

"WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL?"

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Do you think we're hung up on seeing the results of our work? Almost everyone wants to see results - everyone from mission boards to school boards, from church councils to Boards of Directors, and yes, pastors and teachers. We like to see the fruits of our labors. I straightened up and viewed my work. The results were obvious. The flowerbed was neat and clean. I had successfully whacked every last weed. It gave me a sense of satisfaction because I could actually see what I accomplished. Such is not always the case in our line of work. We are ministers of the gospel. We work primarily in the spiritual realm. Since as Jesus said, "*the kingdom of God is within you*" (Lk 17:21) and only God looks on the heart, we do not always clearly see the results of our work. And that can be frustrating at times, perhaps even discouraging.

We live in an era that places a heavy emphasis on getting results. According to today's modern thinking results = success. Success is all that counts. Success which can be measured. That is how the business world thinks. And we all know that the bottom-line for any business is success = bigger profits = more money. Thus the heavy emphasis on getting results. That puts heavy pressure on people to perform. If the team isn't winning, fire the manager and get somebody in who can produce a winning team. If the company is losing money, fire the person in charge and get somebody who knows how to turn a nifty profit. It would be naive to say that the church has not been influenced by the business world. I am not saying that is all bad. In some ways smart business practices can help us do our work more efficiently, like say in the area<sup>f</sup> administration and handling finances.

But there is a very real temptation for us to try to measure Church success in human terms, in terms of results, in terms of numbers - in terms of numbers of people, numbers of dollars, big, beautiful buildings, a plethora of programs, etc. It's easy to play the numbers game. Some might even say we have a love affair with numbers and statistics. There are, of course, some cogent and valid reasons for keeping statistics and tracking numbers, but measuring "success" is not one of them.

We also cannot deny the influence of the Church Growth Movement. Here again, the name of the game is numbers. Church Growth leaders have made numerical growth one of the "marks" of the church.<sup>1</sup> They have even gone so far as to say, "God wills the growth of His church ... The church that does not grow is out of the will of God."<sup>2</sup> How is that for a heavy guilt trip on the church that is suffering a decline in membership or on the pastor of that church who has faithfully and steadfastly proclaimed God's law and gospel!

When you read their literature on this topic of growth, it quickly becomes apparent that their idea of how to grow a church is to adapt certain sociological principles to your congregation. If you and your members want your church to grow,

it will grow. It sure seems to work, at least in churches we look at. (Why is it we only notice the "successful" growing churches and not the failures using these principles?) We notice Stuart Briscoe's Elmbrook Church and the church in Whitefish Bay that was "renewed" after a visit by Church Growth Consultants. We might even be a tad envious of the big shopping mall churches popping up among the evangelicals. They pull people in by the hundreds and even the thousands. They propound a wide variety of ideas, suggestions, programs, methods and techniques as the way to grow a church. We, of course, know, as the Bible teaches, that only God grows a church (*"Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain"* Ps 127:1). And we know the only thing God uses to build a church is the Means of Grace - the gospel in Word and Sacrament.

To be fair, we can learn a thing or two from the evangelicals and the Church Growth Movement. But when you come right down to it, many of their ideas are just plain common sense and nothing new at all. Some of their ideas and (dare I use the word) methods could help us remove man-made obstacles to the gospel - obstacles that perhaps we have unwittingly made. A couple of cautions are necessary, however. We may use some (definitely not all) of their ideas and methods, but we dare never buy their theology. It is riddled through and through with errors and false doctrines. The ideas we do borrow from them must be carefully measured in the light of God's Word before we use them.

The reason I am taking so long in this introduction is I sense a tension, a frustration if you will, among many pastors in our conference. Some espouse and openly practice some of the principles of the business world and/or the Church Growth Movement. And some vehemently oppose all such efforts as a compromising of our Lutheran orthodoxy by swallowing evangelical pabulum. I suspect that is why this topic was assigned. I am not so vain as to think that this paper will automatically solve the problem. This paper is not about the Church Growth Movement nor is it about the influence of the business world on the church today, good or bad. But it is about something they both have in common - results. It is about gospel results.

