A Lutheran Case for Evangelism

MARK MATTES

Scripture admonishes us to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim 4:5). But what are we to make of that? Is it possible that that directive no more applies to us today than the Levitical injunction not to eat pork? (Lev 11:7). Or is evangelism instead an important part of all parish ministry, not to be sidelined as one program among many, nor relegated to a parish committee? The mandate of our resurrected Lord, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19–20), has not been withdrawn. Because that is so, we need to claim evangelism as the core of what we do. Indeed, sharing what God has done for us should be as natural for us as talking about our family members. Evangelism then is one aspect of the mission God is doing in the world. It focuses more on the oral communication of the gospel and less on social advocacy, though these two forms of outreach are not to be played against one another.¹


Because of the “baggage” that the term evangelism carries with it, some have rejected it altogether. But sharing the gospel, the good news, is the central calling of every Christian, and the deep need of modern people—even those who do not know it. The Lutheran tradition has a rich history of evangelism, and theological tools to assist us in “telling the story.”
Evangelism need not be thought of as something that only “evangelicals” do. After all, it is sharing the euangelion, the good news. It is basic to what the gospel is all about. Said succinctly, evangelizing means simply that Jesus comes to people.2 Pastors have the privilege of being at the forefront of outreach, which, properly understood, is not “bringing people in” but instead sowing the seed of the word. In a word, “the office of ministry is the office of evangelizing, because at its core we find Word, Sacrament, and Christian community. Evangelizing begins with the incarnation of Jesus the Christ coming to us through concrete word, physical signs, and real people.”3 Parish leaders who heed this call will discover that working with “nones” and various unchurched people is exciting. Because the unchurched often do not share the same perspectives or assumptions as churched folks, evangelists cannot use insider language in dealing with them but must come up with creative and compelling ways to share the good news. It is precisely because evangelists receive pushback that the evangelistic task can be fun. The best evangelists have not only a passion for the gospel, but also a good dose of resilience in the face of rejection. Not everyone perceives the good news as good, let alone valuable and precious. These folks will not hesitate to let you know. But those sharing the gospel can be of good cheer. Attached to the Lord’s command to evangelize is a promise: “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20).

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Sadly, some think that Lutherans have no theology of evangelism. It is true that for many Lutherans the topic of evangelism has not been on the front burner for a half century or more. But that does not mean that Lutherans have no theology of evangelism, rather that we have neglected it. For many mainline Protestants, the quest for social justice, not evangelism per se, is the most important facet of the church’s mission. Better said, for mainliners, social justice is evangelism. No doubt, many social justice issues are critical to human welfare, especially those targeted to help the poor and oppressed. But evangelism should not be played against the quest for justice. There is a non-negotiable role for evangelism in the life of the church because the core of the church’s mission is to proclaim good news. Recently, this truth was highlighted by a church leader responding to a pastoral

2 Richard H. Bliese and Craig Van Gelder, eds., The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 45.
3 Bliese and Van Gelder, The Evangelizing Church, 39.
intern who was emphasizing the importance of the church’s outreach to the poor. The bishop duly noted, “Let’s not forget about another form of poverty: spiritual poverty.”

It’s time that we run with that bishop’s response. I work with young people, many of whom are self-professed “nones,” who do not identify with a particular religious tradition, and I can verify that there is an increased openness to faith matters. Many young people are looking for a purpose in life that is more than simple satisfaction of consumeristic desires. They are seeking meaning and purpose in order to root their lives and give them resilience and integrity. In other words, they are asking questions for which the Lutheran doctrine of vocation, that we serve God in our service to our neighbors, is well situated to answer. What Michael Lerner wrote a generation ago is as applicable for today’s youth as it was when it was written:

> We hunger to be recognized by others, to be cherished for our own sakes and not for what we have accomplished or possess, and to be acknowledged as people who care about something higher and more important than our own self-interest. We hunger also for communities of meaning that can transcend the individualism and selfishness that we see around us and that will provide an ethical and spiritual framework that gives our lives some higher purposes.

Many young people suffer a depression-like anomie, not feeling that they have a purpose in life. Contemporary culture provides them no other meaning to life than those values set by consumerism. In a sense, consumerism has usurped the role that Christian faith once played. Quite opposite of Christianity, however, consumeristic values, unfortunately, only feed narcissistic self-centeredness. We are told that with the values of modern, secular democratic capitalism in place, people get the opportunity to create themselves. Through such self-creation, they are free. But this is a scam. The values from which they are allowed to choose are only those sanctioned by the market. But, even more to the point, from the Lutheran perspective, all such self-making does is feed “incurvation,” being turned in on yourself, feeding the illusion that you can be your own god or goddess. It should be no surprise then that so many modern people are chronically unhappy. Humans were not designed to be so self-centered. It would be a shame for the church not to seek to address their needs, not in a pushy, coercive way, but instead in one that offers them freedom from their self-centeredness, life-giving wisdom centered in Jesus Christ.

