

# Our Call to Serve

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by Darwin H. Raddatz

## Introduction

For weeks the sailing ship has toiled through stormy waters and raging seas. Its crew has been totally absorbed in the business of keeping the ship afloat. Then the ship leaves the storm but the clouds still hover darkly and dangerously on the horizon. Ask the captain at that moment what his purpose as captain is and he might reply, "My job is to keep this ship from going down before we reach port." Ask the boatswain about his work and he might reply, "I just try to keep the riggin' together." Ask the crew men and they might reply, "Our job is to stay on board and alive until this weather is past." It is only natural that the crew should, at that moment, understand its role in the light of its recent crisis and in relation to self-preservation.

In a less troubled moment the captain might have replied, "My aim is to take this ship to her appointed harbor as swiftly as possible." The boatswain might have replied, "my aim is to do the best possible job of ordering the rigging." And the men of the crew might have answered, "Our job is to step lively when the boatswain calls." Even in an hour of cloudless prosperity it is natural that the crew should understand their work in relation to the ship and in relation to each other.

Meanwhile the benevolent president of the company for which that ship sails might be thinking, "That ship is my way of satisfying what I have in my heart. I have great pity for food-starved people. By sending my ship on this mission I am serving a people who need food; I am, moreover, providing a meaningful life for all those who sail for me."

The Lord Jesus has sent His Church on a mission to serve the lost world. Among the Lord's crew are the members of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. We have just recently come out of a great doctrinal struggle. The winds of false doctrine were threatening to divert the mission, to throw it off course, and to water down the Bread of Life. Storm clouds still lower threateningly on the horizon. Mindful of our recent exertions and fearful of further confessional tumult, we might be tempted to say, "Our goal, as a church, is to preserve the Truth of God." In this way we would be tempted to interpret our mission in terms of our most recent crisis. Or in a moment of forgetfulness and self-satisfaction we might be tempted to say, "Our mission is to build a bigger and better synod and church;" that is to say, we might be tempted to divine our mission in terms of ourselves.

May the Lord preserve us from falling into such temptations. May He cause us to know that our mission cannot be defined in terms of our own recent struggle but in terms of God's struggle and victory in Christ Jesus. May He also cause us to recognize that our mission cannot be fully defined in terms of ourselves but it has to be defined in terms of all God's well beloved world. In *Reports and Memorials for the Fortieth Biennial Convention* of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, page 25, this formulation of our mission is proposed: "The continuing purpose of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, as a gathering of Christians, is to serve all people in God's world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures." The Administration Survey Commission is proposing that the convention study that proposition with its subordinate objectives and policies. In effect our present essay will be a part of that study. Our analysis of "Our Call to Serve" will lead us to the same conclusion that "the

continuing purpose of the WELS, as a gathering of Christians, is to serve all people in God's world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures."

That brief formula offers us no new insight into our reason-for-being. Any of our Sunday school children might, with right, insist that he has gained this understanding already from the Sunday school and its unfolding of "The Story of God's Love". The whole history of the Kingdom of God clearly reveals that God is in mission to save the world through the Gospel; in this mission He involves men through the call into the Church; and in the execution of this mission He empowers the Church to be His witnesses in all the world.

### **I. To Save the Lost of the World is the Mission of God**

God's mission to save the lost was contemplated and its execution planned before ever a man existed. Paul writes, "(God) hath chosen us in (Christ) before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). So before the sun had set on the first human sin God had already begun His mission to save the victims of sin. Genesis Three reveals God's immediate eagerness to approach fallen man in love. It demonstrates that the Father's love permit the continuation of a world so blessed that it does not constantly call man to repentance and to an awareness of his estrangement from God.

Genesis Three is not the only example of God approaching the sinner. In His love the Father is constantly approaching men in grace. In His love He sends His Son into the world to destroy the power of evil (John 3:16). In His love the Son allows Himself to be sent and eagerly proclaims (Hebrews 10:7), "Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me)...Lo, I come to do thy will, O God."

Not only do the Father and the Son labor together in the mission to save the lost; the Father sends also the Spirit of His Son into the world (Gal. 4:6) and the Son likewise sends His Spirit into the world (John 16:7). This "missio" or "sending" activity within the Trinity has been recognized by our hymns. In Hymn 387, stanza 5, of the Lutheran Hymnal, for instance, the Father occupies the stage:

He spoke to His beloved Son: Tis time to have compassion.  
Then go, bright Jewel of My crown, And bring to man  
salvation;  
From sin and sorrow set him free, Slay bitter death  
for him that he  
May live with Thee forever.

