

Come to the Wedding Feast

The Theology of Lutheran Outreach

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Part I: *In Search of a Term*

I'm not sure what to call the thing that I'm here to talk about. Evangelism? Outreach? Those terms have the connotation of congregants speaking the Gospel to the pagans around them in their everyday lives. That sounds like something important enough to have its own name. So what shall we call it when Christians speak the Gospel to their unbelieving neighbors?

Evangelism?

Evangelism is the word that we commonly use. Evangelism comes from the Greek word εὐαγγελίζομαι (euangelizomai). This verb εὐαγγελίζομαι is used in the New Testament and comes up in the verses I'm about to cite; I'm going to translate it literally as “evangelize” so that you can hear it when it appears. To “evangelize” at its core means to report good news. This basic meaning is rare in Scripture, but is used that way, for example, in 1 Thessalonians 3:6, “Timothy has come to us from you, and has *evangelized to us* (εὐαγγελισαμένου ἡμῖν) your faith and love,” meaning Timothy reported good news about the faith and love of the congregation in Thessalonica. But most often in Scripture, to evangelize means specifically to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus himself is the chief evangelizer in the New Testament. He says in Luke 4, quoting Isaiah 61, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to *evangelize to the poor* (εὐαγγελίσασθαι πτωχοῖς),” which means “to preach the Gospel to the poor.” There are a few instances of angels evangelizing, for example in Luke 2:10, “Fear not, for behold, *I evangelize to you* (εὐαγγελίζομαι ὑμῖν) great joy that will be for all the people.” And the bulk of the instances of the word evangelize have as their subject a called minister. John the Baptist evangelizes, “So with many other exhortations *he evangelized the people* (εὐηγγελίζετο τὸν λαόν)” (Lk. 3:18). When Jesus sends out the Twelve Apostles it says, “And they departed and went through the villages, *evangelizing* (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι) and healing everywhere” (Lk. 9:6). Philip evangelizes (Ac. 8:12). Paul and Barnabas and Timothy evangelize (Ac. 13:32, 2 Cor. 10:16). And what do they all have in common? That they were appointed, either immediately by Christ or mediately through the Church, to be ministers of the Gospel and to preach it. Thus the primary subject of the verb “evangelize” is someone who has been appointed to that task: Jesus is appointed by his Father to evangelize, angels are appointed by God to evangelize, ministers are appointed by the Lord to evangelize. In Scripture, evangelizing hardly refers Christians sharing the Gospel with their neighbors. It refers almost exclusively to preaching.

I say *almost* exclusively. Two out of the 54 instances of the verb “evangelize” are debatable. When persecution arises in Jerusalem, it says in Acts 8:4, “Now those who were scattered went about *evangelizing the word* (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι τὸν λόγον),” which makes it sound like everyone was evangelizing, though Luke does immediately transition to talking about Philip, who was a called minister. The other instance is in Acts 11:20, which resulted from this same persecution in Jerusalem. It says, “there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, *evangelizing the Lord Jesus* (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν).” This is the chief verse in the New Testament that sounds like any and every Christian evangelizes. And it's good that we have this verse. The Holy Spirit reminds us that

the Gospel is not confined to the mouths of called and ordained servants of Christ. Any Christian can report the good news of Jesus. But notice that it's not an imperative. It seems that Christians happened to be evangelizing, but there is no verse in the New Testament directed toward the laity that says, "Evangelize!" It's simply not there.

So what can we say in brief about this word "evangelize"? First, that in Scripture the word "evangelize" refers primarily to the preaching of the Gospel by a called minister. Second, that "evangelizing" does not primarily refer in Scripture to Christians speaking the Gospel to their neighbors, and it remains debatable whether the term is ever used that way in Scripture. And third, that there is no imperative in Scripture for the laity to evangelize, whereas called ministers must say with Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:16, "For if *I evangelize* (εὐαγγελίζωμαι), that gives me no ground for boasting. For compulsion is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not *evangelize* (εὐαγγελίσωμαι)!"