A retired church leader now in his upper eighties remembers one of his professors at the seminary saying: “Expect to have calluses on the tips of your fingers due to ringing doorbells and on your feet for treading the pavement.”

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words, the message sent to seminary students in the era of the 1950s was for them to get the message out, invite people into church by going into neighborhoods. No doubt some will balk that this directive could never apply to today’s world. After all, people are not at home anymore, so there is no point in going door to door. But even if that is true, that does not mean there are not equivalents. One evangelistic-minded pastor asked for and received funding through his church council to take prospective members out to lunch. People did have time over their lunch break to meet with a pastor. Many of these people became members of his congregation. True, there are challenges to evangelism in today’s world, but there are also a host of opportunities, especially through social media, that were unavailable in the past.

The Lutheran edge in evangelism is very simple. Evangelism is no special action in addition to many other types of outreach. It is nothing other than proclaiming the gospel, whether to the churched or the unchurched. Where Lutherans, like many others, have over the last decades gone slack is in their willingness or desire to present this message to the unchurched. Unfortunately, that lack of outreach has been coupled with many Americans becoming more secular, feeling that they can live entirely apart from the Christian God.

We live in a challenging time for the church’s witness, but it is also a time laden with great opportunity for Christian outreach, which should hearten and encourage any evangelist. In a Lutheran perspective, ultimately it is God who brings in the harvest. Giving the gospel is really God’s work. Preachers, teachers, and all Christians who share the good news are simply instruments of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who “calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth.” This is a relief for anyone wanting to share the good news. The burden of others’ spiritual well-being is not on the evangelist’s shoulders. God works out God’s own purpose with people. In other words, a gospel approach to evangelizing is completely unlike the tactic of various Christian fundamentalists who guilt-trip Christians into evangelizing. Such preachers say, “Every moment you fail to try to convert someone, 100,000 people die and go to hell.” Lutherans can never abide such thinking. This is not because there is no hell. After all, Paul speaks of “eternal destruction” suffered by “those who do not know God and [by] those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess 1:8–9). The notion of universalism, that all people who have ever lived will be saved, is a pleasant thought, but it is not scripturally warranted. True, Jesus is the “lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). In principle, the entire world is justified before God through Jesus’s saving work. But not all people want to receive Christ, and therefore we should not assume that all will be saved. Those who do come to Christ do so through the agency of the Holy Spirit. God brings about new birth, new life. “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12). Why some come to faith

and others do not is a mystery. But this mystery entails that we are not under the
gun to evangelize. Ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit who is the evangelist. Motivated
by gratitude and believing that the gospel is for all people, we have a hunger to
share this faith. We have a passion for the gospel because we know the difference
it can make in people’s lives.

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Baggage from the Second Great Awakening

It is unfortunate that some words native to the Christian faith, such as evangelism,
come laden with baggage. I suspect this baggage has been at the forefront of why so
many mainline Protestant clergy disown it. As John Bowen points out, all too often
the language of evangelism, as it has been inherited in American culture, is rife
with violence and objectification. For example, “crusade” seems to smack of war-
fare, while evangelistic “strategies” offers the language of marketing. Some even
speak of “friendship” evangelism where it would seem that gospel-proclaimers are
to use their own friends as a means to their own evangelistic ends. None of that
sounds appropriate, let alone rings true to what evangelism is all about. Whatever
evangelism is, it is not marketing. We do not share the gospel simply to advertise
salvation. But unfortunately, too many make evangelism into marketing. Given an
ecclesiastical ethos highlighting marketing, it is we who create the phenomenon of
“church shopping.” The only antidote in such a competitive “survival of the fittest”
climate is simply to preach the truth: “Church shoppers have lots of preconceived
ideas of what they want worship to look like. But unchurched prospects tend to like
worship at the place where someone brought them the Word of God that called
them from darkness to light.”