In stanza 9 of the same hymn the Son speaks:

Now to my Father I depart the Holy Spirit sending  
And, heavenly wisdom to impart, My help to thee extending.  
He shall in trouble comfort thee, Teach thee to know  
and follow Me,  
And in all truth shall guide thee.

Thus we see how the Church has ever delighted in the near approach of God to man.

But what witness have we that God has, in fact, injected himself into the stream of human history in gentle grace? The witness is all about us. Every activity of God is a direct witness of God to man. "God left not himself without witness in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). And this witness of God in nature leaves unrepenting man without excuse. Paul writes, "The invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen...even his eternal power and

godhead; so that they are without excuse.” But the enmity of man toward God is such that God’s activity in nature alone is unable to turn man to faith in God. The jailer of Philippi felt the finger of God acting in his life but he had no inkling of how gently and patiently that finger was beckoning to him. We read that the jailer “came trembling... ‘What must I do to be saved?’”. That is a fear and an ignorance God is determined to remove from the heart of man, so God also woos man through His self-revelation in the Gospel. He sends His Word to man and, in sending His Word, He Himself comes to man in all His saving power. “The Gospel...is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth.” Principally it is this Gospel that witnesses to God as a God who is in mission to save. It is the Gospel which carefully assures us, God “will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 1:3).

The Gospel which God has sent into the world is the message, the record and the revelation, of God’s own mission, how He sent His Son into the world to accomplish redemption, how He sends His Spirit into the world to accomplish sanctification, and how He will send His Son into the world again as Judge. But the Gospel is not just a powerless record or a take-it-or-leave-it revelation. The Gospel is also the means of God’s personal, ongoing mission to man. God Himself confronts the sinner in His message; therefore, every proclamation of the Gospel is a call to decision, a call to accept the Lordship of Christ unto salvation. Or if the message and mission of God are rejected, then the Word becomes a Word of judgement (Mark 16:16). To be confronted with the Gospel is to be confronted with God in mission.

Our God is very earnest about sending His Gospel into the world. He elects and calls men, the Church, and sends them out into the world with His Gospel. Thus those who have experienced God’s mission and have been won to faith become the special agents of God’s continuing mission to the world. They are His mission to the world. But our purpose at this time is to note that even the sending of the Gospel through the Church is not left to the ingenuity or strength of man. The ascending Christ declares, “Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto me” (Acts 1:8). The Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit along with the Church on its mission. In sending the Holy Spirit along with the Church, God continues the personal mission He began by sending His Son and will terminate by the return of His Son.

The mission of God to save the world began, continues and will end with God sending Himself into the world. Not only the idea of mission to the world but the very work of mission to the world is, in its every phase, God’s own labor of love. God serves the world by mission.

## **II. God Calls the Church to Serve in His Mission: The Old Testament**

### **The Original World**

God’s plan to involve the Church in His mission is evident already from the very first announcement of His mission. To the serpent He says, “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” Woman, the very creature Satan seduced, will, under God, become the enemy of Satan and an agent of his downfall. From the beginning God’s fallen people are identified as the nursery of the Serpent-crushing Seed, the cradle of the conquering Son.

Already in the next chapter of Genesis we see a sense of mission developing among God’s people. We read of this early generation. “Then began men to call upon (call out) the name of the Lord” (Gen. 4:26b). Their boasting in the Lord stands in stark contrast to the self-glorification of Lamech and his race. The Godly are not content to be Church in their own hearts,

not content to be Church in their own homes; they want to be Church in the world. They are not willing to let the world be a field where the propagandists for man go uncontested. They proclaim in the world the name of God. They confront the world with the revelation of His saving mission. They become the agents of His mission.

Again in the account of the flood we find Noah is not content to be saved alone. He becomes a “preacher of righteousness” in the world (2 Peter 2:5) and Luther even has him “traveling ‘over the entire world’ and preaching ‘everywhere’”. (Quoted from the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. 66, No. 2, April 1969, Luther’s Practical Mission-Mindedness, page 104).

### **The Patriarchs**

After the flood and after Babel we again discover that God did not abandon His now scattered tribes to a world without a Gospel and without witnesses. From the tribes God called Abraham and separated him to Himself as a sign to the world. He addressed Abraham, “I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee and curse him that curseth thee; and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:2,3). By this we learn that God’s call of Abraham was not the mark of God’s rejection of the world. Far from it: The call of Abraham made him a man with a calling. His election was an election to office. In the same breath that he is told of his blessedness, he is advised that he stands in this world as a blessing. Called by God and separated by God, possessing the gifts of justification and sanctification, his life in the world represented God’s own mission to the world. Abraham was not to be merely the target of God’s blessings; he was to be also the gun, tooled by God, loaded by God, and triggered by God, to deliver His Gospel blessings to the heathen.

