

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

PROSELYTIZING AND STEALING SHEEP:
HISTORICAL LUTHERANISM'S PERSPECTIVE ON EVANGELIZING THE HETERODOX

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ABSTRACT

Is it acceptable to evangelize those who are already Christians? Such a question has likely come into the mind of many pastors who have looked to do evangelism but noticed that many of those around them are not unchurched. What should be done to get more people into the pews on Sunday? Can a pastor legitimately reach out to those who already claim a Christian faith but are of a different denomination? In the interest of answering these questions and helping pastors in their evangelism, this thesis examines the matter of proselytizing and stealing sheep from a heterodox congregation. After offering a definition of sheep stealing and proselytizing, it examines the views of historical Lutheranism and what the Scriptures say on this topic. It then presents some principles to consider for doing ministry in an area which is already predominately Christian.

INTRODUCTION

Evangelism is a gospel imperative for all Christ's church. This is made clear in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19, a verse which many Christians can likely recite from memory: "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (NIV). Sharing your faith is something taught to just about every child who has ever taken confirmation class and every adult taken through Bible Information Class. It is a natural desire for all Christians. Jesus says of himself, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). There is only one way to know God and reach heaven, so do we not naturally want all those around us to likewise reach heaven by coming to know the one way, truth, and life?

These waters become muddied when the person who is on the receiving end of our evangelism efforts is already a Christian and a member of some denomination. What should be done if that person already knows and confesses that they are redeemed by the merits of Christ alone? What if that person is aware that their sins are expiated because of Jesus' perfect life and innocent suffering and death? Then we learn that the object of our evangelism is a member of the church just down the road from ours which has all but stripped Scripture of its role as the *norma normans*, the standard to which all other teachings must be held. How does that factor into our discussion? Though this soul seems to have what they need for salvation, they are not hearing sound doctrine from their church. Yet they are, based upon the confession given, a heaven-bound soul.

This will likely not be an uncommon occurrence for any pastor, either. Though the United States Census Bureau has not been able to mandate that people identify their religion when taking the census for some time,¹ their most recent survey found that there are many Christians living in America. The results of the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey led them to estimate that there were 173,402,000 people in the United States who identified as Christian out of a total population estimate of 228,182,000.²

The numbers are certainly not exact. This is an estimate based on a sample size smaller than the total estimate. Not everyone interviewed responded to the question about their religion. Among those who did, the term Christian included groups such as Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. Most importantly, the survey asked only if the interviewee identified with a church, not whether they were members or regular attenders or in good standing. As such, these numbers should not be held as absolutely accurate. Regardless, they do communicate that there are many people like the hypothetical evangelism prospect mentioned earlier. Many pastors will probably serve in an area where there is already a reasonably large Christian population.

For this reason, it will be nearly impossible to get away from the topic of this paper: sheep stealing and proselytizing. Historically, many in the Lutheran church have found the thought of stealing the members of another church to be odious. Yet we still are compelled by the Great Commission to evangelize and spread both the gospel and all the rest of what Christ taught. So, what should we do in reaching out to others with the Word of God? What is it that qualifies as sheep stealing? What constitutes proselytizing? This paper will aim to explore these

1. "Does the Census Bureau Have Data for Religion?," United States Census Bureau, accessed November 8, 2019, https://ask.census.gov/prweb/PRServletCustom/YACFBFye-rFIz_FoGtyvDRUGgIUzu5Mn*!/STANDARD?pyActivity=pyMobileSnapStart&ArticleID=KCP-5050).

2. "Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2012," United States Census Bureau, accessed November 8, 2019, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2011/compendia/statab/131ed/tables/pop.pdf>, 61.

questions, look into the passages of Scripture which have been used to support the stance against sheep stealing and proselytizing in the past, and draw conclusions for how this may impact the outreach ministry of our pastors.

As others have said concerning this matter, these are tricky waters to navigate, with specific application varying from circumstance to circumstance. For this reason, my aim will be to lay down general principles concerning proselytizing. It is my hope that this will help pastors to be conscientious as they seek to evangelize those around them and spread the pure teachings of the Bible. Personally, I would set forth that although proselytizing runs contrary to Scripture, not all forms of reaching out to the heterodox amount to proselytizing. As such, we need to be cautious in our approach to evangelism to the heterodox, not cease those evangelizing efforts.

PART I: THE MATTER OF PROSELYTIZING

Distinction Between Sheep Stealing and Proselytizing

Before getting into the details of proselytizing, definitions should be given for both proselytizing and sheep stealing. Outside the Christian church, these two terms do not have much relation. Sheep stealing would likely only refer to theft of animals outside Christianity, and the idea of proselytizing may be used very broadly in common parlance when speaking of religious outreach efforts.

For the purposes of this paper, the two terms will be tied together, yet we will also make distinctions between them. Doing so will allow for greater precision when talking about trying to win a Christian over from one church to another. Neither term is used in Scripture, and both are infrequent or nonexistent in the writings of older Lutheran authors such as Luther or Walther. As such, this paper will offer a definition of and a distinction between sheep stealing and proselytizing.

Sheep Stealing

As previously stated, there is no direct reference to sheep stealing in Scripture. One can surmise that it comes from John 10, where Jesus likens believers to his sheep, and Acts 20:28, where Paul exhorts the Ephesian elders to keep close watch over the flock of believers over which they have been made overseers. Calling someone a stealer of sheep, then, implies that they are trespassing into the metaphorical flock of another with the intent to take members which are not theirs.

We can develop this sheep stealing into both a broad and narrow sense. In its broad sense, sheep stealing is deliberately seeking out the members of any Christian congregation and attempting to induce them to join one's own church. This only applies to Christian churches where the marks of the church are present. Without these marks, the church is not Christian,

regardless of what the church may claim for itself. This is said in order to exclude churches which would claim to be Christian, such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or Jehovah's Witnesses.

We reiterate that, in order for an endeavor to be considered sheep stealing, the taking of such a member must be the result of some deliberate outreach effort on the part of a church or pastor, as the active sense of the word "stealing" implies. If the member decides to look into a different church and departs of their own free will, that is not considered sheep stealing.

This broader use of sheep stealing tends to be the more common use, and its deliberate nature is what often earns it a negative reputation. Kevin Harney, pastor of Shoreline Community Church in Monterey, California, described the sentiments he and others felt about sheep stealing in these terms: "Throughout my years in ministry, I have heard pastors and church members mention their frustration over the practice of luring church members away. As a matter of fact, I've used the term sheep stealing on a few occasions myself. Many Christians become angry at those pastors and churches who are taking away their church members."³ Regardless of which Christian church claims a member or how it is done, sheep stealing tends to engender resentment.

That resentment is also present in the narrow sense of sheep stealing. This narrow sense we will define as deliberately attempting to influence the member of a church in fellowship with yours, perhaps even one in the same synod or similar organization, to leave their current church and join your church. As in the broader definition, it is only sheep stealing if the pastor or church is intentional in reaching out to such members. Parishioners deciding to transfer their membership to a church in fellowship for their own personal reasons or without the deliberate

3. Kevin and Sherry Harney, *Finding a Church You Can Love* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 100.

meddling of a different church or its pastor would not qualify as sheep stealing in this narrow sense.

This use is not as common among 21st century Christians, but using it in this way helps to distinguish between deliberately trying to entice away orthodox Christians and heterodox Christians. For this reason, the term sheep stealing will be used in the aforementioned narrow sense in this paper, and proselytizing will be used to refer to deliberate outreach to those from heterodox churches.