Now is this a mere quibble over words? Hardly. We're talking about the theology of evangelism, and theology means that we talk how God talks and say what God says. We don't get to abduct his words from his Bible and redefine them. I've heard plenty of Christians—pastors and laity—talk about the necessity and imperative for all Christians to evangelize. That is theologically dirty.

Witnessing?

"Ok, you stickler," someone might say, "we'll stop using the word 'evangelize' that way. But certainly there's some other term in Scripture that refers to Christians sharing the Gospel with unbelievers." Alright, I'll bite. Which term shall we take up next? How about "witnessing"? Aren't Christians *witnesses* of Jesus who *witness* to those around them?

Well, that depends. Are we going to use the word "witness" the way God uses it, or are we going to commandeer his vocabulary and supply our own definitions? Again, let's talk how God talks; then we'll be theologians. There are multiple related Greek words that have to do with witnessing in the New Testament. There's μαρτυρέω (martyreo), "to bear witness," μαρτυρία (martyria), the "testimony" or "witness" that is borne, μαρτύριον (martyrion), again "testimony," μαρτύρομαι (martyromai), "to bear witness," and μάρτυς (martyr), the "person who bears witness." The verses that I'm about to cite use these words, which you'll hear translated with words like "witness" or "testimony."

These "witness" words all have at their core the sense of "proof." At Jesus' trial, when the high priest says, "What further *witnesses* (μαρτύρων) do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy" (Mt. 26:65), he's saying, "What further *proof* do we need, since he's proven it himself?" When the seven are chosen in Acts 6, the apostles say, "Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute (ἄνδρας ἐξ ὑμῶν μαρτυρουμένους ἐπτά)" (Ac. 6:3), literally, "seven *testified* men," meaning, "seven *proven* men, seven men whom people have seen and heard and whose character they know." And this gets to the core of what testimony is. Testimony is a spoken word, and testimony only carries the weight of *proof* if the person testifying is an *eyewitness* of the thing of which he testifies. Indeed almost every time there's a witness in Scripture, it is an *eyewitness*.¹

Do you want to hear what "witnessing" sounds like in the New Testament? The book of Acts is very instructive. Peter stands with the other apostles at Pentecost and preaches, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are *witnesses* (μάρτυρες)" (Ac. 2:32). And in the temple he preaches, "...you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are *witnesses* (μάρτυρές)" (Ac. 3:15). When Paul preaches in Pisidian Antioch he makes special mention of the witnesses of Jesus, who can corroborate what he's saying: "for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to

¹ The other sense of the word "witness" in Scripture is a "martyr" (note the relation of the word "martyr" to the "witness" roots in Greek from which it's derived). See Ac. 22:20, Rev. 2:13, 6:9, 17:6.

Jerusalem, who are now his *witnesses* (μάρτυρες) to the people” (Ac. 13:31). Indeed, Paul makes the word “witness” sound like an official title, “they are his Witnesses.” They saw and heard Jesus and now bear witness about what they have seen and heard.

And being a Witness was rather official, and important for the Church. How do you know that Jesus died and rose from the dead? From the eyewitness testimony of those who were there and saw. John emphasizes this when he gives his account of Jesus’ Passion: “But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who *saw* it *has borne witness* (μεμαρτύρηκεν)—his *testimony* (μαρτυρία) is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe” (Jn. 19:34-35). And it was no mistake that people were eyewitnesses of the resurrection. The angel specifically told the women at the tomb, “Come, *see* the place where he lay” (Mt. 28:6). And then “Jesus met them” (Mt. 28:9), and they *saw* him and “took hold of his feet.” Then Jesus repeated the message of the angel concerning the disciples, “go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there *they will see me*” (Mt. 28:10). Jesus didn’t leave it to chance whether there would be witnesses of the resurrection or not. He *made* people into witnesses by telling them what to look at and showing himself to them. A very clear example of this is in Luke 24, when Jesus appears to the apostles and says, “*See* my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and *see*....And when he had said this, *he showed them* his hands and his feet” (Lk. 24:39-40).