The faithful Church does well to note that in Abraham there was no natural heroism that fitted him to be an agent of God’s mission to save. It is God’s call (Gen. 12:1) and God’s blessings (12:2a) that make him an able witness. It is God alone (Gen. 15) who dares to pass between the slain covenant animals to take upon Himself the whole weight of His covenant with Abraham; Abraham was not even a competent cosignatory to the covenant. Again it is God who gives Abraham and Sarah a son in old age. While Abraham is laughing at God’s promise of a son (Gen. 17:17) in helpless admiration, God is occupied in fulfilling the promise. It is God who keeps Abraham from being destroyed by Abimelech. When Abraham weakly passes off his wife as his sister (Gen. 20), God keeps Abraham from being destroyed in spite of himself. It is only by the faithfulness of the God who called him that Abraham could fulfill his calling and become known as “faithful Abraham”.

It is apparent that God’s calling of Abraham had nothing to do with favoritism. His call of Abraham was a commissioning service. Abraham and his generation become more than just a called people; they become a people with a calling. And their calling was not to be a blessing just to each other. Their calling was to be a blessing to the whole wide world. Through Abraham God would confront the world with His love so that Abraham would be to the world a savor of life unto life or a savor of death unto death. (1 Cor. 2:15,16).

Dr. Paul Peters offers us Martin Luther’s view of the Abraham account: “No less did Abraham preach ‘publicly’ and erect ‘a public chapel or an altar, at which he preached and taught about the true religion—mainly of course to his household but then also to the neighboring Canaanites who came together at this place’. It is characteristic of Luther’s mission mindedness to add that Abraham did not do this ‘in some corner...but in a public place, in order

that by his own example and that of his own people he might lead others to the knowledge of God and to true forms of worship” (Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. 66, Number 2, April 1969, “Luther’s Practical Mission-Mindedness, pages 104, 105).

The Jacob stories are also valuable to the church which wants to know its reason-for-being. In these stories we learn especially the mystery of election. Jacob, the second born, is “loved” and is designated as the child of promise; Esau, the first born, is “hated” of God and is not designated as the bearer of the promise. These designations are made even before the children are born. God does not let personal consideration determine His choice His choice is free grace. He simply lays hold on an unworthy man and uses him as an instrument of His saving purpose. To this end He trains him and chastens him. The man may kick against the pricks and may betray Him but God does not let him go until His purpose is fulfilled. This is evident from the history of “tricky” Jacob. Moreover it is seen that the election of Jacob is not a curse upon his brother Esau but a promise. God explicitly declares to Jacob, “in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 28:14). From among those blessed families Esau is not excluded; he, too, stands under the promise.

The elected Jacob is not expected to dawdle over the question, “Why have some been elected in preference to others?” He is to take it to heart that his business in the world is that God may use him to bless others. The purpose of God in election is clear: the bestowal of His blessings upon as many as will be blessed. The elected man is the instrument of God’s love for all the world. God elects and calls him, not only to a unique status and destiny, but to a unique role and service in history, “to the praise of the glory of his grace” (Eph. 1:6).

### **Israel, the Nation**

The history of Israel is a fascinating revelation of God’s use of men in His mission to save the world. 1 Peter 2:9 gathers together four designations of the O.T. Israel. “Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you.”

Israel is a “chosen generation”. God elected her. Deut. 7 6,7 prevent Israel from understanding her election as the result of her own superior standing. These verses read, “The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people.” Israel’s election is again referred to in Isaiah 43:20 “The beast of the field shall honor me, the dragons and the owl; because I give waters in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert; to give drink to my people, my chosen.” Israel’s God-given role as a “chosen generation” is that she be an exhibit of the marvelous grace of God towards her. Even the creatures will praise God when they see His grace toward Israel: God chose Israel to the praise of His grace; as soon as Israel fails to exhibit God’s grace to the world, Israel is given over to judgement. The Lord accuses, “Thou hast not called upon me, O Jacob; therefore I...have given Jacob to the curse, and Israel to reproaches”. (Is. 43:22,28).