Proselytizing

The verb “to proselytize” is also not used in God’s Word, but the noun form, “proselyte” is used in four places: Matthew 23:15; Acts 2:10, 6:5, and 13:43. The English word used in those passages is a transliteration of the Greek *προσήλυτος*, a word which was used to speak of foreigners who converted to the Jewish religion. In modern usage, the specificity of converting to the Jewish faith has largely been dropped so that “to proselytize” means “to induce someone to convert to one’s faith,” and the noun “proselyte” means “a new convert.”⁴

In this thesis, we will limit the term “proselytizing” to mean seeking to lead someone from a heterodox Christian church to one’s own Christian church. Though this definition is not to be found in any dictionary, the denotation given above may help understanding here: proselytizing is looking to lead someone away from their different beliefs about Scripture’s teachings and toward one’s own beliefs. As with sheep stealing, this is limited to such activities as are intentionally done as a part of the public ministry of the church.

4. *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1993), 937.

Proselytizing will be the sole focus of what is written here. The focus will be on what pastors can do to evangelize when many of them are surrounded by Christians of some variety. The topic of sheep stealing and taking members from another congregation of the same fellowship will not be examined. Nevertheless, many of the conclusions which are drawn regarding proselytizing may also be applied to sheep stealing. Scripture speaks only of meddling in the ministry of another church, so the proofs drawn from Scripture to support one may just as easily be used to support the other.

Is Proselytizing Permissible?

With such distinctions drawn, we look now to how the church has handled the matter of proselytizing in previous centuries and whether proselytizing is allowable. We will seek to lay out the common principles used by Lutherans in dealing with proselytizing and examine the Scripture used as support for these claims in order to determine how we should approach the matter.

Though personal anecdotes will prove that there is not perfect consensus within Lutheranism regarding proselytizing, many Lutheran writers have voiced disapproval of it. Luther did as much when he wrote, “If the incumbents of the office teach wrongly, what affair is that of yours? You are not called to give account for it.”⁵ Walther likewise condemns the practice: “The preacher should guard against carrying out official functions for those who belong to another parish without the knowledge and consent of the pastor concerned, whether he is orthodox or erring.”⁶

5. Martin Luther, “Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers, 1532,” in *Luther’s Works: Church and Ministry II*, ed. and trans. Conrad Bergendoff, vol. 40, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 391.

6. C. F. W. Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, trans. John M. Drickamer (New Haven, MO: Lutheran News, Inc., 1995), 231.

There are a couple reasons for voicing this disapproval. Some base their displeasure of proselytizing on the Tenth Commandment, but most have argued against proselytizing on the basis of the divine call. The latter uses the doctrine of the church to build the foundation for an argument on the basis of the ministry and the call. Because that argument is the more popular, the doctrines of church and ministry shall receive a more thorough treatment after a brief look at the argument based on the Tenth Commandment.

The Argument from the Tenth Commandment

As mentioned above, a few have protested the practice of proselytizing due to concerns that doing so violates the Tenth Commandment. In *The Shepherd Under Christ*, Schuetze and Habeck warned pastors in regards to making mission calls, “Care must, however, be taken not to become guilty of proselytizing, of violating an existing pastor-member relationship and with it the Tenth Commandment.”⁷

Regrettably, there may be more truth to this reasoning than one may care to admit. Although the ideal would be that pastors are more concerned with spreading God’s Word than with the number of members in their pews, the darkness of sin still skulks in the hearts of every member of God’s saints on earth. The temptation can creep in to focus on having more people in church as an end goal in itself rather than as a means to keep people surrounded by sound doctrine. If a church submits to that temptation, then they do run the risk of proselytizing and violating a pastor-member relationship. If the motivation for doing evangelism is personal satisfaction at seeing a fuller church, then certainly proselytizing breaks the Tenth Commandment.

7. Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd under Christ: A Textbook for Pastoral Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1974), 162.

With that said, this argument is certainly not a categorical condemnation of proselytizing. While it does warn those who evangelize to examine their motives before they do their evangelistic work, it does not condemn those who reach out to the heterodox for reasons other than covetous desires. There are stronger arguments which reject proselytizing as a whole, and those will be examined more closely in what follows.

The Doctrine and Presence of the Church

First, the doctrine of the church is used to set the stage for the doctrine of the public ministry. These two doctrines set the foundation upon which the historic argument for refusing to proselytize is built. There may be some who would argue solely from this doctrine, and that argument will also be examined.

The Marks of the Church and Their Efficacy

In a church where the means of grace are present, there, too, are God's children. As the Lord said through Isaiah, "so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isa 55:11). In this and the verse preceding it, God declares that his Word is always capable of doing what he desires, so it will work on the hearts of those who hear it. Just as the rain is sent from heaven, so is God's Word. Just as the rain never disappears without its intended effect, i.e. watering the ground, so also God's Word will always achieve its purpose.

That purpose is shown elsewhere in the Bible. Paul writes in 1 Tim 2:4 that God "wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." In Rom 10:13-14, he says, "for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?

And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” From these passages it is clear that one effect which the Lord desires from sending his Word and from the use of the sacraments is “the conferring of the forgiveness of sins and the resultant engendering and strengthening of faith.”⁸

This does not mean that everyone who hears the Word of God will have faith; mankind is still able to resist the Holy Spirit’s working of faith. Jesus lamented the human tendency to do just that when he said, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing” (Luke 13:34). Much like Pharaoh, such rejection can result in a person’s heart being hardened further to what the Lord says (Exod 7:13).

While God alone can say which has happened to those who have heard the Bible, it can be said with certainty that where the Bible is proclaimed and preached, Scripture is able to affect conversion. It has the power and ability to do so. The sacraments, because they are inextricably bound to God’s Word when administered properly, can have the same effect. Because of this power, the means of grace function as the marks of the church, indicators which show that God’s church is present. As Adolf Hoenecke wrote, “Scripture teaches that we should assume God’s children are certainly present where the preaching of the gospel resounds and the sacraments are administered according to their institution.”⁹

8. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953), 3:108.

9. Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, trans. James Langebartels et al., 4 vols. (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1999–2009), 4:169.

Presence of the Invisible Church Among the Erring

Such an assumption should also be made regarding heterodox churches. In 1 John 4:2, the apostle says, “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.” He does not limit this to one specific spirit rather than another. Any and every spirit, i.e. a person bearing a religious confession,¹⁰ which has this particular confession is from God. Because God’s Word is efficacious, these spirits can be anywhere that the Lord causes that Word to be preached.

Luther saw proof of this in Galatians 1:2, where Paul declares his letter to be “To the churches in Galatia.” In his lectures on Galatians, Luther notes a key point raised by Jerome: how can Paul call these groups churches when they have shown themselves to be quick to desert the gospel?¹¹ In Galatians 1:6–9, Paul chastises the Galatians for abandoning the true gospel in favor of what is not any gospel at all.

To explain this, Luther says that Paul is employing *synecdoche*, calling the whole group churches even though many of the individual members may have been led astray by the Judaizers. “Even if the church is ‘in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation,’ as Paul says to the Philippians (2:15), and even if it is surrounded by wolves and robbers, that is, spiritual tyrants, it is still the church.”¹² Walther likewise views this as proof that there are children of God in heterodox churches: “When the holy apostle denominates the called Galatians ‘congregations’ or ‘churches’ (Gal. 1:2: ‘To the Churches of Galatia’) this proves conclusively

10. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude*, Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), 484.

11. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1–4*, ed. and trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 26 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 24.

12. Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, 24.

that also in such communions as have been misled by false teachers into error and have largely departed from Christ there remains the hidden seed of the church of true believers.”¹³

The support for this is strengthened by examining the rest of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. Not only does Paul refer to the groups there as churches, he addresses them as his brothers nine times throughout the book, emphasizing their unity in the faith. In Gal 4:28, Paul makes it even clearer by saying “Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise.” Despite their turning away from the true gospel, Paul still recognizes the presence of Christians among them. Even though false teachers had snuck in and begun to teach them false doctrine (Gal 2:4), there were believers in Galatia.