The language of marketing and warfare is a legacy of evangelism that grew out
of the Second Great Awakening, which began in the 1800s and continued off and
on for many decades thereafter. The Second Great Awakening developed a deeply
American approach to evangelism. Immediately following the American Revo-
lution, active Protestant groups such as Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians

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6 John P. Bowen, Evangelism for “Normal” People: Good News for Those Looking for a Fresh Approach
(Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 20.
at the Lutheran Free Conference, Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, November 8, 2012.
8 For a discussion of the political dimension of the Second Great Awakening, see Robert Benne, Keeping
were not irked with the prospect that the new American republic had no governmentally sanctioned national church. Indeed, these groups embraced the incipient democracy. Many leaders in these groups felt impelled to “win souls for Christ” precisely because they were committed to democracy. They believed that Christian faith would make Americans more ethical and that, if they were more ethical, democracy would succeed. Even though revivalists of the Second Great Awakening were not schooled in psychology, since the discipline was a century away when the movement began, they were adept at swaying people and moving them toward repentance and conversion. Indeed, Charles Finney, one of the most successful revivalists, did not even see those factors that led people to “decide for Christ” as especially miraculous. Instead, he trusted his intuitions about social dynamics. For example, crowded rooms were more apt to serve as an environment where evangelism was effective.

Some Great Awakening evangelists promoted a “turn or burn” approach to preaching, threatening hell for those who refused to decide for Christ. While this approach to evangelism is mostly dead, even among evangelicals, it has been replaced by an alternative approach, a “prosperity gospel,” guised in many manifestations. Here there is no threat of hell but instead the promise that those who turn to God will be rewarded with material goods or exciting experiences. (In other words, loyalty to religion will guarantee that consumerism will succeed for you.) The thought that God rewards people with material goods or unique, memorable experiences appeals to those envious of others. In Lutheran terms, this is a theology of glory, not of the cross, and it certainly is a false gospel by every indicator imaginable. The biblical God is not fitting American Christians for earthly prosperity, but instead God is conforming them more and more to the image of Jesus Christ, including Christ’s suffering, just as with people of faith in all times and cultures.

A more sophisticated prosperity gospel focuses less on material prosperity and more on increased self-esteem and social effectiveness. Some sermons at both large suburban congregations and open-country rural churches could almost have titles such as “Three Steps toward Becoming a More Effective Soccer Mom” or “Dad: A Parent with a Purpose.” Certainly, such preaching is to be acknowledged for its intention to “contextualize” or make Christian ethics apply to real life—in this case, facing the stressors of competitive suburban parenting. But it is to be challenged because, at least in Lutheran terms, it is highly moralistic and un-evangelical. It also tends to endorse the economics that lead to systemic inequities. Now, as philosopher John Rawls suggests, it may be ethical to tolerate some social inequities, but not if they come at the expense of the least advantaged.

Given the drive for church growth, particularly at a time when Christianity has been in numerical decline in both Europe and North America, many congregations, both mainline and evangelical, turn to the tactics of marketing. But this

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turn comes at a cost. The dynamics of marketing church can lead to cynicism. Mark Olson notes:

Customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention strategies are taught to the church by the most sophisticated practitioners of the marketing industry. Psychological profiling and personality inventories abound as ways to enhance the effectiveness of everything from church boards, to preaching, to personal devotional life. A mechanistic assumption undergirds all these endeavors.¹⁰

It is this “mechanistic” approach that is at odds with the sense of transcendence—that is, of wonder, mystery, and awe—that many “nones” are attracted to in worship and that, naturally, Christians with more traditional liturgies are able to offer. At its best, “profiling” and the like can help preachers know their context well. Some know their context largely through intuition. For others, numbers and statistics can be helpful. But the latter should never be thought of in purely bureaucratic terms. As Christians we deal not with numbers but with people, reflections of God’s very image.

Forward to Luther

The reason some Lutherans claim that Lutheranism has no theology of evangelism is that their image of evangelism is colored entirely by the tactics of the Second Great Awakening or the gimmicks to which many conservative American evangelicals have resorted in the last half century. The majority of Lutherans have participated in neither of these. This is coupled with the fact that evangelism has not been pushed in the church. For example, while seminaries have professors of “mission,” “leadership,” or “global Christianity,” there is no position devoted to evangelism. The lack of such teaching faculty should perhaps be rethought if we take the church’s mission seriously. This is especially true if we think that “from the formation of clergy themselves to the equipping of all the baptized for ministry, the pastoral office needs to be the evangelizing office, an office that guides and

directs all the evangelizing activities of the whole church. No candidate for the pastoral office should be accepted without these gifts and sense of call.”