In Exodus 19:5,6 we find the designations “kingdom of priests” and “holy nation” applied to Israel. “Ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation”. Note that the two terms are found in close connection with God’s claim, “All the earth is mine”. In choosing Israel God is not forgetful of the rest of His human creation. In fact, His choosing of Israel is done just in loving remembrance of His whole human creation. Just because all the fallen world is God’s own, He has called Israel to be a kingdom of priests with respect to the world. The world needed a priesthood to minister unto it the grace of God. The Israelites were the God-appointed priests to

the world. As priests they were initiated into the mysteries of God's will; they possessed His Gospel. They did not possess these mysteries in secret but openly ministered unto the world, and not only accidentally, but by design by God's plan. Even so do the priests of the New Testament simultaneously minister unto the Lord and to the world in their worship. While they minister unto the Lord in obedience to His invitation, "This do in remembrance of me", they also, by the same act, minister unto the world for they "do show the Lord's death til he come" (1 Cor. 11:24,26).

The above description of Israel's priestly role suggests that the "hedge about Israel, her peculiar ceremonial laws, was not intended to muffle her witness to the world but to enhance her witness. The hedge was not a barrier to the grace of God but a witness to God's grace. It was a witness to the uniqueness of Israel's Lord the world's Savior. Israel was not to hide behind the hedge in bashful introversion; the hedge was not a cold shoulder of indifference to the world. The hedge was a mighty witness to the world of its only Redeemer. Just as the distinctive doctrines of Wisconsin Synod and Biblical orthodoxy are not to be regarded as inhibitors of mission, but as champions of mission, so also the hedge of ancient Israel had its missionary value in the pluralistic society of the Old Testament.

This understanding of the hedge helps us also to understand Israel's identity as "an holy nation" in the world. Israel was a nation with a difference. She was set apart to God. The holy God dwelt in her. Thus she was not only a light to the world, not only a sun to radiate the Gospel into the world, but she was also a sun room in which the warmth of the divine fellowship could be experienced. Israel served in this capacity, not because God loved her alone but because God loved all the nations, because of His claim, "All the earth is mine". In the wisdom of God the earth needed "an holy nation" in which the world might discover the holy God. Israel's identity as "an holy nation" marks, not her superior character, but her character as a servant of God in the world to show to the world the way to the God who said, "All the earth is mine".

The final Old Testament designation by which Peter describes the Church is "a peculiar people", or "a people for his possession" (Footnote of the RSV). In Exodus 19:5 Israel is identified as a "peculiar treasure" by the same Hebrew word. In Malachi 3:17 that same word is translated "jewels". God purchased His Old Testament jewels and carefully shined them that they might have a cosmetic effect upon the Gospel, that they might have attractive power. Jewels are precious in themselves but they do have a function, too. Their function is to adorn and glorify. God set Israel, His "jewel", in a strange and lovely setting, the ceremonial law, and then placed her at the crossroads of old World traffic. There she was to be an instrument of His plan to save the world. God made Israel His precious jewel, not simply for her own sake, but for the sake of the world.

### **The Psalms**

The Psalms are filled with similar evidence that God called Israel into the service of His mission to save the world. And faithful Israel recognized her calling. As evidence we list Psalms 22:27,28; 68:28-32; and 102:15-22. Dr. Paul Peters (Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. 65, No. 4, October 1968, page 240, in the article "Worldwide Mission: the Work of the Triune God) lists also Psalms 47,95-100, 86, and 102.

We will give special attention to only two Psalms, neither of which appear in the lists above.

In Psalm 67:1,2 we read, "God be merciful to us, and bless us...that thy saving health (may be known) among all nations". Israel here prays that God may deal mercifully with her that

she may become an effective world-wide exhibit of God's mercies. Israel expects God's dealings with her to affect the heathen. She prays for God's mission to be accomplished through herself. In a later verse of the same Psalm Israel shows that she cannot even contemplate her harvests without thinking of the great human harvest God would reap from the Gentile world. Israel rejoices, "Then shall the earth yield her increase...God shall bless us; and all the ends of the earth shall fear Him". Israel sees her harvests not only as personal blessings but as blessings given in the interest of the heathen.

Israel's universal mission is also the theme of Psalm 87. In his Commentary on the Psalms Leupold translates, "I mention Rahab (Egypt) and Babylon among those who acknowledge Me; Behold Philistia and Tyre together with Ethiopia". Leupold comments, "In this Psalm...a particular thought of the preceding is developed more fully, namely, the thought expressed in Ps. 86:9: 'All the nations Thou hast made shall come and bow down before Thee.' (Here is) exuberant praise on the part of Zion herself over the prospect of adding these many outside nations to her citizenship rolls. Therefore the Psalm is eloquent testimony to the high hope of (Israel's) world-wide mission..." Israel envisions her bitterest enemies as reborn citizens of the kingdom. That faithful Israel recognized her mission potential and calling is obvious.

### **Isaiah**

Among the prophets, too, there is the realization that God has called Israel into the service of His mission to the world. Out of all the prophets we select only Isaiah, and from him only a verse or two, as a little sample of the many choice mission tidbits set before us in the prophets.