These witnesses could speak as the Apostle John does in 1 John 1, “That which was from the beginning, which *we have heard* (ἀκηκόαμεν), which *we have seen with our eyes* (ἑώρακάμεν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ἡμῶν), which *we looked upon* (ἑθεασάμεθα) and *have touched with our hands* (αἱ χεῖρες ἡμῶν ἐψηλάφησαν), concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and *we have seen it* (ἑώρακάμεν), and *testify to it* (μαρτυροῦμεν) and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and *was made manifest* (ἐφανερώθη) to us—that which *we have seen* (ἑώρακάμεν) and *heard* (ἀκηκόαμεν) we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us” (1 Jn. 1:1-3).

Note that none of these witnesses chose to be witnesses. This is an important point. In the New Testament, one does not *choose* to be a witness of Jesus. *God* chooses people to be witnesses and makes them witnesses. Peter makes a point of this in Acts 10 when he preaches to Cornelius and his household. Peter says, “And we are *witnesses* (μάρτυρες) of all that he [Jesus] did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but *to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses* (μάρτυσιν τοῖς προκεχειροτονημένοις ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ, ἡμῖν), who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and *to bear witness* (διαμαρτύρασθαι) that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead” (Ac. 10:39-42).

The eyewitnesses are the ones who received the command to bear witness to Jesus. Not everyone is Jesus’ witness. You can only witness to what you have seen and heard. So we cannot bear witness about Jesus. To call ourselves witnesses is to cheapen what a witness was in the New Testament.² Your faith rests

2 Notably, in the famous and respected *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, a change in the definitions of μαρτυρέω and μαρτυρία occurred between the initial English translation in 1957 of Bauer’s lexicon by Arndt and Gingrich and the updating of the Arndt/Gingrich translation by Danker in 1979. The copyright page of the 1979 edition says, “Frederick William Danker is Christ Seminary-Seminex Professor Emeritus of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, Illinois,” and the inclusion of the term “Seminex” ought to be cue enough for taking his updates with a grain of salt. But let the definitions speak for themselves. Arndt and Gingrich originally defined μαρτυρέω with such phrases as “bear witness, be a witness,...testify concerning someone or something,...declare, confirm” (pg. 493). Danker made some changes, defining μαρτυρέω as “to confirm or attest something on the basis of personal knowledge or belief, *bear witness, be a witness*” (pg. 617). And whereas Arndt/Gingrich originally had as the definition of μαρτυρία “testimony, testifying,...attestation” (pg. 494), Danker changed it to “confirmation or attestation on the basis of personal knowledge or belief, *testimony*” (pg. 618). In Scripture, testimony is always on the basis of knowledge, particularly

on the eyewitness testimony of the apostles. That's what the Gospels are: eyewitness testimony that has been written down. Are we going to stand up in one of the most reverent parts of the church service for the reading of the Holy Gospel, the infallible eyewitness record concerning our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ—are we going to show such honor to Christ, who condescended to enshrine his words and deeds in the testimony of man, and then presume to call ourselves witnesses? Far be it from us! Again, let's talk how God talks. Let's reserve the word "witness" for such people as the women who accompanied Jesus, saw his death and burial, saw him after his resurrection, and whose report the apostles have included in Scripture. Let's reserve the word "witness" for the Twelve Apostles, who understood very well the place of Apostolic Witness in the Church. In order to return to their full number after Judas' suicide, they stipulated that the twelfth had to be a man who had "accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us" so that he would "become with us a *witness* (μάρτυρα) to his resurrection" (Ac. 1:21-22).

In short, whatever we're going to call that thing where Christians present the Gospel to unbelievers, we're not going to call it "witnessing." Well, what are we going to call it? We've just lost the two main words that get thrown around when it comes to this topic. What options are left?

Mission?