That brings me back to my original thought. All of us would like to see positive results in our ministerial labors. We want to reach out and save the lost. We want to evangelize not only our neighborhood, but also our world and see both growing churches and a growing synod. We want all of our members to grow spiritually and be spiritually renewed. We want our students to be spiritually mature. We want all of our people to produce fruits of faith in an increasing measure. We want our members in church faithfully each week, hence better church attendance. We want our people growing in God's Word at home (daily) and at church (weekly), hence higher Bible Class and Sunday School attendance and burgeoning enrollments in our Lutheran elementary and high schools (WLC too). We would like to see more and more young

men and women aspiring to be pastors and teachers, hence higher enrollments in our synodical schools. We want our people to freely give of their time and talents to serve our churches and our Lord in a variety of ways. And we want our members to willingly and generously give of their money to carry out our Lord's work in our churches, schools, synod and charitable agencies. I'm sure no one will argue with that. We would all love to see such positive results.

The problem is we can get so busy majoring in the minors (spending our time on trivial matters) and performing cosmetic surgery on our churches that we forget where real growth occurs - through proclaiming the gospel. When we start zeroing in on results we are moving into God's realm. That's his job. He has not commanded us to get results, but to preach the gospel. We are not Christ's bookkeepers, we are his ambassadors. Like the angel in Re 14:6 we have "*the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on earth - to every nation, tribe, language and people.*" Because of the desire and ensuing tension to see results the theme of this paper is:

#### "WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL?"

What results can we realistically expect to experience when we proclaim the gospel? We will let the Scriptures speak on this subject. But first let me make two assumptions and state three propositional truths on which this paper will be based.

**Assumption # 1:** We do not proclaim the gospel alone. We proclaim both law and gospel.

They are inseparably paired. Because our members are simul iustus et peccator (at the same time saint and sinner), they will need to hear from us both law and gospel. Both are proclaimed as needed, but the gospel must be predominate in our public and private proclamation of God's Word.

**Assumption # 2:** We need to and therefore will proclaim the gospel in all phases of our ministry - from the pulpit, in the classroom; at the sick bed, to the shut-in, in each counseling session, in our meetings to our boards and committees, in our member visits, in our evangelism calls, on the phone and in our conversations, to our youth and to our elderly, etc., etc. We are, above all things, first, last and always, ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And we should at all times and in all places and to all people proclaim the gospel. We will do so because Christ has commanded us to *κηρύξατε τὸ εὐαγγέλιον*, Mk 16:15 (remember seeing that every morning in chapel?). That is our Lord's command. That is our mission. Jesus assumes that we will willingly obey when he says, "*repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations*" (Lk 24:47), and "*you will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth*" (Acts 1:8). This is our

responsibility. This is our privilege. This is our calling. So that is what we will do.

**Propositional Truth # 1:** The gospel and only the gospel saves. Only the gospel creates faith. Only the gospel makes believers out of unbelievers.

*"I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved" (1 Co 15:1-2).*

**Propositional Truth # 2:** Only the gospel motivates the believer for godly living. Spiritual renewal, spiritual growth and a sanctified life cannot occur apart from the gospel.

**Propositional Truth # 3:** Only the Holy Spirit brings people to faith. It is not the work or decision of man (1 Co 12:3). The Holy Spirit uses only the gospel (in Word and Sacrament) to create faith. *"You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Co 6:11). "[Our Savior] saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5).* Luther wrote: "It is ridiculous to want to deduce from passages such as this that power exists in us to convert ourselves to God without grace. For God gives to those to whom He communicates this Word of His the ability to believe the Word. The Word of God is not taught in vain and without bearing fruit, but the Holy Spirit is with the Word, and through the Word He moves hearts to believe." <sup>3</sup>

#### WE CAN EXPECT POSITIVE RESULTS FROM PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL

When Jesus said, *"On this rock [Peter's confession] I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prove stronger than it" (Mt 16:18)*, he was promising growth. When he told them to make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19), he gave them the means to do so and implied that they would see results, namely disciples. In his high priestly prayer Jesus prayed *"for those who will believe in me through their message" (Jn 17:20)*. Here again he says that the gospel (their message) will result in believers.

