. My awareness of that difference and my concern about it grew as I began to read students' sermons at the seminary. Some of those sermons confirmed my earlier observation. For what it is worth, here it is. I may or may not be applicable to you.

The manner in which we preach and teach about the new life in Christ may tend to leave God's people with more of a negative than a positive view of that new life. This results from an unintentional eschatological twist we give to our teaching about eternal life. Ask the members of your congregation when eternal life begins, and a percentage of them will probably respond: when I enter heaven. But that is not Scriptural. Jesus says to those who know Him as Savior, "He that liveth and believeth on me shall never die." You and I are living right now the life that will never end.

That fact puts our daily living into a radically different perspective. To be sure, there will be trials and crosses and thorns in the flesh, and much tribulation before we enter into the next life. But our God has told us "my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." That promise makes it possible for us to respond, "Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." In fact as God's child I can even go so far as to make a statement that is completely incomprehensible to the uninitiated. "For Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:8-10).

What a marvelously positive, optimistic, buoyant attitude, especially in view of what that man, Paul, had to endure. Some of our people, on the other hand, seem to think of the good life only as the life to come. The Christian life for now means giving up something for the sake of getting something better later. It does mean that of course. But a Christian's attention is not focused on that. What he has gained in coming to know Jesus as Lord enthalls him and fills him with such a degree of contentment and satisfaction that he simply does not think of forsaking all to follow Jesus as something that leaves him short changed or deprived. Surely he lives every day looking up because he knows his redemption is drawing near. But his uplook toward the future does not give him a somber outlook on life right now. It keeps him on top of the world even while he is embroiled in it. It has him saying with a gleam in his eye, "Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's."

Perhaps we need to make doubly sure that our preaching and teaching aims at helping our people to see the new life in Christ more clearly in that light. But what does this have to do with the theme at hand? Much every way. Christians whose lives are a daily dramatization of what it means to delight in weaknesses, hardships, insults, persecutions, and difficulties constitute a powerful testimony to the unchurched. Such Christians are the kind of living letters Paul wanted the Corinthians to be. As pastors, you can strengthen your congregation's contacts with the unchurched by making sure your people know what the new life in Christ is. You can teach it to them, and you can exemplify it for them. And you will never tire of reminding your people of what God's baptismal acceptance of them has made them to be. The result will be lives which attract the attention even of the unchurched. Scripture says so.

2. Help your people to think “ministry”

Some of our people manifest still another unbalanced view of what it means to be a Lutheran Christian, one that also weakens our contact with the unchurched. If you were to ask: What does it mean to be a member of a Lutheran congregation in the WELS, I fear some of our good people would respond: It means to espouse the confessional Lutheranism for which our church stands. It means giving your support to a church which is determined to continue to be faithful to the Bible. (If ever any of your people have begged off from a request to serve because they are afraid they may say the wrong thing, then you have the kind of members in your church I am describing) Not enough of our people would respond by saying: My membership in my church means that I can regularly hear God’s Word and receive the Sacrament to give me help and encouragement for my ministry to my family, to my fellow Christians, and to my community.

In the thinking of too many of our people, ministry is something they support rather than something they do. Consequently they are not looking for new ways in which the Holy Spirit wants to surprise them with new opportunities to serve other people with God’s love. Thus people deprive themselves of the satisfaction a life of ministry is meant to give to God’s people. And that weakens our outreach, sometimes critically.

As pastors, you can work to change that. You can help your people to realize that doctrinal, confessional purity, while it may be the ultimate test of fidelity, is not the *only* test of it, and that to measure up to the requirements for fidelity in one respect, but not in the other, still adds up to infidelity. Putting it positively, you can strive to help more of your people realize more fully the joy and satisfaction a life of ministry returns to those who minister. It is more blessed to give than to receive. As Christians, it is not so much that we minister to a need. Rather, we need to minister. Help your people sense that need. They will respond, and as they do, they will begin to break out of the syndrome that causes people to stifle the Spirit’s impulses. And simultaneously they will strengthen your church’s contacts with the unchurched.

3. Preach to enhance a proper self-esteem

God’s people are bold people. They can wrestle with God and even demand that He bless them. They can hold Him to His promises. They can pray with importunity. They can walk right into the throne room of His grace anytime they feel inclined to do so, even without knocking. And if anyone were to try to stop them and ask: What right do you have to approach the mercy seat of God like that? they can reply: Why not? Jesus told me I could. My baptism makes it right, that’s why.