The word "mission" comes up sometimes in such discussions. The word mission, from the Latin *missio*, properly means "sending," and this meaning survives in English. A "missionary" is someone who is sent, and the Church has been quite wise in her choice of words here. You see, the word "apostle" likewise means "someone who is sent," but the Church avoided applying this term to anyone but the Twelve. The Twelve are called apostles: ἀπόστολος (apostolos) in Greek, *apostolus* in Latin. But when we talk about sending people today we use a completely different root, *missio*, and get the word "missionary." My point is, these words "mission" and "missionary" have a place in the Church, in spite of the fact that these words nowhere appear in Scripture.³

Yet this root *missio* has also been perverted into the term "missional," which has a very nebulous meaning. As far as parts of speech are concerned, it's an adjective. As far as a definition goes, well, in some groups it has the connotation of being keenly interested in the spread of the Gospel and the conversion of unbelievers, and in other groups it has the connotation of being a Gospel-reductionist who cares more about numbers and growth than the doctrine of Christ. Words without real definitions are a little scary when they become popular. But fortunately, the root *missio* will always be a non-contender in this conversation, because it has no corresponding verb in English. You can't "mission" your neighbor. So by all means, let's keep talking about "missionaries," who are sent to places to preach the Gospel, and let's keep talking about "missions," which are the places to which they are sent, and let's leave the root *missio* at that.

knowledge of what one has seen or heard. There is not a single passage in which one testifies merely on the basis of "personal belief." Mormons do this; they testify about the burning in their bosoms and consider that to be proof enough of their religion. Christians, however, don't testify to their own faith in the Scriptures. Danker lumps testimony on the basis of personal *belief* in with testimony on the basis of personal *knowledge* for no reason, then proceeds to cite verses that only evidence people testifying on the basis of personal knowledge. This mis-definition only perpetuates the misunderstanding of biblical witnessing.

3 The word "mission" appears in the ESV in Judg. 13:12, 1 Sam. 15:18, 20, and 2 Cor. 11:12, but a quick look at the original languages shows that the word mission is completely out of place. In Judg. 13:12 the noun is מַעֲשֵׂה, which means "work" (from the verb עָשָׂה). In 1 Sam. 15:18 and 20 the noun is דֶּרֶךְ, "way." There is no noun corresponding to "mission" in 2 Cor. 11:12.

Apologetics? Mercy?

Well, that was a fine little digression, but we're no closer to have a name to put to our topic. "Apologetics" is no good; it specifically refers to offering a defense for one's words and actions and beliefs, not to preaching the Gospel or converting people. "Mercy" has become a bit of a buzzword when it comes to dealing with the people "out there," though it is only tangentially related to the matter at hand. In practice, "mercy work" has become a bit of a bait-and-switch technique that's supposed to lead to a presentation of the Gospel, but more often falls flat on its face, while having all the charm of a door-to-door vacuum salesman and as much foundation in Scripture as the word "missional."

Outreach?

There is one popular term I have not yet addressed, and that is "outreach." The word "outreach" does not occur in Scripture, but the image nonetheless befits the Gospel. The image of outreach is of an arm extending, embracing, and sweeping back to itself. This is the course that Jesus ran, as he says in John 16:28, "I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father." We celebrate the Incarnation, which is Jesus sweeping into the world. We celebrate the Ascension, which is Jesus returning to the Father and bringing us along with him, as Paul says in Ephesians 2 that God "made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:5-6). This is divine outreach: God reaching out to us in Christ, taking us up in his arms, and gathering us to himself.

The Church's outreach is an extension of this divine outreach, though it is still a divine arm that extends and begins this outreach: Jesus stretches out his hand to us and gives us his body and blood. His body and blood forgives our sins, strengthens our faith, and animates us in love for our neighbor, as Luther's post-communion collect states so succinctly: "we implore You that, of Your mercy, You would strengthen us through the same in faith toward You and in fervent love toward one another."⁴ So we could think of the altar at the local congregation as the point from which outreach starts. It is important to note that we do not begin this outreach, but God does. His arm continues to reach out through us as we depart into the world and return to the stations in life in which we love and serve our neighbors. In these stations in life God is at work through us, and when his arm gathers us back to the altar the next Sunday, sometimes it's the case that other people have been brought along with us.