This same principle is used in regards to other groups in Christianity. Despite the harsh language he used in addressing the Roman Catholic Church, Luther was willing to call it holy, for

Although the city of Rome is worse than Sodom and Gomorrah, nevertheless there remain in it Baptism, the Sacrament, the voice and text of the Gospel, the Sacred Scriptures, the ministries, the name of Christ, and the name of God. Therefore the Church of Rome is holy, because it has the holy name of God, the Gospel, Baptism, etc.¹⁴

He likewise states that “where the enthusiasts and factious spirits [*Rottengeister*] are ruling” the holy church may be found, “provided they do not utterly deny and reject the Word and the sacraments.”¹⁵

A careful distinction should also be made between what the teachers teach and the members of congregation believe. Concerning the members of Arian churches, the church father

13. C. F. W. Walther, *Church and Ministry*, trans. John Theodore Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia, 1987), 101.

14. Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, 24.

15. Martin Luther, *Detailed Interpretation of the Epistle to the Galatians*, 1535, St. Louis ed., 9:44, quoted by Walther in *Church and Ministry*, 104.

Hilary says that even though the intent behind the words is a perversion of the Bible, proper terms were used by Arian church leaders, and so their lay people may still become believers. “The ears of the people are holier than the hearts of the priests...” he wrote.¹⁶ Speaking about the enthusiasts again, Luther wrote, “No Christian can or should pray for the enthusiasts [Schwärmer] nor take up their cause.... I am speaking of their teachers. May our dear Lord Jesus Christ help the poor people that are under them against these murderers of souls.”¹⁷

The situation remains the same today. In spite of the continued synergistic errors of the Roman Catholic Church, the marks of the church are present there. Though there continues to be doctrinal decay among Lutheran church bodies which may have been orthodox in the past, the means of grace are still present in those denominations. Therefore, it must be assumed that there are believers present in those churches even if the spiritual leaders mix heresy into their teaching.

The Argument from the Doctrine of the Church

Some may say that the statements given thus far are reason enough not to proselytize. The thought of the argument would be that such proselytizing would be a denial of the potential for believers to be found among other churches. Proselytizing could then be viewed as a declaration that there is no salvation outside of one’s own church or those in fellowship with it. Making such a statement would be falling into the same error which historically plagued the Roman Catholic Church, which Walther noted as occasionally happening in his day: “Formerly the papists defended the false doctrine now under review; now Lutherans dare to set up the claim against

16. Hilary of Poitiers, *Lib. adv. Auxentium*, 215, quoted by Walther in *Church and Ministry*, 113.

17. Martin Luther, *Brief Confession of the Holy Sacrament Against the Enthusiasts*, 1544, St. Louis ed., 20:1771, quoted by Walther in *Church and Ministry*, 104.

them that the Lutherans, aye, the Lutherans, are the Church outside of which there is no salvation.”¹⁸

While this argument does raise good points, it is not ironclad. First, people can and do reach the conclusion that a given church body believes themselves to be the only church to have salvation even without their proselytizing. When a pastor points to the false doctrines of a different church while teaching a Bible class, some might hear that as a statement that none in that church will be saved. This possibility does not mean that the pastor should avoid condemning the prevalent errors with which his parishioners might have contact. The possibility of misunderstandings like the one mentioned above does not mean that the pastor believes his church to be the only place where salvation is found. Rather, such a potentiality means that the pastor must explain that errors do not necessarily preclude salvation.

In that same vein, it is not any truer that a proselytizing pastor believes his synod to be the only saving church than it is true that the aforementioned pastor instructing his people believes that about his church. That potential to be misunderstood calls more for careful speaking when proselytizing than a cessation of proselytizing.

Second, to proselytize would not necessarily be a denial of the efficacy of Scripture and the presence of the faithful within heterodox churches. Those who undertake such endeavors could just as easily see their actions as acts of love. Such actions could be seen as opportunities to keep scattering the seed of the gospel and hope that it takes root in those heterodox who do not have faith. Such evangelism could be seen as an encouragement to the believers among heterodox churches to flee error and all which is harmful to faith. The orthodox Christians who are reaching out to the heterodox are seeking for the heterodox the maturity Paul mentions in

18. C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986), 336.

Eph 4:14–15. They do so in order that those who are currently tossed to and fro by false teachings may become mature and stable in the true faith. The ultimate goal would be pointing out errors, then joining an orthodox church would follow naturally. As Walther said, “Every Christian for the sake of his salvation is in duty bound to acknowledge and adhere to orthodox congregations and orthodox pastors, wherever he can find such.”¹⁹

This is by no means condoning such outreach efforts, but as an exercise it shows the weakness of this argument against proselytizing. Though the doctrines of the church and the efficacy of God’s Word do caution against believing that there is only one visible church body which saves, these doctrines do not completely condemn the practice of proselytizing.

When the Marks Are Not Present

The thoughts explored previously apply wherever the marks of the church are present. In those settings, the presence of errors does not rob God’s Word of its power and efficacy. Luther says, “For Baptism, the Gospel, etc., do not become unholy because I am defiled and unholy and have a false understanding of them. On the contrary, they remain holy and exactly what they were, regardless of whether they are among the godly or ungodly; men can neither defile them nor hallow them.”²⁰ There is a point, however, at which the Word has been so twisted that it no longer functions as a mark of the church. As an example, we now look at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

The Latter-Day Saints have the Bible in their church and make extensive use of it. As they say, “The Latter-day Saints have a great reverence and love for the Bible. They study it and try to live its teachings. They treasure its witness of the life and mission of the Lord Jesus

19. Walther, *Church and Ministry*, 136.

20. Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, 25.

Christ.”²¹ Even though they think so highly of Scripture, it is not a mark of the church among them. They will readily admit that it is not a complete testament to the will of God, so it needs to be supplemented by the *Book of Mormon*, *The Doctrine and Covenants*, and *The Pearl of Great Price*. Their use of such supplements is due to their belief that the Bible as it exists today is riddled with errors and in need of correcting, a task which is seen to by the above-mentioned books.²²

With this additional material adopted, God’s revelation takes on an entirely new character. All humans are divine in their nature, though that divine nature is now stifled and suppressed. Jesus’ work as Savior was not only done to free mankind from their sins, but also to unlock the potential within all people to develop their divine nature and become more like God, their Heavenly Father. In fact, by practicing godliness, people are able to become gods themselves.²³

By taking this brief look at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, we see that the visible presence and use of the Bible does not mean that the marks of the church, the means of grace, are present. Regardless of what they claim, the Mormons empty the Bible of its meaning and message, and in its place they leave an entirely different picture of humanity and salvation. Of course, there are many more errors which could be discussed in addition to these.

21. “Bible, Inerrancy of,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/bible-inerrancy-of?lang=eng>.

22. “Bible, Inerrancy of,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/bible-inerrancy-of?lang=eng>.

23. “Becoming Like God.” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Accessed November 10, 2019. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/becoming-like-god?lang=eng>.

Because of these errors, Carl Lawrenz wrote concerning them and other sects like them, “Here the marks of the church are wholly missing and thus indicate no presence of the church.”²⁴

In such churches, direct outreach is acceptable. Edward Lindemann wrote, “It is not sheep-stealing or proselytizing to actually call on members of non-Christian churches ... with the intention of winning them over to the truth and persuading them to join a Christian congregation.”²⁵ Likewise Lawrenz: “Their members are a legitimate object of our evangelism thrust, and approaching them with our witness is not objectionable proselytizing.”²⁶ Because churches and sects like the Mormons lack the marks of the church, they can be seen as entirely outside of the church. As such, orthodox believers ought to evangelize them as part of Christ’s command to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19). Just as Paul freely proclaimed the gospel to those who held to a polytheistic religion (Acts 25:16–34), Christians who possess the marks of the church may boldly do the same to churches which lack the marks of the church.