Is. 49:6 reads, "It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth". Again it is with the heathen in full view that God reminds Israel, "Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen". (Is. 43:10). For Isaiah it is too "light" an understanding of Israel's purpose in the world when she considers her purpose to be her own salvation. She is to understand herself as God's instrument for the gathering of nations.

### **Summary**

God's Old Testament will for the world is summarized in Ezekiel 33:11, "As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live". To achieve this purpose God, already in the Old Testament period was calling men to participate in His mission. The faithful people of God understood themselves to be the agents of His mission. Whenever this understanding was lost, Israel fell under judgement. When Israel lost its salty savor, Amos spoke to them the Lord's judgement, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities (Amos 3:2). God's election and call imply mission responsibility. His faithful people full of the joy of salvation, always understand this responsibility as a privilege; nevertheless, the shirking of the responsibility implies rejection of the call and finally results in God's transferring His call to another people.

## **III. God Calls the Church to Serve in His Mission: The New Testament**

Israel, oft forgiven gradually grew more and more unfaithful and lost her calling as the people of God. First the Northern Kingdom was deported, leaving only Judah. With the defection of Judah as a whole, only the faithful remnant remained as the hope of the world. Christ is born, then, not among Pharisees and Sadducees, but among the poor in whom “the joy of salvation” still lives. He calls twelve to be His disciples. One betrays Him and the other eleven flee. But the risen Christ calls His disciples together. He pours out on them His Spirit and the Church of the New Testament is born.

The New Testament Church is not a nation; it is a gathering of disciples. Discipleship is not by birth or by attainment; it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. “No man can say that Jesus is Lord but by the Holy Ghost” (1 Cor. 12:3). The disciple is a man at the complete disposal of His Lord (Luke 9:57ff). He can walk no other path than that traveled by his Lord (John 15:18; 16:3). What he must surrender for the sake of his walk with Jesus he regards not as loss but as gain (Phil. 3:7). Such an attitude is possible only to a man whose heart has been turned about by the Holy Spirit (John 3:5).

Discipleship implies dedication to the Master’s mission (Matt. 28:18ff). The disciples were commissioned, not just to preach to people who would listen as though finding willing listeners were the sufficient goal of the Church; they were commissioned to “discipleize”, to make disciples, to make people like unto themselves who would carry on the mission of the Lord in the world. It is through the Holy Spirit that the disciples receive courage to witness to Christ in the world and to admit no other alternative. “We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard,” Peter and John say (Acts 4:20) and of their fellow Christians it is written, “They were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31). Everyone who is baptized is given the Holy Ghost (Acts 2:38) and becomes a working member of Christ’s body (1 Cor. 12:13). Of the Thessalonians Paul could write, “Our Gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost.” Consequently he can write (1 Thess. 1:8), “From you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia but also in every place your faith to Godward is spread abroad”. Jesus teaches the same truth in Matthew 10. In verse 20 he explains to His disciples, “It is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you”. So in verse 32 He can very positively assert, “Whosoever shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven”. Individually and as congregations the Holy Spirit constitutes His disciples as witnesses to Christ.

The manner of the mission in the New Testament Church differs from that in the Old Testament Church. The mission of the Old Testament Church was, perhaps entirely, centripetal. Chosen Israel in the center, was to attract to herself the scattered heathen. In the New Testament era God’s will to save the lost is to be achieved by a centrifugal approach to mission. The Church is to send the Gospel and its witnesses out into the heathen world. The charter of the New Testament Church is Christ’s, “As the Father hath sent me even so send I you” (John 20:21), and its bylaws are Matt. 28:18ff.: “Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them... teaching them”.

The impetus for the Church to exercise her centrifugal mission to the world comes from the Holy Spirit. “Ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and in Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The Spirit even breaks down the barrier of language (Acts 2). He annuls the barrier of culture as He sends Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch and as he gives Peter a special vision to assure him that mission is not through incorporation of the Gentiles into the Jewish legal-ceremonial system. (Acts 10:34).

In the Bible it is not color, nationality, cultural advantage, or geography that matter in mission. What matters is: “Has that man heard of Christ?” If he has not, then there is mission responsibility and we don’t wait for him to come to us; we go to him. “There is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: ...whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent?” (Rom. 10:12:15)

The New Testament Church’s commitment to the mission of God is clear also from her identity as “the body of Christ” (Eph. 1:22f and 4:4). A man’s body gives expression to the will of its head. Christ is the Head of the Church. His will is to seek and to save that which was lost. The Church, then, exists to give expression to Christ’s will to save the lost. The Church possesses her sacred identity to reveal to the world her wonderful Savior. Peter puts it this way, “Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”.