How others get swept along is a discussion for a little later in this paper; for now we're still searching for a name to put to our topic. Is outreach a good word for it? Outreach is a nice image that is theologically sound if rightly understood. Yet it cannot be the term for which we've been searching. First and foremost, as I noted already, it is not a word that occurs in Scripture. "Reaching out" is a pleasant metaphor for the Gospel, but it is not a verb that God commands the Church to do. He commands ministers of the Word to *evangelize*, that's in Scripture. He commands eyewitnesses of Christ to *testify*, that's in Scripture. But as for the action of Christians presenting the Gospel to unbelievers, "reaching out" is not the verb that's used in Scripture.

Christian Speaking

The time has come to ask outright: what is the verb in Scripture for Christians sharing the Gospel with others? And the answer: there is no term for this in Scripture. Does it mean that Christians shouldn't tell others the Gospel? No. Christians speak what they believe. But there is no type of Christian speaking that is specifically labelled in Scripture as presenting the Gospel to unbelievers. There is simply description of

4 *Lutheran Service Book*, pg. 201

what comes out of a Christian's mouth regardless of location and audience. For example, Peter writes, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, *that you may proclaim the excellencies* (ὁπῶς τὰς ἀρετὰς ἐξαγγείλητε) of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." People have marshalled this verse to talk about speaking the Gospel to others, and this verse doesn't exclude that. But singing hymns in Church is proclaiming God's excellencies. Confessing the Creed at home with your family is proclaiming God's excellencies.

To put it simply, Christians speak the same way everywhere and to everyone. Christians do not have multiple tongues, because we do not have multiple minds and multiple faiths. We believe in one God, and we think according to this one God's Word, and we speak as this one God speaks. This doesn't mean that the only thing that comes out of our mouth is praise of God. It means that our tongue always speaks in consonance with the Scriptures.

The saints speak of God in church, as David says in Psalm 26, "I wash my hands in innocence and go around your altar, O LORD, proclaiming thanksgiving aloud, and telling all your wondrous deeds" (Ps. 26:6-7). The saints speak of God to their fellow saints, as it is written in Psalm 66, "Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for my soul" (Ps. 66:16). The saints speak the things of God for their own sake, Psalm 77, "I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds" (Ps. 77:12).⁵ The saints pass on the words and deeds of God to children, as it says in Psalm 78, "We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done" (Ps. 78:4). And the saints speak of the things of God to all people according to Psalm 9, "Sing praises to the LORD, who sits enthroned in Zion! Tell among the peoples his deeds!" (Ps. 9:11). The saints speak consistently, and thus in the psalms we find many general phrases, without reference to time or place or audience, that simply describe the tongue of the faithful: "My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all the day, for their number is past my knowledge" (Ps. 71:15), "Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day" (Ps. 96:2).

And so you see, there is no specific word for Christians speaking the Gospel to those who do not believe in Christ. There is simple Christian speaking. But talking that way doesn't let us fixate on what's usually (and erroneously) called evangelism or witnessing. This leads to a followup question to our initial quest for the proper term: If the Scriptures don't have this special category of Christian speaking, that is, Christians speaking the Gospel to unbelievers, then why have so many congregations and church bodies obsessed over it? Why have people written so many books and come up with so many programs for it? Why has it become a natural assumption among Christians that sharing the Gospel is the greatest good work we could do when there are so many clearer imperatives in Scripture, such as the Ten Commandments, or the tables of duties that Paul includes in his epistles?

Part II: *Motives*⁶

We can understand the obsession with spreading the Gospel when we examine the motivation behind it. It's hard to speak in broad terms here and make a convincing point about people's motivations, so I'll take up a specific scenario that illustrates a common train of thought: When the church council meets and looks at the attendance numbers, and someone says, "We need to be doing more intentional outreach and spreading the Gospel," *why* does this person say that? Is it out of concern for those who are perishing? Is it out of love for the neighbor? Or is it out of self-interest? Is it out of fear and concern for survival?