But some mainline Protestant members never consider evangelism as an opportunity for their ministry. They have a hard time discerning the value of evangelizing precisely because their sense of mission is already so set by the standards of their culture. As Brad Kallenberg points out:

Thus, the most liberal of churches appear able to maintain the best of relations with secular culture, but no longer have anything distinctive to say to it! Righteousness has been reduced to equality, agape has paled to fraternity, sin has been replaced with maladjustment, and salvation has become mere civility.

Given the gimmicks of many conservative Christians and the sellout of many liberal Christians, we should look to Luther. *Ad fontes!* Back to the sources. What would Martin Luther think about evangelism? Is he the source of the contemporary Lutheran evangelistic malaise of quietude? A closer read of Luther indicates that he was compelled to do his reform precisely because he was passionate for the gospel. He had received mercy from God—spoken to him through his confessor Johann von Staupitz—and he was eager that this mercy be available for all. We hear Luther’s passion clearly:

This is part of being a priest, being God’s messenger and having his command to proclaim his word. You should preach the “good work,” that is, the miraculous work that God has done as he brought you from darkness into light. This is the highest priestly office. Consequently, your preaching should be done so that one brother proclaims to the other the mighty deed of God: how through him you have been redeemed from sin, hell, death, and from all misery, and have been called to eternal life. You should also instruct people how they should come to that light. Everything then should be directed in such a way that you recognize what God has done for you and that you, thereafter, make it your highest priority to proclaim this publicly and *call everyone* to the light to which you are called. Where you see people that do not know this, you should instruct them and also teach them how you learned, that is, how one through the good work and might of God is saved and comes from darkness into light.

Luther’s passion for the gospel was not akin to the goals of the Second Great Awakening: Christianizing Americans in order to make democracy work. It was instead

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11 Bliese and Van Gelder, *The Evangelizing Church*, 47.
to secure the conscience before God on the basis of the mercy granted to sinners in Christ Jesus. He was willing to challenge both pope and emperor, the highest authorities in Europe, who both sought to take his life. Luther’s passion for the gospel enabled his courage, as well as his political savvy, as he worked with Frederick the Wise and other supporters.

Luther spoke the gospel in an environment that assumed everyone was a Christian: Christendom. Obviously, our culture is more pluralistic and secular, and Christendom is long gone. At one time preachers could address the unchurched and receive the response “Well, yes, I know I should go to church.” That response is native to an environment that takes for granted that America is a “Christian nation.” But it is not likely that one will hear that response in today’s world where fewer people would see America as a Christian nation or feel a duty to attend church. But the fact that Luther’s context is so different from our own does not rule out insight or passion that he has to offer. Luther makes clear that the evangelistic task is a privilege for preachers of the gospel. It is not expendable but integral to a preacher’s identity. Interpreting Psalm 117, Luther writes:

If they are to hear His Word, then preachers must be sent to proclaim God’s Word to them; for not all the heathen can come to Jerusalem or make a living among the small company of Jews. Therefore the psalmist does not say: “Come to Jerusalem, all heathen!” He lets them stay where they are and calls upon them, wherever they may be, to praise God.14

Luther’s conviction echoes Paul: faith comes from hearing. “But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?” (Rom 10:14).

**Post-secular, Catechetical Evangelism**

Other than faithful proclamation in word and sacrament, what evangelism meant for Luther, more than anything, was catechesis. As mentioned, Luther assumes Christendom. However, even though Christianity is privileged, that does not mean that every Saxon knows the faith. This was brought home through the Saxon Visitations on account of which Luther then developed his catechisms.

Teaching the faith in all its variety continues to be the most important evangelistic “strategy.” Many pastors may not see themselves as teachers, but perhaps they should find ways to claim that role not only in teaching children, youth, and adults, but also in visitation of members and non-members. In a technological era, people have more soap boxes from which to express their religious convictions or hear others’ beliefs. But that has not assisted people to understand what

Christianity is all about. In fact, it would seem that the more soap boxes there are, the less Christianity is understood. Pastors do well to teach the faith when the occasion arises.15 People are genuinely interested in what Christianity is about. Many Americans are looking for an alternative to consumerism. We fail to serve them well if we do not speak up. Weddings, funerals, baptisms, invitations to public and family gatherings give ample opportunities for pastors to share the faith.