#### The Power of the Gospel

We can expect to see positive results when we proclaim the gospel because the gospel has the power to produce results. God's Spirit works through the gospel on the heart to remove the heart of stone and give a heart of flesh that believes. With Paul we say, *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Ro 1:16)*. The gospel is God's dynamite which blasts through stone-hard hearts to create faith. *"The message of the cross ... to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Co 1:18)*. Paul reminded the Thessalonians of the positive power of the gospel, *"our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction"*

(1 Th 1:5). Paul experienced positive results in Thessalonica when proclaiming the gospel because of the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus also spoke of the life-giving power of the gospel, *"The Spirit give life ... The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and they are life"* (Jn 6:63). Such life-giving power residing in the gospel inspires us to believe that when we proclaim the gospel we will see positive results.

#### The Gospel Call Us to Faith

How many times have we confessed the words of Luther, "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Ghost has called me by the gospel." We were called to faith by the gospel. Everytime we proclaim the gospel God is calling sinners to believe this good news. Paul thanked God for calling sinners to faith through the gospel he proclaimed, *"We ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel"* (2 Th 2:13-14).

#### The Gospel Brings Us to Faith

The gospel we proclaim has the power not only to call our hearers to faith, but to actually bring them to faith. We have already touched on the power of the gospel. We have heard Paul tell the Corinthians, *"By this gospel you are saved"* (1 Co 15:2). And we have seen the powerful results of Paul's proclaiming of the gospel in Thessalonica. We see overwhelming evidence, example after example in God's Word of the gospel bringing people to faith. Let's consider Jesus' ministry. Jesus said he was anointed to preach good news to the poor (Lk 4:18). And that's what he did. He travelled around proclaiming the good news (Lk 8:1). John tells about the results, *"Even as he spoke, many put their faith in him"* (Jn 8:30). In Eph 2:17-22 Paul tells us that Jesus came and preached peace and the result was that aliens and foreigners were made members of God's household. They were brought to faith.

The Book of Acts is replete with examples of how the gospel brings people to faith. Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost and about 3000 people believed and were baptized (Ac 2:41). Peter proclaimed the gospel after healing a crippled beggar and many who heard the message believed and the number of men grew to about 5000 (Ac 4:4). Acts 5:42 tells us, *"Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ."* The next verse adds the footnote that the number of disciples was increasing. In Acts 6 when the Twelve apostles were freed up to give their full attention to the ministry of the word, we are told, *"So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly"* (Ac 6:7). On and on it goes throughout the Book of Acts. Numerical growth of believers is mentioned in 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 8:12, 14, 35-36; 11:19-21; 13:38-39, 48; 14:1; 16:10, 14, 34; 17:4, 12, 34; 18:8; 19:20. When we survey Acts with an eye for what made the church

of Christ grow so rapidly, we learn several things. I will highlight only two. First, in each and every case the tremendous growth happened after proclaiming the gospel. That tells us that the way to growth is by proclaiming the gospel. Second, we are told repeatedly that it was the Lord who added to their number. Only God grows a church and he only uses the gospel to grow it. From this we learn that when we proclaim the gospel, we can realistically expect that God will bring hearers to faith. We have his word on it.

### Faith Comes by Hearing the Gospel

The word "proclaim" implies an oral (but that does not rule out the written) communication of the gospel. Before the gospel was written in the New Testament, it was orally proclaimed. Most of our work involves an oral proclaiming of the gospel - preaching, teaching, calling, counseling, etc. Isn't it amazing that *"God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Co 1:21)*? We all know that *"faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Ro 10:17)*. Paul reminded the Ephesians, *"you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation" (1:13)*. And he praised the Thessalonians because, *"when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe" (1 Th 2:13)*. And Peter wrote to God's elect reminding them, *"you have been born again ... through the living and enduring word of God. And this is the word that was preached to you" (1 Pe 1:23, 25)*. From this we can expect that God uses our oral proclamation of his gospel to bring people to faith.