A Christian of course will never say that haughtily. He will say it self-evidently. He will, that is, if the preaching and teaching he has heard regularly does not demean him and rob him of his self-esteem as God’s own child. A by-product of right preaching and teaching is a positive spirit and attitude, a Baptismal attitude, an attitude that says: It’s really great to be a privileged child of God. To be sure, we must preach the law in all its force and severity in the full knowledge that the Spirit will use it to strike *terrores conscientiae* into the hearts of our people. But our preaching must not neglect at the same time also to affirm the dignity of the people to whom we preach. Without that affirmation and its consequent positive, confident, buoyant, radiant outlook, our outreach to the unchurched will be seriously hampered.

Not all of our people display an attitude of Christian dignity and self-esteem. They may well say it’s great to be a child of God because they believe it theoretically. But their actions and demeanor do not express it practically. The posture of our people sometimes suggests that being

a Christian calls for somber sobriety. After all, we are all nothing but a bunch of miserable sinners, aren't we? Surely, we are forgiven, but we daily sin much and indeed deserve nothing but punishment. All true enough, but when that is the dominant thought left in our minds, the image we project is likely to suggest that our God wears a scowl on His face rather than a shining face with an uplifted countenance. Such a projection makes it doubly hard for the unchurched to hear what we are trying to say to them about good news. They have difficulty seeing our Redeemer because we don't look very redeemed.

You are in a position to do something about that, not only on Sunday morning, but every hour of every day in your contact with your people. You are the exemplar of the baptismal grace of God, exemplar of grace at work in a person to whom God has given a proper sense of self-esteem.

4. Use language that communicates

Lutherans are not fundamentalists. But we conservative Lutherans sometimes give the impression that we are because aspects of fundamentalism are discernable in our circles. Turn of the century fundamentalism threw up walls to protect the believing community from the onslaughts of an unbelieving, rationalistic, secularistic world. In addition to blue laws, anti-saloon propaganda, restrictions on card playing and other such fundamentalist devices which constituted marks or walls of separation, fundamentalists erected linguistic walls, a specialized fundamentalist language. It is the kind you can hear on Bible-belt radio stations on "the Sabbath day." Fundamentalist language treats fellowship as a verb rather than as a noun. And it speaks of the Rev. Billy Hill as having pastored the Community Church at Sweetwater junction. "Just" is almost as frequent in prayer as invocations of the deity. "Oh Lord, just help me Lord. You just know so much how much I need you."

Thus fundamentalism gives unchurched people the impression that to be a Christian you have to stop doing certain things, and that when a prospect learns to speak the language of ghetto fundamentalism, he will be accepted. Sociological fundamentalism places unnecessary barriers between the church and the unchurched.

I repeat, we are not fundamentalists, but we are like them in the sense that we have developed a WELS ghetto language. Perhaps we should call it esoteric. It is language that has meaning only for insiders. For example, "The Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts," or even "Jesus saves sinners." Like what? Like my wife saves coupons from supermarket ads? It is not very Lutheran to speak the way we often do, especially in the pulpit. Luther had the courage to scrap second-hand religious language as stifling and untrue to his experience. He used language that communicated.

The language we use to communicate the gospel to the unchurched must be real, not second-hand. It must be life-related, not mere religious jargon. It cannot suggest that our church services are "out of this world," or that our people who attempt to reach the unchurched are second cousins to the Amish. I think this problem is more serious than we take it to be. And the solution to it starts with you as pastor. It involves the language you use in the pulpit, the catechism class, in any formal presentation of gospel truths. It isn't easy to shed old habits, comfortable phraseology. The old time religion is good enough for me, but old time ways of communicating it are not. It takes effort to find new and fresh ways to present familiar truths. But if WELS ghetto language constitutes a barrier in our approach to the unchurched, we need to forsake it in favor of something that will help to strengthen our contacts.

Conclusion

Everything we have tried to share with you in our effort to determine what we can do to strengthen our contacts with the unchurched can probably be summed up in this one observation: You are the pastor. You are the example to your flock. What you are, they become. Recognize the importance of your place as pastor, as pace setter, and as trend setter for your people. And when you are of a mind to throw up your hands at the awesome responsibility that is yours, fold them instead. Fold them and pray for wisdom, strength, and determination to be God's kind of man for God's kind of people. And remember too that the power God places at your disposal to help you and your people to minister to the unchurched is none other than the power He unlooses in and through the gospel. That makes it possible for you to say without a hint of a boast: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Therein lies the key to strengthening our contacts with all people, unchurched or not. If the angels of God still rejoice over one sinner who repents, it is worth the effort it takes to strengthen our contacts with the unchurched so we can give the angels something more to rejoice about.