The presence or absence of the means of grace is not always so easily discerned as it is in the Mormon church, however. Sometimes a church body may issue an official statement of belief with which some of its constituent congregations disagree. Synods may not have a strong confessional statement around which all of the individual parishes rally. Regardless of the difficulties involved, it has historically been believed that pastors must put in the work to see whether the churches surrounding them bear the marks of the church.²⁷ If the marks are present,

24. Carl Lawrenz, “A Definitive Study of Proselytizing” (paper presented February 4, 1975), <https://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/2919/LawrenzDefinitive.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, 7.

25. Ed Lindemann, “Sheep-Stealing: What Is It and When Does It Occur?” (paper presented to the Crow River Conference of the Minnesota District, September 19, 1973), <https://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/3118/LindemannSheep-Stealing.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, 6.

26. Lawrenz, 7.

27. Lawrenz, 7.

then it is to be assumed that the true Church is present, even if the Church takes the form of only a few individuals.²⁸

The Presence of the Keys Among All Churches

Finally, all believers, as members of the universal priesthood, have been entrusted with the use of the keys. These they have received directly from Christ, as can be seen from Matt 16:19, 18:18 and John 20:23.²⁹ Faith is all that is required to receive this and all the blessings which Christ gives to his church.³⁰ Since both the orthodox and the heterodox can be Christians, the faithful in both groups have the keys.

The Doctrine of the Ministry

The doctrine of the ministry builds on what has been said about the presence of the church and of believers being among the orthodox and heterodox alike. It is the primary thrust of the historic argument against proselytizing and gives the best reason for prohibiting it. Because the heterodox have the keys, the argument runs, they, too, are able to call.

The Right of the Heterodox to Validly Call a Public Minister

As regards who may extend a call, the consensus shown below has been that so long as there are Christians in a church, those Christians have the ability to issue a valid call. Walther qualified a valid call as one which is “extended by those who have the right and authority from God to do so.”³¹ Luther, in speaking about who may issue such a call, wrote,

28. Hoenecke, 4:169.

29. Pieper, 3:413.

30. Walther, *Church and Ministry*, 49.

31. Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, 21.

Where there is a holy Christian church, there must be all Sacraments, Christ himself, and His Holy Spirit. Should we now be a holy Christian church and have the greatest and most necessary things, such as God's Word, Christ, Spirit, faith, prayer, Baptism, the Sacrament, keys, the [pastoral] office, etc., and should not have also the most minor things, namely the authority and right to call some persons to the office, to administer to us the Word, Baptism, the Sacrament, forgiveness [Absolution] (which are already there), and to serve in those things?... Where would Christ's Word be where He says, Matt. 18:20: 'Where two or three, etc.'?³²

Walther quoted a few other of Luther's writing to show that any and every Christian has the right to issue a call. Then he voiced his assent to Luther's position and concluded that neither the social standing of the ones issuing a call nor the number of them in a group has any bearing on the validity of the call which they issue.³³

In answering the question of who has a divine call, Erwin Scharf asserted that pastors, assistant pastors, vicars, professors, male and female teachers, Sunday school teachers, choirmasters, and many more have divine calls. They have valid calls because a group of Christians, regardless of their size, has shown their desire for such people as those listed previously to serve them in a way relating to the use of the keys, in some capacity or another. If those who receive such a request accept it, then there is a valid divine call.³⁴

While heterodox churches are neither the reason for Scharf's essay nor a focus in this part of the essay, his point still applies. The public ministry is discharging the use of the keys on behalf of those who have extended the call. If the group which issued the call includes those who have been given the keys, then they have the right to call a minister to use those keys.

32. Martin Luther, *Writing on Corner Masses and the Consecration of Priests*, 1533, Walch, XIX, 1565, quoted by Walther in *Pastoral Theology*, 22.

33. Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, 22–23.

34. Erwin Scharf, "The Call to the Public Use of the Keys," in *Our Great Heritage*, vol III, ed. Lyle W. Lange and G. Jerome Albrecht (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1991), 504.

The number of believers over against the number of heretics present in the calling body also does not impact the validity of the call. Just as there are hypocrites in the midst of orthodox visible churches, there are orthodox Christians in heterodox Christian churches. Just as the presence of those hypocrites does not nullify the validity of the orthodox church's call, so the presence of the heterodox Christians in heterodox congregations does not invalidate the call issued by the believers in their midst. Even if it is a group of but two or three Christians in those circumstances, the call is valid. Studtmann emphasized the small number of Christians necessary for such a call: "The calling of a pastor or a teacher is the sovereign right of the Christian congregation, though only two or three compose that congregation. (Matt. 18:20.) As certainly as all spiritual rights, powers, and keys belong to them, just as certainly they have the right to call for themselves one of the 'evangelists, pastors, or teachers'..."³⁵

Because it is a valid call, it is also a divine call. For passages which prove this, Scharf pointed to Matt. 23:34, 28:20; Acts 26:16, 13:2,4; and 1 Corinthians 4:1 to show that the immediate calls³⁶ in the Bible were divine, and then to Acts 20:28 as proof that the mediate calls³⁷ held by those outside the number of the apostles are also divinely given.³⁸ Thus even the calls of the heterodox are given by God, and their ministry should not be violated.

Staying Within the Bounds of One's Call

Since the calls held even by erring preachers are divinely given, many Christians have stated that to try and reach out to that minister's members is trying to shepherd a flock God has entrusted to

35. H. Studtmann, "Authority in the Church with Special Reference to the Call," in *The Abiding Word*, vol I, ed. Theodore Laetsch (St. Louis: Concordia, 1946), 434.

36. i.e. calls extended by God without using any church or individual as intermediaries

37. i.e. call extended through a church or individual

38. Scharf, 498–499.

another. Thus, doing so violates Paul's instruction in Acts 20:28 to tend to those members of God's flock over whom you have been made overseer.

Regarding preaching in a parish without invitation, Luther wrote,

It is not lawful for me to forsake my assigned station as a preacher, to go to another city where I have no call, and to preach there. (As a doctor of divinity, of course, I could preach throughout the papacy, provided that they let me.) I have no right to do this even if I hear that false doctrine is being taught and that souls are being seduced and condemned which I could rescue from error and condemnation by my sound doctrine.³⁹

Even in the case of a situation as dire as people being led toward condemnation by false teaching, Luther refused to intrude upon that congregation and preach there. It was wrong and unlawful for him to do so, no matter how much he may desire to save the souls of that parish.

It should be noted that when Luther speaks of the unlawfulness of such a situation, his context was that of a time when the state and the church were not so separated as they are today. Shortly after the previous quote, he speaks of a prince or magistrate giving him a call, and that then his call would be a "command of God" spoken by a prince. That, he says, is a true call.⁴⁰ For Luther, preaching without authorization from the proper authorities would be unlawful not only because he would be intruding upon the call of another, but also because that preaching would be violating the will of the temporal authorities.

Even with this understanding of Luther's historical setting, it would be incorrect to say that Luther only found such practices disagreeable because they disregarded government mandates. We see him point out that he has the necessary qualifications to preach in any Catholic church, but he attaches one proviso: the Catholics themselves must permit him to do so. It is not

39. Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, 18.

40. Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, 18.

the prince or magistrate who must grant him permission, but those who are a part of “the papacy,” meaning the bishops or priests, in whose churches he would be preaching.⁴¹

In the same way, in his exposition of Psalm 82 Luther recognized that during the Apostolic Period, before caesaropapism and confusion of church and state crept into the church, each bishop and pastor would have had their own sphere of activity. “In it no one else, no stranger, should undertake to instruct his parishioners, either publicly or privately, without his knowledge and permission,” he wrote.⁴² While the sin against the law of the land was part of the reason why Luther decried such practices, he also believed that no preacher had any business peddling his trade in a place where another was rightly called to serve.