Isn't it incredible that God uses cracked pots of clay like us to bear his precious message of salvation. What a privilege! God has entrusted us with the gospel (1 Th 2:4). And he expects us to be faithful in our stewardship of the gospel (1 Co 4:1-2). There is absolutely no excuse for laziness in our sermon preparation or for using tired old cliches, clergy jargon or even good old Lutheran language that does not clearly convey the gospel to our hearers. Nor is there any excuse for preaching God's exciting gospel in a dull, boring fashion. We need to constantly work at communicating the gospel clearly, boldly, confidently, enthusiastically and persuasively. When is the last time you asked your members to pray for you before you preach that you will declare the gospel fearlessly (Eph 6:19-20)? After all, we are ambassadors of the mighty Savior. He does make his appeal to sinners to be reconciled to him through us. Let's work at being the least possible hindrance to the Holy Spirit in our preaching, teaching and all public and private proclamations of the gospel. We say we are not ashamed of the gospel, so let's not preach like we are. Still, let us never forget that the power



to convert sinners lies not in our "wise and persuasive words" but in the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified. Permit me to suggest an article written by Prof. Jeske in the WLQ Vol. 79, Winter 1982, Num. 1, entitled, Communicating The Gospel More Effectively. It will help sharpen your homiletical skills.

#### Enlightened Through the Gospel

Luther tells us the Holy Spirit enlightens us with his gifts. He uses the gospel to do that. Paul wrote in 2 Ti 1:10, "*our Savior, Christ Jesus ... has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*" In several places in the New Testament we are told that God's Word gives light to those in darkness and sight to those who are blind. Psalm 19:7-8 states the Word of God does four things for us: 1) it revives the soul; 2) it makes wise the simple; 3) it gives joy to the heart; and 4) it gives light to the eyes. We can reasonably expect that when we proclaim the gospel, the Holy Spirit will use it to help our naturally blind listeners see and appropriate the many wonderful gifts (forgiveness, peace, joy, hope, comfort, etc.) God has in store for us in the gospel.

#### Faith Grows and is Strengthened by the Gospel

Luther writes in his Large Catechism, "Through the same Word and forgiveness the Holy Ghost bestows, increases, and strengthens faith." The gospel we proclaim is able to strengthen and grow the faith of our hearers. Paul made that clear in Ro 16:25, "*to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ.*" Several times in his letters Paul told the believers how pleased he was that their love and faith were growing. This is the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word. How often do we use the gospel to strengthen and encourage our listeners? We could use model prayers for our people like that of Paul in 2 Th 3:16-17 more often, "*May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.*" We, like Peter, need to constantly encourage our people with the gospel to dig into God's Word continually for their own spiritual growth, "*Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good*" (1 Pe 2:2-3). When we proclaim the gospel, we can expect that the Holy Spirit will use our message to strengthen believers and grow faith.

#### Kept In The Faith By the Gospel

Peter wrote that God has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Then in the next breath he mentions that we are "*through faith shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time*" (1 Pe 1:5). Then at the end of his letter he tells us that the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ ... will ... make you strong, firm and steadfast" (1 Pe 5:10). Paul was confident of

this, "that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ" (Ph 1:6). We can be confident too that when we proclaim the gospel, God will use it to keep our hearers in the faith.

#### **Motivated By The Gospel to Live a Godly Life**

We would like to see all of members growing in faith and living their faith. The temptation for us here is to try to encourage our people to produce fruits of faith by means of the law instead of the gospel. The writers of God's Word were careful to place their appeals for sanctified living squarely on the gospel of justification. They teach us that there is no motivation for people to live sanctified lives apart from justification. Look up and read for yourself the following examples: Acts 20:32; Ro 12:1-2; 2 Co 5:14-15; Ga 2:20; Eph 2:8-10; 5:1-2; Ph 1:27; Titus 2:11-15; He 10:19-25; 2 Pe 1:3-11. In each case they inspire their readers to repond to the love, grace and mercy of God in Christ Jesus. If we truly want our members to grow in this important area of faith, then let us imitate the writers of God's Word. Let us exhort, urge and encourage our people to live sanctified lives, lives set apart for the Lord based on the objective justification of the gospel and not on the law. That is the mistake the evangelicals too often make. Let us motivate our members to produce fruits of faith in response to the love of God in Christ. When we proclaim the gospel in this way, we can expect to see positive results.

#### **Sometimes The Fruit of the Gospel is Hidden From Us**

The gospel will produce fruit. There is no question about that. Paul makes that clear in Col. 1:6, "*All over the world this gospel is producing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.*" But what happen when we don't see the fruit? Does that mean it's not there? Not at all. If we take the gospel seriously, we know it is producing fruit. It may be that the fruit is hidden from our sight. Consider the case of Elijah. What a case of discouragement that was! "I've been so faithful for you, Lord," he said, "but it hasn't done any good. Now I'm the only one left." He couldn't see any results, but they were there. He just didn't see them. The Lord finally told him, "I still have 7000 believers left who haven't worshipped Baal."