How deeply mission is written into the nature of the Church is seen from Paul’s compelling words in 1 Cor. 9:16. He writes, “Though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of; for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel.” Paul, the Apostle, simply can do nothing else than to proclaim the Gospel. He has no other choice. A later verse explains why he has no choice. “This I do for the gospel’s sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you”. Paul shares the Gospel that he may have the Gospel. This astounding truth applies not only to the Apostle but to the Church which is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. We share the Gospel that we may have the Gospel.

We are reminded here of one of those old strings of lights we still use for our Christmas tree. It is a string whose circuit is hooked up in series. When we get it out and plug it in, we almost always find that the string doesn’t work. Then comes the question, “Which one of the bulbs is the offender? Which one of the bulbs isn’t letting the electricity flow through her to get to the rest of the bulbs?” The answer isn’t easy to discover, for all the bulbs look alike. Not one of them has light; even the offending bulb is dark. In not letting the electricity flow through herself to the other bulbs, she herself is dark. So it is with the church. She passes on her light that she may be light.

In Rom. 1:14f. Paul writes, “I am a debtor both to the Greeks and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise. So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are in Rome also”. The Gospel is not Paul’s to possess but to share. Paul is like a newspaper boy. The publisher of the paper works hard to put together a newspaper which he intends for the entire community. He enlists paper boys to help him distribute his newspapers to every home. Each paper boy is entrusted with newspapers to deliver. They are his, not to possess, but to share, to distribute. Until he actually distributes them in the community he stands in debt to the community. He owes the community the news which the publisher printed and delivered to him to share. In thinking about his job, the paper boy is not likely to think, “I have all these papers for myself but I think I’ll go out and share them with somebody else who needs them”. He is more likely to think, “I have these newspapers only because they are intended for the community. I can’t rest until I have distributed them to whomever they belong”.

Even so God wants all men to be saved, not just a select few. God sent His Son to redeem all the world, not just the Church. The Gospel of redemption is intended, therefore, for all the world. The Church already has the Gospel but it is not enough for the Church to think, “We have this glorious Gospel; let us share it with men that need it.” The truth is even stronger; the Church

is bound to think, “This glorious Gospel we have, we have only because it belongs to the world. We owe it to the world.’ Or as Paul says, “I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians...So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the Gospel.

God has called His New Testament Church to serve His mission. Men can accept the call or reject it. Excuses and delays are impossible. When God has called a man, he cannot even say, “But first I want to bury my father.” A man who would excuse himself thus has already answered “no” to God’s call. The man who knows it is God who calls, who knows what God has sacrificed to make that call, and who knows the urgency of the mission, will not delay to take his part in the mission. He will answer either “yes” or—God forbid—“no”.

No disciple will answer “no” to God’s mission call. Jesus Himself warns, “Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). Worship without commitment to the Father’s will is meaningless. Discipleship without mission is impossible. The disciple, on his way to heaven, is always on his way to the world. The Church’s path to heaven is through the lost world. Only in this way can she experience Christ’s presence with her. Christ’s promise, “Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world”, is given to a Church which is “go”ing into all the world, “baptizing” and “teaching”.

#### **IV. The Church is Called to Serve All People in God’s World**

Jonah of old was reluctant to take God’s message of repentance to the heathen people of Nineveh. He would willingly have kept God’s Word in Israel. He even chided God for His willingness to forgive the heathen when they repented. God’s mercy upon the world and its people stands in wonderful contrast to Jonah’s selfishness. But Jonah is not unique. The Church must always resist the Jonah temptation to keep God’s Word and His grace comfortably at home.

Scripture argues that the Church exists to serve the world. Note that word “serve”. The Church regards herself as the servant of the world. She feels no haughty pride over against the unbelieving world. She is a beggar who has received wonderful food and now wants to tell other beggars where they can get more of the same. In that spirit she serves the world. Paul writes to the mission congregation at Corinth, “We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake,” (2 Cor. 12:15). In serving the world we do no more than Paul and no more than Christ who said, “The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

The mission field which the Church serves is no less wide than the world. There is only one God in this world. Paul argued, “Is he the God of the Jews only? Is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also” (Rom. 3:29). Since the Church believes there is one and only one Lord for all the world, she is already by that faith committed to extend His dominion in the world.

The Church finds still better reason for viewing the world as her field in the universal love of her Lord. It is all the world that God loves (John 3:16). It is the world which has been reconciled. “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself” (2 Cor. 5:19). It is all men whom the Lord seeks for salvation. “Our Savior will have all men to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth”. It ought be no surprise, then, that it is all the world into which the Church is sent to do God’s saving work. “Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations”. The Church finds her will for world-wide mission in God’s will to save the world through the Church sent into all the world.