In its first convention in 1872, the Synodical Conference agreed with Luther. The delegates present laid out six different theses on the topic of outreach to the English population of America, and the first two theses showed the Synodical Conference weighing in on the topic of proselytizing. In the first thesis, they recognized that they all have a duty to witness to the English-speaking population of America in accord with the Great Commission. In the second, various excuses one might use to escape this responsibility were listed and shown to be invalid.⁴³

One such excuse is that there are already heterodox churches seeing to the spiritual needs of those who spoke English. The refutation goes: “*for though it recognizes the church rights of the existing congregations in spite of their heterodoxy* [emphasis Lawrenz’s], the rights of the preachers called by these congregations obviously do not extend beyond the circle of those who are involved in their calling, while everything outside of their circle is open territory.”⁴⁴ The

41. Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, 18.

42. Martin Luther, *Exposition of Psalm 82*, 1530, V, quoted by Walther in *Pastoral Theology*, 231.

43. *Verhandlungen der ersten Versammlung der Ev. Luth. Synodal-Conferenz von Nord-Amerika zu Milwaukee, Wis., vom 10. bis zum 16. Juli, 1872*, quoted by Lawrenz in “A Definitive Study of Proselytizing,” 3.

Synodical Conference readily acknowledged that the pastors of these heterodox churches had their own rights and that evangelism directed at their members would be unfitting. They did not see the unfitting nature of such outreach as something which should entirely stop their outreach efforts while there were many outside these heterodox churches, however. This exception to the general rule shall be examined in closer detail later.

In reflecting on those theses, Lawrenz stated support for the position they advocated: “Those who have called a spiritual shepherd have a relation to this shepherd for which he bears the responsibility before God, so that we may not interfere directly with this relationship.”⁴⁵ Lindemann, too, believed that each pastoral call has its own designated scope: “The shepherd is not called to shepherd the whole flock of Christ but only that portion over the [sic] which the Holy Ghost has made him shepherd. God determines the place where the preacher is to preach and the teacher is to teach.... He determines the number of sheep and lambs which His shepherds are to feed.”⁴⁶ Schuetze and Habeck also supported this position by stating, “Those people who are members of a church that confesses the one true God (the triune God, including recognition of Jesus as God) and acknowledge redemption through Christ cannot be considered ‘unchurched.’ Treating them as prospects is to interfere in another church’s ministry (Ac 20:28; 1 Pe 4:15).”⁴⁷

These arguments form the backbone of the reason why proselytizing goes against God’s will. Those who have a call are each meant to work within the area and portion of God’s flock over which they have been appointed as overseers. In his farewell to the Ephesian elders, Paul

44. *Verhandlungen der ersten Versammlung*, quoted by Lawrenz, 3.

45. Lawrenz, 5.

46. Lindemann, 2.

47. Schuetze and Habeck, 237.

said, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). The translation of the NIV might give the wrong impression. There are not two separate commands, one to keep watch over one’s own flock and one to shepherd all of God’s people. The infinitive ποιμαίνειν here carries a purpose idea: overseers keep watch over their own flock *in order to* shepherd the church of God. If each appointed overseer keeps close watch over his own people, then the task of shepherding the whole flock will run smoothly.

Peter gives a similar encouragement in his first epistle: “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be” (1 Pet 5:2). Peter also speaks of his recipients having their own flocks which they should tend, flocks which are τὸ ἐν ὑμῶν ποίμνιον, “the among you flock.” He wants the elders who receive his letter to recognize that they have their own sphere of activity. Excluding the elders from working among other flocks is not in focus, but the nature of the command will lead to that exclusion as a result. So long as they are seeing to what has been entrusted to them, they will be busy enough to not be interfering in another’s sphere.

Though neither passage gives a strict prohibition against ministering to the sheep entrusted to another, the implication is certainly present. If the elders were to see to all the church of the Lord, then the limitation to keep to their own flocks given here would be out of place. These same exhortations can be given to pastors and others acting on behalf of their churches today. There is a flock which they ought to serve, and the same is true of every other church where a valid call is in place. As the first century elders were not to intrude in the churches under their brothers’ care, pastors today must leave churches in the hands of the one who holds the call to serve.

This fact is emphasized by the mention by Paul that the Holy Spirit is the one who appointed these men to be overseers. The divinity of the call should give one pause for consideration before attempting to reach out and take into one's own church a member who is already being served. It is God's will that the pastor serve his particular parish, and that is true of both pastors and those working "as the pastor's assistants, under a call," as Lawrenz said it.⁴⁸ It is also true of the heterodox preacher, even of the heretical preacher, if he has a call extended to him by members of God's flock. For this reason, the words of that Synodical Conference convention could very well be directed to the ministers of modern orthodox churches, too: "the rights of the preachers called by these congregations obviously do not extend beyond the circle of those who are involved in their calling."⁴⁹

Such principles do not exclude a congregation from doing mission work, however. Paul and Peter were not saying that Christians need some form of call or divine appointment to preach the gospel; they were emphasizing that each man had his own part of the invisible church to look after. In the case of reaching out to those who were still outside the Christian church, the commands of Jesus and the apostles to tell the world the good news of Jesus Christ (Matt 28:19–20; Mark 16:15; 1 Pet 3:15) gave legitimacy to those outreach efforts. For churches today, too, no one need feel that having a call is a necessity before reaching out with the gospel.

Use of 1 Peter 4:15 and Proselytizing

1 Peter 4:15 is another passage frequently cited when making the case against proselytizing, as the following show. Schuetze and Habeck cited it as biblical testimony against meddling in the

48. Lawrenz, 8.

49. *Verhandlungen der ersten Versammlung*, quoted by Lawrenz, 3.

work of another church.⁵⁰ Walther pointed to this passage as a condemnation against meddling in the ministry of another, and while he was aware that English translations of his day tended to make the meddling more general than ministry-oriented meddling, he believed that interfering in another's call is the primary focus.⁵¹ Wayne Fischer, in his paper regarding proselytizing, said that this verse is “a general passage but it surely applies to the area of evangelism also.”⁵²

The word around which much of this argument hinges is the Greek ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος, “a word whose meaning has not yet been determined w. [sic] certainty.”⁵³ Walther cites Luther as translating this as one who “reaches into another's office,” and seems to imply that the etymology of the word gives us some insight into what sort of meddling is meant here.⁵⁴ That etymology is a combination of the words ἀλλότριος and ἐπίσκοπος, with the former meaning “not one's own,” and the latter being defined as an “overseer or supervisor” in Christian circles.⁵⁵

Lawrenz agreed with Walther's view, saying, “We will readily grant that the context of 2 Peter 4:15 [sic] does not fully establish that the activity of the *allotriepiskopos* mentioned there is restricted to meddling in the public ministry of another; but there can be no doubt that it above all applies also to this kind of meddling.” He went on to condemn it strongly:

Let us not fail to note that the activity of the *allotriepiskopos*, of a busybody in other men's matters, is lined up with that of a murderer, and of a thief, and of an evildoer. Let

50. Schuetze and Habeck, 237.

51. Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, 232.

52. Wayne L. Fischer, “Proselytizing” (paper delivered to the South-Central Pastor-Delegate Conference in Birmingham, Alabama, October 1–3, 1979), <https://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/1448/FischerProselytizing.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, 5.

53. BDAG, s.v. “ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος.”

54. Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, 232.