Our job is to proclaim the gospel. God's job is to produce results. Sometimes God produces fruit in his good time. And sometimes he keeps it hidden from our sight for reasons known only to him. Ours may be a sowing ministry like Paul's was in Corinth. "*What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe - as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own*

*Labon*" (1 Co 3:5-8). My parents did not profess faith in Christ until ten years ago. When I was a senior in the Seminary, they finally took the adult instruction class and joined one of our churches. I went to church all along, but they never did. I still remember our first pastor visiting our home time and time again witnessing about Christ and trying to talk my parents into taking the AIC class. And I remember my dad doing his best to get that pastor to drink. No luck for either of them. The next pastor also visited our home several times. He managed to talk my parents into trying the AIC class twice. Each time they fizzled out of it for all the wrong reasons. He too shared Christ with them. He too met with failure. I was at Northwestern by the time the third pastor was assigned fresh out of the Seminary. Not to sell him short (I like him and he is a good pastor), but of the three pastors, he had the least dynamic personality. But it was during his ministry that my parents came to faith. Were the first two pastors failures? Not at all. They were sowing seeds that the third pastor was privileged to harvest. Like the farmer in the parable, our job is to faithfully keep on sowing the seed of the gospel in everyone we can. And like the farmer we might need to learn patience. God will do the growing when he is ready. After all, the results all up to him. So keep on proclaiming the gospel! It works.

#### WE CAN EXPECT NEGATIVE RESULTS WHEN PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL

It would be naive for us to believe that when we proclaim the gospel all we will get is positive results. One look around our churches today is enough to pop that bubble. I won't bore you with a long list of negative statistics deploring the sad state of our families, churches and synod. We are all were aware of them. We deal with them nearly every day in the trenches back home. What's wrong? Why is it this way? Is there something the matter with the gospel we preach? No one can honestly believe that after what we've just read.

God does give us an answer in his Word. He paints a realistic picture of what we can honestly expect when we proclaim the gospel. He provides a proper balance in understanding our dilemma when he tells us:

#### We Can Expect Rejection of the Gospel

This should come as no surprise. Nearly all of God's Old Testament prophets were rejected, and they preached some beautiful gospel too, not just all law. Prophet after prophet was sent to Israel and Judah only to face rejection and, in some cases, death. Some prophets, like Jeremiah, toiled all their lives in a seemingly fruitless ministry. Isaiah writes by inspiration, "*Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?*" (53:1) And then Isaiah pens what is considered the most beautiful gospel in all of the Old Testament.

If anyone should win them over, it would be the Lord Jesus Himself. He is

the gospel and still he was *"despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not"* (Is 53:3). John tells us, *"He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him"* (Jn 1:11). They chose Barrabas, a criminal, over Jesus. To Jesus they cried, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" We get a hint of what it was going to be like for him early in Jesus' ministry. He visited his home town of Nazareth and was asked to be the guest preacher. He preached gospel, beautiful, clear gospel from Is 61 and what happened? The people from his home town tried to throw him off a cliff (Lk 4:14-30). At a mid-point in Jesus' ministry John informs us, *"Jesus said ... The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe. For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to say, 'This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.' From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him"* (Jn 6:63-66).

Before Jesus sent out the Twelve in Mt 10, he warned them how tough it was going to be. If they were met with rejection, they were to shake the dust off their feet and move on with the good news. He warned them that they would be hated because of him, they would be arrested, put on trial and persecuted. Then he made an interesting statement. He said, *"A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master"* (Mt 10:24). In other words, if they do these things to him, their teacher and master, should they (or we for that matter) expect nothing but success and a rejection free ministry? Jesus would pick this up again when he talked to his disciples on the night he was betrayed (Jn 18:18-20). He taught at least two parables which tell us the gospel can also be met with rejection - the parable of the tenants in Mt 21:33-46, and the parable of the Great Banquet in Lk 14:16-24, in which he says of those who rejected God's gracious gospel invitation, *"they all alike began to make excuses"* (14:18).