Sometimes our sense of urgency with regard to mission in the world is nothing more than a feeling of nervous insecurity. When we have read about the latest crime wave, or about the latest statistics on juvenile delinquency, or about the declining influence of Christianity, we are tempted to think, “Say, we better get busy and do something or things will really be rough on us in a few years”. In short we have compassion on ourselves instead of the world; but we will try to save ourselves rather than the world. It is really that wicked, persecuting, troublesome world that deserves our pity for the sake of her lost condition and for the sake of her loving Savior.

The faithful Church does not find excuse for laxity in her world-wide mission by reason of the fact that the Gospel has, at some time or other, been preached in all the world. This is a mistaken deduction from Matt. 24:14: “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come”. The Old Adam cleverly reasons that since the globe has already been covered by missionaries, any mission work we do now is just a little bonus we give to God, something above and beyond the call of duty. The opposite is true. What Jesus intends us to understand is that the whole last age before the end is to be an age which is filled with the Church’s activity of going into all the world with the Gospel. Until the end come, the Gospel is to be preached wherever the Church can cause it to be preached. The characteristic of this final age is to be the Church’s preaching of the Gospel in all the world as well as she can.

The preaching of the Gospel in all the world does not refer to activity in foreign missions only. The United States is in the world, too. Its millions are by no means committed disciples of Christ. The world is even to be found right across the street from the church building. A virgin Macedonia can exist hard by a church when the Church worships behind soundproof doors. The people on the outside of the church building cannot hear the Good News unless they are brought in and they are not likely to test the church’s forbidding doors unless they are invited to do so and are actually brought into the church by the witness of the Church. The world is all around us, near and far. The fields everywhere are white unto harvest. God has called us to be His international harvesters. It is urgent that as much harvesting as possible be done before the judgement rains begin to fall.

## **V. The Church is Called to Proclaim the Word**

What is the Gospel which the Church has been called to proclaim in all the world? The Church is called to proclaim those mighty deeds which Paul “delivered unto (the heathen), how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3,4). Vague preaching of a soft-hearted God who forgives is not proclamation of the Gospel. The world is very ready to believe in an affectionate Father and a forgiving Judge. The offense of the Gospel lies in the preaching of Jesus Christ whom the world crucified but whom God raised from the dead. “We preach Christ and him crucified” still is a fine summary of the Church’s apostolic activity.

The Gospel has an excellent handmaiden in the Bad News of the Law. Peter said, “Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). The word “repent” reminds us of Peter’s stern accusations against the Jews spoken a little earlier. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is most effectively proclaimed among a people who have been brought to realize how great a gulf stands between them and the holy God. The Gospel is food for the hungry, balm for the sore oppressed, liberation for captives, and life to the lost. It is Good News to those whose hearts are empty because they have heard the Bad News of their own

inadequacy in the issues of life and death. So the whole counsel of God is useful to be preached in the world, the Law as well as the Gospel, that repentance may be worked and that Christ's forgiveness and our adoption may be appreciated.

The Church in her apostolic activity need not concern herself about revolutionizing social structures through moral pressure. Nevertheless, the Church must call sinners to repentance and she cannot fear to identify the accepted social evils as sin. This is her prophetic task. She just cannot hope effectively to preach the Gospel among a people who do not know the righteous wrath of God against their selfishness and idolatry. Even so, the Church must preach the full counsel of God to her own numbers. Paul earnestly warned and exhorted the early churches, "I...beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called". And he explicitly declared to them the manner of such a worthy walk. Only as the Church is brought to full obedience to the total will of God does her witness become as effective as it can be. The Church's vocal witness to Christ profits much by the supporting witness of a Christlike life.

The mercies of God are proclaimed by deed as well as by word. In "My Fair Lady" Eliza Doolittle sings, "If you're on fire, *show me!*" The world sings that same tune to the Church. The Church has the responsibility to live the redemption and freedom she proclaims. "Words, words, words, I'm so sick of words...Show me!" Eliza shrieks. And the Church has to take it to heart, too, that in proclaiming the full counsel of God she only wears the eardrums unless she is also living her proclamation. Paul wrote of the Corinthians, "Ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ...written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God". The Holy Spirit's Word is read more generally from the life and acts of genuine Christians than from the pages of a book. To live the Gospel is a vital part of proclaiming the Gospel.