55. BDAG, s.vv. “ἀλλότριος,” “ἐπίσκοπος.”

us also take to hear that if we would come to suffer something because we have made ourselves guilty of being such a meddler we would not, as the Apostle Peter points out, be suffering as a Christian, we would not be partakers of Christ's suffering. It is not a light thing to disregard or to act contrary to any of the scriptural truths concerning Christ's church of believers and of its ministry. It is not a light thing ... to make light of the sacredness of a divine call in itself, even though the person who has that call misuses it and does not carry it out faithfully.⁵⁶

This passage from 1 Peter seems to condemn proselytizing more directly than the other passages listed previously. While the former passages detailed Paul and Peter telling the elders listening to them to focus on the souls entrusted to their care, here Peter gives a prohibition against meddling in the affairs of others. In this passage the NIV does not quite capture the force which Peter applies when it translates, "If you suffer, it should not be..." The NIV changes the imperative, "let no one of you suffer," into a conditional. The trouble with this change is that it fails to show as strongly that such suffering is something which should not happen among his audience.

The translation of the NIV does, however, show that there is a certain degree of attention given to ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος. The Greek reads, "ὡς φονεὺς ἢ κλέπτῃς ἢ κακοποιὸς ἢ ὡς ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος." While the crimes of murder, theft, and general evildoing are put together by sharing a ὡς, ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος stands apart from them with its own ὡς. The additional ὡς shows that even being an ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος is worthy of some suffering, even though people may not normally think it belongs alongside murder, theft, and evildoing. As Lenski notes, the repetition "places this fourth term beside the three that precede as denoting a crime of a separate and different class."⁵⁷

56. Lawrenz, 6.

57. Lenski, 208.

The difficulty in claiming that 1 Pet 4:15 certainly prohibits proselytizing is that the issue ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος is describing is not well-defined. The Greek lexicon compiled by Liddell, Scott, and Jones (LSJ) uses the definition “busybody in other men’s matters,” and has no citations aside from this passage.⁵⁸ As previously cited, the lexicon assembled by Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich (BDAG) is also not sure how to translate. It, too, offers the translation of “busybody,” but notes that something so minor would not seem to result in the suffering mentioned in the context of this passage. As alternatives, the lexicon proposes “concealer of stolen goods,” “spy,” and “revolutionist.”⁵⁹ Lenski, also recognizing this difficulty, prefers a meaning which would fit the severity of murder and theft better, such as “a political ‘agitator,’ *Aufrehrer*, whom the authorities must squelch.”⁶⁰

In the context of 1 Pet 4, however, it seems best to keep the definition as a general busybody. Because there do not appear to be any earlier uses of the word, it is possible that the word originates here, so a definition based on its etymology would seem likely and tenable. In that case, the word would likely refer to a general “busybody,” someone who pursues what is in the “guardianship”⁶¹ of “another.”

As Lawrenz and Walther wrote, however, the idea of the Christian office of ἐπίσκοπος would likely have been part of the intended meaning. Outside of 1 Peter, a form of ἐπίσκοπος is used four other times: Acts 20:28; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:2; and Titus 1:7. In all of these occurrences, it is used to mean an overseer in the Christian church or someone who shepherds a congregation.

58. LSJ, s.v. “ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος.”

59. BDAG, s.v. “ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος.”

60. Lenski, 208.

61. BDAG, s.v. “ἐπίσκοπος.”

1 Peter was likely written in roughly the same timeframe as the four books previously mentioned, so the idea of an ἐπίσκοπος as a figure in the Christian church would have been established in the mind of this letter's recipients. For this reason, Peter quite likely would have had in mind the idea of involving oneself in the affairs of another's ministry if indeed he coined this term.

With all of this in mind, it does seem best to consider an ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος to be a general busybody, but with meddling in another's ministry being a part of the intended meaning. David Kuske understood the word as a person who is "a self-appointed 'overseer' (ἐπίσκοπος) who 'meddles in the affairs of other people' (ἀλλοτρι)."62 The seeming insignificance of being a busybody could also account for the additional ὡς preceding ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος. While the other three are similar in thought and severity, this seems minor enough that one would not assume it to be a cause for the same suffering as awaits those who perpetrate the other three sins. To bring this thought across, the NIV's translation of "even as a meddler" works well.

With all of this in mind, 1 Peter 4:15 may constitute the most direct argument against proselytizing. If the concept is tied into the verse by the word ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος, then it is directly forbidden by μὴ ... πασχέτω. Because of that prohibition, Lawrenz's condemnation should be borne in mind. The suffering a person might endure for proselytizing is contrasted against the suffering endured by Christians. To meddle in the call of another is a sin and is no small matter. Though it may not be recognized, such meddling is ignoring the rights God gives to those who have received a divine call.

62. David P. Kuske, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Peter, Jude* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2015), 225.

Being Approached by a Member of Another Church

Despite the aforementioned strong warnings against attempting to proselytize the members of another Christian congregation, giving answers to a member of such a congregation who approaches a member or pastor in our synod to ask questions or seek membership is not condemned as proselytizing. In those circumstances, there is complete agreement that providing a witness to our beliefs is not only acceptable in God's eyes, but expected.

Walther said that in the event that a pastor is approached by believers who have “renounced their preachers and congregations because of false doctrine or tyrannical practice, the preacher cannot reject them, even if they are under an unjust excommunication.”⁶³ Likewise in *The Shepherd Under Christ*: “When, however, members of erring Christian churches seek information in their search for the truth, a forthright answer must follow without fear that this could raise the charge of proselytizing.”⁶⁴

After his criticisms of the notion of proselytizing, Lawrenz also noted that there are options available for providing an orthodox witness to those Christians who have endured error. He observed that pastors and lay members alike have many contacts with such Christians, and orthodox believers should learn to notice these opportunities and take full advantage of them. Though one cannot approach such conversations as a called worker or representative of the congregation without being guilty of proselytizing, all Christians are part of God's royal priesthood and are therefore able to make use of those opportunities for giving a testimony as universal priests.⁶⁵

63. Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, 231.

64. Schuetze and Habeck, 237.

65. Lawrenz, 8.

Though it does take training, experience, practice, and much prayer, the benefits to be gained by learning to capitalize on such opportunities are tremendous. By using a “very brief incisive testimony,” one can potentially set the mind of the other person in motion to think about the topic at hand in a more spiritual way. In the example of abortion, Lawrenz wrote, “do not content yourself by merely confessing that it is murder, but that it is murder by which a human being also redeemed by the blood of Christ is robbed of his time of grace, the real purpose of all earthly life since the fall.”⁶⁶

All of these encouragements to provide a witness of the true Christian faith flow from Peter’s encouragement in 1 Pet 3:15, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” As long as the members of orthodox Christianity are being asked about their beliefs rather than targeting members of another church body for outreach, no harm is done by proclaiming the truth in an attempt to combat error.

A Condemnation of Proselytizing, But Not Evangelism

By all of the preceding arguments the Lutheran Church has historically opposed the idea of proselytizing. Though there would almost certainly be others who would see no problem with reaching out to those who have fallen into false doctrine, those who hold such a stance do not seem to have recorded that sentiment. As such, it can be said that the general agreement in Lutheran circles has been that those who are already active members of a church where the marks of the church are found should not be considered prospects for evangelism. Considering what has been written in the Bible, it would be best to continue to hold to this position. Proselytizing is a practice which should be avoided and discouraged in the Lutheran church.

66. Lawrenz, 8.

Rather than look to erring Christians to find our mission field, the attention of the church should be directed elsewhere. Luther saw that the church could keep itself busy without pursuing the members of another church. “We have enough to do if we want to carry out what had been commanded,” he wrote, comparing the forbidden work of preaching to Catholics to the rest of the work which the pastor is already commanded to do.⁶⁷ Fischer, making his point rather strongly, directed his readers to a field already filled with grain ready for harvest even without looking to those poisoned with false doctrine: “Many are the people who are without the Gospel and the message of the forgiveness of their sins in the blood of Jesus Christ the Lord. Let us make haste to reach these people who are truly our responsibility. Such people have no Word of Life. Such people have no Christian guidance.”⁶⁸

This does not leave believers without recourse in presenting this witness to those who suffer false doctrine, however. The mandate to give an answer regarding our faith is still to be observed, and there is encouragement to prepare for those circumstances. If someone begins opening the door, then we are still told to bear witness and share the truths of Scripture free from guilt.