5 Note that Hebrew verbs for "ponder" (הִגֵּד) and "meditate" (חָשַׁב) include vocalization and are not just mental. For הִגֵּד, cf. Ps. 2:1 "plot," 35:28 "tell," 71:24 "talk." For חָשַׁב, cf. Ps. 105:2 "tell," Prov. 6:22 "talk."

6 This part is largely drawn from Chapter 1 of *Be at Leisure: A Lutheran Approach to Outreach* by Andrew Richard: <https://steadfastlutherans.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Be-at-Leisure-by-Andrew-Richard.pdf>

It is only when we have bad motives that we have to have a specific term for congregation members sharing the Gospel with those around them, so that we can fixate on it and speak incessantly about it. Whereas, if our motives are right, if we're concerned for the salvation of our neighbors and not for ourselves, then we can simply talk like God talks in the Scriptures. So let's take up a couple of the common motivations for outreach efforts and examine them in light of God's Word.

Fear

A common impetus for conversations about the need to spread the Gospel is fear: fear that the budget won't balance, fear that the congregation will have to close its doors, fear that the gates of hell will prevail against the Church. This fear not only drives pastors and congregants to speak desperately about "evangelism" and "witnessing," but also leads them to look skeptically at the practice of closed communion, push for contemporary worship, and avoid a clear confession about what they consider touchy subjects, even when God's Word is perfectly clear.

Fear that the Church will perish is common to the sinful flesh of Christians. Or I should say, fear that *we* will perish is common to the sinful flesh of all people; it's just that as Christians we understand that our survival is inextricably tied to the survival of the Church. It is this fear for self-preservation that makes us Christians fear the failure of the Church.

Now we're right that our life is tied to the life of the Church, and our preservation is dependent on her preservation. But we are not right to fear for the Church's survival. Her life is Christ's life, and Christ is with her. We can think of the stilling of the storm on the Sea of Galilee and take that to heart. Here's the account of it from Mark 4:

On that day, when evening had come, he [Jesus] said to them [his disciples], "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mk. 4:35-41)

The Lord was in the boat with his disciples. What did they have to worry about? The only reason for terror would be if he were not there. Breakers, rollers, a great windstorm—what's all that if Jesus is with us? Jesus teaches us what *he* thinks of the dangers of life in this world: he rolls over and goes to sleep. But the disciples are sleepless and afraid. The perils of the world appear to our earthly eyes to be infinitely greater than Jesus, and we get desperate. The little boat seems to be in grave danger. For a congregation, a storm could be local persecution or anti-Christian laws. Perhaps closer to our experience, a storm could be dwindling attendance, apathetic giving, apostasy of members, general hatred and slander from the world, or sudden, unanticipated expenses. All these things give us the impression that we're taking on water and won't be afloat much longer.

But Jesus has made sure and certain promises concerning his Church. He says in Matthew 16, "I will build my Church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against her" (Mt. 16:18). Even before Christ gave this promise, the sons of Korah boasted of the security of God's people in Psalm 46, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its arrogance" (Ps. 46:1-3). And a little later on, "God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved" (Ps. 46:5).

Now it is worthwhile to distinguish between individual congregations and the Church as a whole. The Church has the promises of Christ, that nothing shall overcome her, whereas individual congregations may have to close their doors. Where are the churches in Ephesus and Smyrna and Pergamum and the others whom Jesus addressed in the book of Revelation? Many church doors have closed, but this in no way nullifies Jesus' promises about his Church as a whole. But note that in Mark 4 there are other boats, as it says, "other boats were with him." If one congregation closes, that doesn't mean Christ has cut us off from the Gospel or left us to die. The Church goes on, though the venues may change.