But is the word of God really an adequate means of mission in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Is it still relevant to man and his predicament? Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus is assuring at this point. The rich man in hell was concerned about his brothers. He felt, "The Church needs more realistic preaching of damnation. The Church needs someone who can come and really scare the daylights out of my brothers". To this Jesus replies, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them". No man ever loved his brothers more than Jesus loves the world and yet he says, "The Scripture is God's sufficient tool to convert the lost world". If our Lord Jesus is satisfied with the Word as the basic tool of His mission to save the world, we, too, can feel confident to use it among men, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you."

It is for the preaching and teaching of the Word in the world that the Church uses her abundant Spirit-given energy. When Peter and John are warned "not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus," they respond, "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." The Holy Spirit worked that same desire to speak the Word in the larger congregation of believers: it is written of them that "They were all filled with the Holy Ghost and they spoke the word of God with boldness." In Acts 9 Paul was "filled with the Holy Ghost" and "straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God". In Acts 20 the fleeing, persecuted Christians are described as "preaching the word" and "preaching the Lord Jesus". In Acts 13 the Antioch congregation is instructed by the Spirit to separate "Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them". A little later Barnabas and Saul are found in Salamis where "they preached the Word of God." Meanwhile the Antioch congregation, where they had been commissioned, waited eagerly for a report of the results of their preaching of the Word. "And when they were come and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles." The all-

engrossing task of the Church in her service of the world is the preaching of the Word to the conversion of the Gentiles. This work occupies the Church's attention and consumes her energies.

### **Conclusion**

There is an old legend of the Savior and His angels talking together after the Ascension. According to the legend the angels inquired, "How will it go now with your kingdom? Do you have a plan?" Jesus pointed down toward His disciples leaving the Mount of Ascension to return to Jerusalem and said, "I have my disciples." The angels continued to ask, "But if they fail? What plan have you then?" To this Christ replied, "I have no other plan."

The account is legend; the point is Scriptural. We, the Church, are God's mission to save the world. He is depending on us to be His agents. God has still left us in the world for this that we, like Paul, may be "ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God."

In calling us to be His agents and co-workers, Jesus is giving us a chance to find joy. He is giving us a chance to know what can make angels happy. The elder brother of the Prodigal Son fluffed his chance to experience that kind of joy. When his father gave a big party for His repenting Son, all that the older son could think was, "what a lot of fuss and what a lot of waste of my money for a no good sinner!" Meanwhile angels were rejoicing in heaven at the repentance of the lost Son. And what a lot of joy the Church can have in seeing God bless her mission concern and effort. The joy of mission is reflected even in the tone of our hymns: "From Greenland's Icy Mountains", "Hark, the Voice of Jesus Crying", "There Still Is Room" and a host of others. Nor is it any accident that the Sunday on which missions is stressed in our churches is called a festival, Mission Festival. The faithful Church has always looked upon mission, not as a loathsome yoke about the neck, but as a grand and joyous opportunity to make glad the heart of the Savior she loves.

Churches have sometimes pleaded "temporary arrears" as an excuse for delay of vigorous mission activity. Now good stewardship certainly does demand wise fiscal planning but the church which makes such a plea had better be very sure her "temporary arrears" are not due to programs of doubtful significance to the Lord's mission. In all the Church's planning the continuing purpose of the Church to serve all the world with the Gospel must occupy center stage. That is "Our Call to Serve". It is God's call and it does not deserve to be shelved because of "temporary arrears".

Our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is a gathering of baptized persons. Having been baptized, we have been called by God and empowered by the Spirit to serve His mission. With a sense of awe and privilege we acknowledge that "the continuing purpose of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, as a gathering of Christians, is to serve all people in God's world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures". And since the faithful execution of this mission depends upon our Lord, we offer this prayer:

Send Thou, O Lord, to every place  
Swift messengers before Thy face,  
The heralds of Thy wondrous grace,  
Where Thou Thyself wilt come.

Send men whose eyes have seen the King

Men in whose ears His sweet words ring;  
Send such Thy lost ones home to bring;  
Send them where Thou wilt come,

To bring good news to souls in sin,  
The bruised and broken hearts to win;  
In ev'ry place to bring them in  
Where Thou Thyself wilt come.

Thou who hast died, Thy vict'ry claim;  
Assert, O Christ, Thy glory's name  
And far to lands of pagan shame  
Send men where Thou wilt come.

Gird each one with the Spirit's Sword,  
The Sword of Thine own deathless word,  
And make them conquerors, conquering Lord,  
Where Thou Thyself wilt come.

Raise up, O Lord the Holy Ghost,  
From this broad land a mighty host;  
Their war-cry, "We will seek the lost  
Where Thou, O Christ, wilt come".

Hymn 506, The Lutheran Hymnal