The prohibition against proselytizing also does not call for believers to stop their work of spreading the good news to those who do not have it. Rather than a cessation of mission work, this calls for careful preparation on the part of those who seek to reach out to the lost lest they become guilty of proselytizing. What a pastor should consider as he and his evangelism committee look to undertake outreach in predominately Christian areas forms the basis for the next part of this paper.

67. Luther, *Exposition of Psalm 82*, quoted by Walther in *Pastoral Theology*, 232.

68. Fischer, 6.

PART II: PASTORAL PRACTICE TO AVOID PROSELYTIZING

Principles to Bear in Mind

Defining proselytizing and determining it to be wrong is a complicated matter, but far more so is the matter of putting into practice what has already been said in Part I. Deciding to completely avoid the heterodox is no solution. Despite his recognition that there were not only true believers in Galatia, Paul still sent them his letter in an attempt to correct them in their error. Although he wrote clearly that he had no place intruding into the parishes of the Roman Catholic or the enthusiast, Luther, along with the other Reformers, boldly proclaimed the truths of Scripture over against the falsehoods preached by these and other groups. In our churches, too, there is a continued need to speak against the errors taught by others, though always in a way characterized by love (1 Cor 16:13–14).

This will mean walking a fine line when dealing with those who belong to a church which adheres to false doctrine. It will be difficult. The many contacts believers have with the erring and the myriad ways of speaking to them make a set of broad rules on whether something is proselytizing or not impractical if not impossible. Even so, walking this line will be of benefit not only in keeping one's own conscience clean, but also in acting in a way which will avoid earning the ire of those members of heterodox churches to whom we give a witness. To assist in this, the following principles for reaching out are offered.

Seek the Marks of the Church

If a church plans to evangelize in an area which is already well-churched, its members should know the churches which may serve the spiritual needs of the people they will meet. This will include attempting to discern whether the marks of the church are present within those

congregations. Doing so may seem like a daunting task or poor stewardship of time, but it still must be done. Whatever the avenue chosen to find this information, whether it be on a church's website, speaking to the members or pastor of the congregation, or some other means, the presence or absence of the marks of the church will impact the way that the church does outreach to those people. Their status as legitimate prospects for evangelism hinges upon the presence of the means of grace within their church.

This is a tremendously difficult task because it seems to leave the pastor and other members of the church's evangelism committee in the position of determining how much false doctrine may be present before the gospel can no longer be said to be preached within that congregation. The idea of tolerating any heresy is exceedingly odious to a Lutheran, yet recall that even among the synergistic Roman Catholic Church Luther would still grant that there were true believers.⁶⁹ As a rough guideline, then, one could perhaps start by asking whether this church preaches Christ crucified as a punishment for our sins. If not, one could also look to Luther's criterion for what makes a church holy: "so long as they do not deny the Word and the sacraments."⁷⁰ If they have the Word yet empty it of its power and meaning, as we observed that the Mormon church does, then it can be safely concluded that the marks of the church are absent.

Even this is not a guarantor that these marks are to be found there, however. As people deny the inerrancy and plenary inspiration of the Bible, the pastor is again left to ponder whether what has been removed would still leave their church with the means of grace. The enormity of this task ought to be stated again, but the task itself must not be ignored in the name of saving

69. Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, 24.

70. Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, 25.

time or of simplicity. The viability of those heterodox members as prospects for evangelism rests on how this question is answered.

Giving Testimony or Enticing

A minister must also make a distinction between bearing testimony to one's faith and trying to entice a heterodox Christian to join his church. Only the former is acceptable and would not be proselytizing. One may think again of Luther countering the Roman Catholics or the enthusiasts. He recognized that there were believers among those people, and so he had no right to intrude into the rightly appointed, if misused, office of another. Still, this did not stop him from testifying to the truths of Scripture and declaring the false teachings of either group.

So it is for the orthodox church of today. Giving a testimony concerning the errors and falsehoods proclaimed by another group is not proselytizing or meddling in the ministry of another. In fact, Scripture encourages admonishing those who have wandered from pure doctrine, just as Paul did in many of his epistles. This does not mean making personal attacks or being hostile in writing or speaking, but seeking to lovingly correct the errors of others when they have brought doctrinal matters to the table is not to be discouraged.

The inverse of such a Christian witness is an attempt to entice someone to join the church. While simply giving witness comes from a desire to state the truth and let the Holy Spirit work on a person's heart to lead them away from false teaching, focusing on enticing them to join a church may lead to or stem from a desire solely to gain more members. In such a case, God's Word becomes secondary. We would rightly despise evangelism of that kind even apart from the matter of proselytizing, but in connection with proselytizing, that kind of outreach makes a person a meddler in the affairs of another's ministry. It is attempting to assume

responsibility for ministering to a person. It is stealing that person away from the shepherd who rightly holds the responsibility for that soul's spiritual care.

To counter this mindset, a pastor should establish from the outset what the goal of doing outreach is. If it is to proclaim the truths of God's Word to those who either do not know them or know them but dimly, then one need not fear guilt from objectionable proselytizing. If the aim is to entice more people to join a specific parish regardless of the person's prior church affiliation, then that will lead to sinful proselytizing, and such evangelism should not be undertaken.

Receptiveness of the Prospect

Even if the pastor is looking only to bear witness to the Christian faith to one in an erring church body, he must gauge the receptiveness of the one listening to him. If the person seems willing to hear orthodox teaching, then telling them is following the charge given to believers to give an answer to all who wish to know the reason for the hope held by the person addressing them (1 Pet 3:15).

On the other hand, to attempt to witness to one who has no interest in hearing is forcing oneself upon them. Not only does this make it more likely that the recipient of this testimony will shut out any further attempt at witnessing, it also crosses the line into a presumptuous attempt of the pastor to minister to a sheep who has not been entrusted to him.

It should be noted, however, that this does not mean that a pastor is dependent on hearing the person verbally announce their willingness to hear what he has to say. For example, if, in a conversation with a member of a heterodox church, the pastor hears them make mention of false teaching or show support for sin, the pastor may state his position and the biblical reason such an

error or sin is wrong. We again note Lawrenz's example of not only calling abortion murder, but also speaking of it as cutting short the time of grace of a human redeemed by Christ.⁷¹

At that point in the conversation, the pastor must allow the conversation to go where it will. If the member shuts down the conversation, then it must be allowed to stop there lest the pastor become overbearing. Doing otherwise violates Peter's instruction to give the reason for your spiritual hope "with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet 3:15), and it therefore goes beyond the pastor's allowance to testify to, not proselytize, the heterodox.

Intent

Although it was already hinted at in many of the principles already mentioned, attention should be drawn to the intent with which one approaches the matter of witnessing to the heterodox.

Those who seek to testify to sound doctrine must beware of doing so for the wrong reasons. Is the motivation getting more people into the pew on Sunday, or warning people to stop drinking from a well poisoned by false doctrine? Is one hoping for an opportunity to explain what the Bible teaches to those whose understanding is darkened by error, or to take responsibility for this person's soul and try to supply the purity of doctrine which they have been lacking? Though very few pastors would think of what they are doing in those terms, such is the reality if their intent is to try and entice this heterodox Christian away from his divinely called spiritual leader.

This calls for honest self-reflection on the part of the pastor. Is the growth of his church his primary motivation for reaching out to those Christians? If so, then he must refrain from continuing to evangelize those people for fear of sinning by proselytizing them. The same would apply to those others who work as assistants to the pastor in evangelism and who therefore work under his call as representatives of their church, such as members of an evangelism committee.