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That said, contemporary evangelists should expect to encounter more criticism of the faith than has been heard in the immediate past. To experience an era of comparable skepticism, one would have to return to the time of Thomas Jefferson. After all, our third president took scissors to the New Testament, cutting out all those portions that no “rational man” could believe. Naturally, the story of Jesus walking on water is tossed to the garbage heap. But Jesus’s command to love neighbors as oneself passes the test since loving others furthers one’s rational self-interest. Seeking others’ welfare makes it more likely that they will reciprocate help in your time of need. Evangelists are advised: Expect to encounter ridicule similar to the ancient graffiti discovered in Rome showing a crucified donkey-headed man with the inscription “Alexamenos worships his God.” Even prior to that, Paul had already acknowledged such opposition. Jesus Christ, he wrote, is “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23). The depths of God’s willingness to give of God’s self to redeem humanity—to die in a public execution—remains a scandal both to the “enlightened” mind and to those attempting to justify themselves. No doubt beneath the layers of skepticism is the conviction that humans are not so bad that they cannot better themselves of their own accord, if they just try. Nor is the sense of accusation—“Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee? Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee”—apt to go over well with old Adams or Eves.16

In no way should contemporary evangelists back off from this discomfort. It is not as if faith has lost any public voice in a secular era. For instance, in current practice, there is no recovery program for addicts apart from a spiritual antidote. This can be seen easily in Twelve Step groups. Most pastors are aware that addicts

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15 While dated, an excellent resource for thinking about evangelism in the parish is Ralph W. Quere, Evangelical Witness: The Message, Medium, Mission, and Method of Evangelism (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1975). Likewise, value can still be found in Rolf A. Syrdal, Go Make Disciples (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1977).

16 “Ah, Holy Jesus,” Evangelical Lutheran Worship, 349 st. 2.
in recovery follow a “fourth” and “fifth step” where they undertake a “searching moral inventory” and then publicly—that is, orally—admit their shortcomings not only to themselves, but also to their “higher power” and another person. Obviously, this fifth step is modeled on private confession and forgiveness. Perhaps we should ask, What makes “coming clean” so helpful for addicts? No doubt addicts habitually blame others for their addictive behaviors, which usually brings much harm to families and communities as well as to themselves. When addicts come clean by admitting their contributions to social disharmony, unrest, and pain, they feel liberated from the powerlessness they confirm in themselves by habitually blaming others for their addiction. Coming clean, becoming liberated from guilt and shame, addicts can work toward more effective habits that contribute to social health in place of hurt. Likewise, they develop a greater self-respect as they help foster the common good. It is likely that Lutherans underplay private confession and forgiveness. Perhaps in addition to pet-blessing ceremonies and the like, we ought to advertise that our confessional ear is wide open to the public, members as well as non-members, and that we are available to hear confessions, keep confidences, and forgive sinners.

Likewise, the fact that Christendom has evaporated need not entail that Christians police their faith in public by never owning up to it. Modern Europe and North America are post-Christian. But a good case can be made that we are also (to add another “post”) post-secular. That is, at least according to the German social theorist Jürgen Habermas, modernity need not entail a wholly secular outlook. Habermas points out that secularism cannot generate its own values beyond indifferent tolerance of all beliefs. But that is an inadequate foundation on which to build society. Habermas advocates that modern people should be open to religious influences and that the modern world should acknowledge the religious, indeed Christian, foundations of its heritage. In public discourse, Christians need not be hushed, nor must they hush themselves, especially if there is a commitment that every perspective be heard. “Atheism” need not be the default or privileged perspective in the public square.

That said, contemporary evangelists should have thoughtful responses to secular defenses, canards such as “Science and religion are incompatible” or “Religions cause wars.” This is not said to encourage evangelists to be argumentative. It is to acknowledge that in ultimate matters all humans have only faith by which to access any truth. John Bowen notes:

> It’s the same balance that philosopher Pascal was trying to express when he said that God has given us sufficient evidence that if we want to discover God we may, and if we wish to avoid God we may do that, too. So he speaks in an intriguing way: “You can give me one kind of water; but there’s a better kind that I could offer you.”

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To be sure, secular stances are not conspiratorial, but neither are they innocent. They are not neutral, “scientific” perspectives, as they bill themselves. Rather, they are a product of a consumerist economy that exalts and privileges the self in order to capitalize on its buying power. This exaltation of the self is not “scientific” but is instead a deeply mythological perspective. The “self” is no more scientifically verifiable than the “soul,” whose existence is challenged in many secular traditions.