The same Sanhedrin that sentenced Jesus to death later rejected Peter and John and had Stephen killed after hearing the gospel proclaimed from their lips. A quick read through the Book of Acts and we see the disciples persecuted for the Name of Jesus. A great persecution broke out in Jerusalem. Wherever Paul preached the gospel enemies dogged his footsteps and opponents to the gospel popped up. In Athens the Epicureans and Stoics called Paul a babbler (Ac 17:18). In some of Paul's letters he mentioned that he was in chains for the gospel. To the Thessalonians he wrote, *"We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition"* (1 Th 2:2). Whenever we proclaim the gospel we can expect that it will be met with rejection by some. When our sharing of the gospel is met with rejection, let us keep

in mind the words of our Savior, *"He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me"* (Lk 10:16). With God's help we too will dare to tell the gospel in spite of strong opposition.

Why do some reject the gospel when it has the power to save? The Bible tells us that man has the ability to resist the gospel (Ac 7:51; Mt 23:37). At the same time, man has absolutely no ability to believe the gospel without the <sup>working</sup> aid of the Holy Spirit (1 Co 12:3). Natural man does not understand and therefore rejects the gospel, *"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned"* (1 Co 2:14). Why some believe and others reject the gospel we proclaim is and will remain a mystery to us. God alone knows. We keep preaching the gospel with the hope that some will believe.

#### Some Christians Will Fail To Grow

We can preach the gospel week in and week out and some Christians will still fail to grow. Paul calls them "weak" Christians in Ro 14 & 15 and encourages us accept them where they're at, be patient with them, not offend them, but encourage them instead. In Re 3:14-17 our ascended Lord laid into the Christians at Laodicea. He called them "lukewarm" Christians. The writer to Hebrews jumped on his readers in He 5:11-6:2 for being spiritually immature. Some simply ignore the gospel we proclaim. He 2:1-3 warns of the dire consequences of ignoring "such a great salvation." Ignore it and you can lose it. If some Christians fail to grow it is their own fault, their own choice, and not a fault of the gospel. We must be ready to expect this when we proclaim the gospel.

#### Some Will Wander, Stray and Backslide

A prime example would be the prodigal son in Luke 15. They hear the gospel but still they wander away. This too should come as no surprise. Our natural tendency is to wander away like Isaiah says, *"We all, like sheep, have gone astray"* (Is 53:6). Our job then is to try to win them back and save them from death (Ja 5:19-20). In some cases, like that of the prodigal son, the gospel turns them back. In his case it was the word remembered as Prof. Becker liked to put it.

Some Christians are drawn away by their own evil desires (Ja 1:14-15). Some are enticed by the glitzy world we live in with its false promises of happiness in money, pleasure, possessions, power, pride and fame - 1 Ti 6:9-10; 2 Ti 4:10; 1 Jn 2:15-17. Some cave in to their Old Man. They forget to drown him each day and allow him to win the battle within - Ga 5:16-17; Eph 4:22-24. Some are led astray into false doctrine - 2 Co 11:3-4; Ga 1:6-9; 3:1; 1 Ti 6:20-21; 2 Ti 4:3-4; 2 Pe 3:17. And we dare not forget that conniving schemer, the devil. Some are trapped by the devil and taken captive (2 Ti 2:26). Some go into battle unarmed against him and are overcome (Eph 6:10-17). Some are deceived (Re 20:8) and others led astray (Re 12:9). Such

people Paul tells us to "gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Ti 2:25). We can expect these things to happen in spite of our faithful preaching of the gospel.

#### Some Will Be Fallen Away, Apostate

In spite of our most faithful efforts in communicating the gospel, there will be a few who fall from the faith. Paul mentioned two by name in 1 Ti 1:19-20 saying that they "have shipwrecked their faith." The Book of Hebrews gives this warning, "See to it brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (3:12-13). Hebrews also warns of a most severe judgment in store for those who fall away - He 6:4-6; 10:26-31. Jesus said that in the last days "many will turn away from the faith" and "the love of most will grow cold" (Mt 24:10,12). And Paul describes it this way, "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons" (1 Ti 4:1). Some fall away from the gospel because of the opinio legis. These try to justify themselves by observing the law - Ga 5:4, 7-9.

In some cases God hides the gospel from people. Paul speaks at length about this 1 Co 1:18-31. Jesus also spoke of this in Mt 11:25. When we preach the gospel to them it serves as a testimony (Mt 24:14) to them.