71. Lawrenz, 8.

If, on the other hand, they content themselves with sharing the truths of the Bible with others and allowing the Holy Spirit to lead those Christians to seek a fuller understanding of the truth, then they should by all means continue what they are doing.

Educating the Helpers

All of the preceding is information which should not be kept by the pastor alone, but should be shared with as many in the congregation as possible. Whether in a Bible class, in training for doing evangelism work, or in whatever other opportunity to instruct his members regarding proselytizing, the pastor should seek an opportunity to equip his members for proclaiming their faith to others.

This should start with those in the congregation who have a sincere passion for telling others about their faith. This group would likely include the members of an evangelism committee and any others in the congregation who always keep their eyes open for an opportunity to spread the gospel. If these people are well-educated in the matter of proselytizing and what to avoid when proclaiming the faith, then they can be a tremendous help to the pastor by helping to equip still more people in the congregation. Additionally, because they are the people who care the most for outreach, they are also the most likely to engage others in religious conversations and also the most likely to potentially proselytize.

Though all members of the church, pastors included, have many points of contact with the heterodox throughout their daily lives, the pastor will likely have many fewer than the rest of his congregation as a matter of course. There are many more members of the congregation than there are of him, and his work makes him an official representative of the church. For this reason, he must be that much more careful not to give the impression of proselytizing to heterodox Christians, as if his only goal in reaching out to them is to bring them into his church.

Because this is the case, the potential of his members to work either good or harm in their witness to the heterodox is also much greater than that of the pastor. As such, they must know what to avoid in reaching out to those erring Christians as well as how best they can get their foot in the door to give a witness to their beliefs. When properly equipped to capitalize on the opportunities for witness placed before them, the lay people of the congregation could have a great impact.

Pray

Finally, continue to pray for all of those whose understanding of Scripture is clouded by the false teachings of their church. Pray that the Lord would, through a pastor, lay member, or through a reading of the Bible itself, lead those people to a fuller understanding of his Word. Though the work which orthodox Christians can do is limited, they may still follow Paul's exhortation to the Christians in Ephesus: "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people" (Eph 6:18)." Included here would also be prayers for the Lord's people in those churches which do not teach the full counsel of God. They too, perhaps they especially, should be prayed for so that they may remain in the faith, however weakly. Pray also that God might send them someone who teaches them sound doctrine, as Luther recommended doing for the erring of his day: "I should commit the matter to God, who in His own time will find the opportunity to call ministers lawfully and to give the Word. For He is the Lord of the harvest who will send laborers into His harvest; our task is to pray (Matt. 9:38)."⁷²

72. Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, 18.

A Difficult Road

To some the difference may seem to be only a very slight one that we have made between that which must be declared to be objectionable proselytizing on the one hand and on the other hand the witness of God's royal priests in every day contacts as such witness is made also over against heterodox Christians and the legitimate forms of public testimony likewise which a church makes before all. Yet on the basis of all that has been said in our scriptural analysis of proselytizing it is nevertheless a distinction that must be recognized and upheld in practice. Proselytizing is not in keeping with God's Word and will. The other actions and activities of witnessing mentioned are.⁷³

As Professor Lawrenz recognized, the difference seems subtle and perhaps not worth making.

Some may prefer to adopt the view that our call to proclaim the full counsel of God overrules a prohibition against mere meddling. This is not true. Through Peter and Paul, God makes it clear to pastors that they have their own spheres of activity and their own portion of the Lord's flock to shepherd. They ought not meddle in the ministry of another, or they become guilty of sin. It is not a matter to be trivialized, and so the distinction between sinful proselytizing and acceptable evangelism must be upheld.

It is also a difficult difference to maintain. A small shift in intent can shift what is being done from viable to illegitimate. One statement too many to someone who does not want to listen can change the situation into pastoral meddling into another's ministry. The time requirement needed to determine whether a church's members can be considered acceptable objects for our evangelism efforts seems imposing. The line is certainly a fine one to walk. Regardless, the difficulty involved in undertaking a task does not allow us to ignore the teaching behind the difficulty.

Following the difficult road of avoiding proselytizing is ultimately a benefit to the pastor and to his church. Proselytizing is not only sinful; it also tends to foster ill-will from those who see another church stealing their members and from those who are the recipients of unwanted

⁷³. Lawrenz, 10.

outreach. While the same ill-will could come from preaching the law, there is no command against preaching the law as there is against proselytizing. Therefore, as we carry out God's will to spread the gospel and admonish those in error, we must be careful to tread this fine line and walk the more difficult road as we evangelize. Then we shall avoid both falling into sin and placing an unnecessary stumbling block in the way of the gospel.

CONCLUSION

Jesus' Great Commission still stands. All of God's people are told that they are to spread the gospel and all of Jesus' teachings to the corners of the earth. Along with the spread of Scripture comes the spread of erroneous teaching about Scripture. False doctrines, heresies, and other attacks of Satan threaten the saving faith of Christians, yet all the while that these false teachers subscribe to their various errors, they continue to wave the banner of Christians. As such, we reached a point where in America alone there were an estimated 173,402,000 Christians as of 2008,⁷⁴ and a small percentage of those were orthodox.

What should orthodox Christians do? Is it acceptable for them to proselytize, to attempt to bring those whose church bodies are tainted by false teaching out of said church bodies? Scripture says no, and Lutherans over the centuries have agreed. Where the marks of the church are, even if they are warped by those preaching, there the church may be found. The keys and the right to utilize them has been entrusted to all who belong in the church.

Those who have the keys are also given the right to extend a call. When such a call is given, it is divine, coming from God himself through the congregation. The one who accepts that call is then functioning as the spiritual leader of that group of Christians by divine appointment. The relationship between that leader and his members should not be disturbed, nor should anyone meddle with it. Although it would be possible for an orthodox preacher to do much good for the souls of those in such a situation, no pastor should attempt to step into the sphere of another and thus interfere with his work.

As we saw, this does not mean that there is no way to correct the errors of such congregations. Instead, it calls for a great amount of caution and self-evaluation on the part of

74. "Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2012," 61.

any Christian who would seek to present a testimony of their faith to those who are in erring church bodies. They must examine themselves closely to ensure that their intentions are not selfish or inherently meddlesome. They must check their methods so that they are not enticing the members of another church body, applying unwanted pressure upon them, or singling them out in outreach.

Hopefully, this thesis both provides some useful principles for pastors who look to do outreach and notice that their area seems to already be largely churched and, in the process, helps them avoid objectionable proselytizing. Regrettably, the scope of this thesis was not such that an in-depth examination of specific application for those principles could be observed. Through interviews with those who daily deal with this issue in their own evangelism program and a deeper dive into the applications of the command to not proselytize, perhaps another could fill that knowledge gap. For now, however, it suffices to investigate the historical position of the Lutheran Church.

As Carl Lawrenz wrote at the beginning of his paper, “A Definitive Study of Proselytizing,”

“Definitive” implies an authoritative, complete, reliable study, one that may serve in supplying a final answer, solution, or evaluation of the subject matter, one that may hold out the promise of ending a previous unsettled and unresolved condition concerning this matter. The more time and thought I have given to this adjective “definitive” in this assignment, the more have I come to the realization that it calls for a rather ambitious, almost presumptuous, undertaking.⁷⁵

Upon digging deeper into this subject, I am in agreement with Professor Lawrenz. There are a great many facets to the subject of dealing with proselytizing, and one is left wondering if a truly comprehensive or “definitive” study of the matter could ever be produced. It is messy. Ruling whether an action is or is not proselytizing must almost be done on a case-by-case basis. May

75. Lawrenz, 1.

God grant wisdom to those who do the work of an evangelist so that they may avoid this sin and ever be God-pleasing in their endeavors to grow His kingdom.

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