A major insight that Lutherans bring to evangelism is that all sinners feel vulnerable. They are inherently self-justifying and seek some idol by which to validate their own good. All people with whom evangelists deal seek to validate themselves in some way or another, establishing worth through some purported “god.” It is not the job of evangelists to be iconoclastic and smash people’s idols. But it is the job of evangelists to be truthful and, similar to Dr. Phil, ask, How is your unbelief working for you? False gods are not benign. They all demand sacrifice. The triune God demands no such sacrifice since Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary is not only necessary but also sufficient. Gospel preachers will deliver a word that delivers from idolatries, a word of pardon and mercy: “For Jesus’ sake, your sins are forgiven.” In God’s forgiveness, new life is to be found.

The church’s task of sharing the good news has never been limited solely to those already churched. Successful evangelism has always relied upon pastors who are as comfortable dealing with the unchurched as with the churched. No doubt there are some congregations that are so much like a club that they are uncomfortable receiving new members. New members upset the power structures already at play in a congregation. Surprisingly, not all churches want to grow. Growth undercuts the stasis of power already present in the congregation. Those churches, however, that become intentional about growing are willing to adapt, share power, and move forward in mission. Pastors who wish to help congregations grow are advised that both they and the congregation will face growth pains. But the flip-side of such challenges is excitement. The core of a Lutheran approach to evangelism will eschew self-interest as a motivation. This is because ultimately, one is freed from oneself and finds one’s good and reality in God and in the neighbor. In the waters of baptism, the old being is drowned.

That said, healthy congregations are attractive and have staying power. This does not feed the human ego per se, but instead reflects God’s ongoing creation of community. That is, those congregations fed from the word and the sacraments, that sustain supportive community and seek to reach out to their communities
increasingly find themselves similar to the ancient church in terms of drawing power. Of this attraction, in the Roman world, Michael Green notes:

But what about the ordinary man—supposing, for a moment, that such an abstraction existed: what attracted him to Christianity? Undoubtedly the love of the Christians had a lot to do with it, so did the moral qualities they displayed, the warmth of their fellowship, their manifest enthusiasm, the universal applicability of their message. Reconciliation with God had a lot to do with it, the unknown great God who lay behind the idols of ancient polytheism, and from whom men instinctively felt themselves separated.19

Evangelism means incorporating new members into the body of Christ. As mentioned above, catechesis is crucial because effective evangelism offers converts (1) a new social identity—specifically, that of a justified sinner; (2) a new vocabulary, grounded in the scriptures and the liturgy; and (3) a paradigm shift, in which one processes the world with the “mind of Christ.”20

A Personal Note

One might well wonder why a college professor such as I would have any stake in evangelism. Almost a quarter century ago, when I started teaching after eight years in parish ministry, I would have said that my calling was to teach critical thinking and solid writing. That calling abides. But over the years there has been a shift in student attitudes. Increasingly, students want to know what makes their professors tick. They are especially comfortable asking those teachers they see as fair, as not apt to reward or punish them based on whether or not they agree with the teacher’s view of things.

I confess that once this shift began, I resisted talking about my own views. After all, I had not seen this mentored in my own college experience (which was at church-related colleges). I suspect that my teachers withheld from bringing their Christian faith into teaching not because it did not matter to them but instead because the college where they taught already had a high percentage of Lutherans. And those students who were not Lutheran were usually Methodists or Roman Catholics. In other words, the environment was not very diverse; there was a shared ethos. However, I have worked in a very diverse environment with a wide range of faith stances, many “nones,” a few mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics, some vocal evangelicals, an atheist or two, and some Muslims of various levels of observance. Over time, at students’ request, I experimented with sharing my faith convictions. This has not been to evangelize per se. But it does mean that

20 Kallenberg, Live to Tell, 64.
I confess my faith—my core—publicly. I remain committed to critical thinking and solid writing. But, for better or for worse, a number of people over the years, whether students in my classes or my colleagues, have either been strengthened in their faith or have come to faith and requested baptism. I am not reticent to say that this has been very satisfying.

CONCLUSION

While our era is not apocalyptic, it is challenging. Americans have never been more divided over values and politics. One would have to go back several hundred years to see the sense of mission among Christians so divided and weakened. In all this cacophony of competing voices and views, there is a great opportunity for the church. Seeking good pastors, we need to court “builders” every bit as much as “caregivers” among those looking for leadership roles in the church. The former are more inclined to the adventurous task of witnessing to Christ among those apt to challenge this witness. Evangelism is hard but gratifying work. After all, there is always satisfaction in building and creating. Ultimately, God has promised to bless such work. Let us continue to bear witness, share Christ, and seek out evangelists for the building up of the church.

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