Have I got you thoroughly depressed by now after lifting you to such soaring heights with the promises of the gospel? Please bear with me. We dare not adopt a fatalistic attitude. Nor dare we give in to pessimism. Prof. Wayne Mueller commented on this, "Pessimism has all kinds of brothers and sisters: cynicism, sarcasm, negativism, doubt, worry, defensiveness, and a stated belief in Murphy's law. We deal with so much sin, trouble, sickness, sorrow and so many mixed up lives, and disappointed expectations in the sanctification of our people that it seems natural to fall into a pessimistic attitude. We try to keep it inside, but it sneaks out in front of our family, in conversations with brothers in the ministry and most unfortunately in our dealings with members." <sup>5</sup>

When God's spokesmen get depressed, like Elijah did, it is because we are looking to see results. God deals with us the same way he did with Elijah. He tells us to get back to work and leave the results to him. Paul tenderly reminds us not to give in to despair, "Since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart" (2 Co 4:1). Lift up your hearts leaders of God's people. We follow the triumphant Lamb of God.

#### WE CAN EXPECT BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE RESULTS AT THE SAME TIME

This is a paradox, but this is what Scripture teaches. Jesus teaches this in the parable of the sower (Lk 8:4-15). The seed we sow is the Word of God. Some fall

on hard ground. The devil comes and takes the word from their heart so that they cannot believe and be saved. Some fall on rocky ground. These believe for a little while, but in time of testing quickly fall away. Some fall among thorns. These have their faith choked out by life's worries, riches and pleasures and they do not mature. And some seed fall on good soil. These people believe and produce abundant fruits of faith. Jesus also mentions this in the parable of the weeds (Mt 13:24-30) the parable of the net (Mt 13:47-50). Jesus himself experienced this many times in his ministry such as in Jn 12:37-49. Paul experienced it in Athens (Acts 17:32-34) and other cities. Some sneered. A few believed. Paul told the Corinthians that the message of the cross is foolishness to some, but means salvation to others (1 Co 1:18, 21-23).

This paradox causes us a tension that we will have to learn to live with. Paul writes, *"For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?"* (2 Co 2:15-16). Like God, we want all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Ti 2:4). Like Paul, we are willing to become all things to all people, so that we might win some (1 Co 9:22). We look at our home and world mission fields with eyes like Paul's and say, *"Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our area of activity among you will greatly expand, so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you"* (2 Co 10:15-16). And yet, at the same time, our shepherd's heart hurts whenever one of God's sheep or lambs goes astray, gets lost or hurt.

How can we resolve this tension? We cannot. We simply proclaim the eternal gospel to those who live on earth. As pastors we play many roles. We wear many hats in the ministry. But the single most important role we have is a proclaimer of God's saving gospel. We, like Paul, must resolve to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Co 2:2). In our mission calls we do not invite people to come to the church with the padded pews, but to come to the Savior for spiritual rest. We seek to reach the masses for Christ, but will content ourselves to work one on one, because the Bible tells us there is great joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (Lk 15:7). We will not allow ourselves to get bogged down looking for results, for we know that faithfulness, not "success" is the standard by which our ministry will be judged by God.

We have the words of eternal life. We <sup>have</sup> the Word of this world's only Savior. *"This word is in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed I cannot"* (Jer 20:9). We have the life-giving gospel, the only thing that works in this sin-sick world of ours. We must proclaim it loud and clear. We must proclaim boldly. Why? Always looking for results? No! Because we must preach it! *"When I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!"* (1 Co 9:16).

ENDNOTES

- 1) Win Arn, ed. The Pastor's Church Growth Handbook (Pasadena: Church Growth Press, 1979, p. 98
- 2) Robert J. Koester, LAW AND GOSPEL: The Foundation of Lutheran Ministry With Reference to the Church Growth Movement. His Dissertation to Fuller Theological Seminary, Oct. 1989
- 3) What Lutheran Says, I, P. 346 (W25, 288; SL 6, 543 Is 44:22)
- 4) Large Catechism, Art. III, 62, Triglot, P. 695
- 5) Wayne D. Mueller, Keys to Evangelical Congregational Development, an Essay delivered on April 22, 1985 to the Wissillowa Pastoral Conference

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