Yet we belong to the Church by belonging to the local congregation, and thus the congregation is not completely separate from the promises Christ makes about his Church. Note that in Mark 4 the boat doesn't go under, and there's no need for worry, no need to jump ship for a different boat. The disciples even teach us the best response to the wind and waves, in spite of their panic: they pray. They present their concern and petition to Jesus. He gives them a gentle rebuke—"Why are you afraid? Do you not yet have faith?"—but they clearly do have faith, otherwise they wouldn't have turned to Jesus for help in the first place. Jesus' rebuke is not a harsh condemnation, but simply makes them feel sheepish and silly, and thinking of our needless worry ought to make us feel sheepish and silly as well. But note that Jesus granted their request before he did anything else. Jesus cares about your well-being.

And notice that at the end of a passage filled with fear, the resolution is not a disappearance of fear, but properly placed fear: "and they were willed with great fear." But their fear is no longer fear of the wind and waves. Their fear is the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom. Their fear is fear of what Jesus could do to them if they forsook him. The only thing to fear is offending against our Lord. We need not fear for survival. We need not fear having too few people in church. We need not fear whatever the changes and chances of the world bring our way. We only have to fear the Lord, and there's actually great consolation in that, for he cares for us.

Insecurity

So fear is no longer our motivating factor for talking about the conversion of unbelievers. Yet there are other false motives. Insecurity can also drive men to push for increased outreach efforts. I use the word "insecurity" in the sense of what a girl might suffer if none of the boys asked her to the dance. Now I won't deny, it is natural for us Christians to think that the Church should be popular. She should. In his Church the Lord proclaims his saving Gospel and offers life to the world. Only a fool would reject the free offer of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Only a fool would distance himself from the Church. That's very true. Only a fool would do that.

But lest we have false expectations of what the Church should look like, we must heed the Word of the Lord in 1 John 3, "We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you" (1 Jn. 3:12-13). Why did Cain kill Abel? Because when Abel did what was right it made Cain see his own sin in contrast. In order to get rid of that contrast Cain did not repent and believe in the Gospel and join Abel in righteousness. He tried to eliminate righteousness by eliminating his brother. Darkness doesn't look dark when it's in the dark, and where there is no light there are no shadows.

This is the point that Jesus makes in John 3: "the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed" (Jn. 3:19-20). The world hated Jesus, because being around him made people realize that they were sinners. As Jesus says, he did not come into the world to condemn the world (Jn. 3:17), but the world cannot grasp this and sees Jesus as its enemy.

The world killed Jesus, even though he came to give the world life. As Christians, we should not expect the Church to look any different than her Lord. The world pins her to the cross and she rises from the dead. We should therefore expect hostility from the world, not popularity. But we should also expect that Jesus will continue to give us his life and victory over the world.

If we feel insecure because of the world's hostility, then the problem is with our false expectations and weak faith, not with the Word of Christ. We don't need to woo the world with gimmicks and programs and flash-bang crowd-pleasers. Those who go about outreach out of insecurity are simply pleased to see a bunch of people associated with something the congregation is doing, even if that something is a far cry from what Christ has given his Church to do. You don't need a crowd to be the Church. You need Christ. In John 6 after Jesus preached his sermon on how he is the bread of life and said, "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (Jn. 6:54)—after Jesus said that, not only did the world take offense, but "many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him" (Jn. 6:66). There goes the crowd. Jesus turned to the Twelve and said, "Do you want to go away as well?" (Jn. 6:67). Peter answers him, and Peter confesses what's necessary for the Church's security, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (Jn. 6:68-69).

That's what the Church needs for her security: she needs Christ to speak his Word to her. Sometimes that Word will draw people, sometimes people will take offense at that Word, but regardless of the effect of Jesus' words, his words are the words of eternal life. So long as the Church has these words, she is secure, and it doesn't matter how many people are there to hear them.

The Nature of Love

Now that might sound a little flippant. But it's not that we don't care about people hearing the words of eternal life. It's that the words of eternal life are not the least bit dependent on the number of people present to hear them. This is freeing. The Church doesn't *need* people in order to be the Church, in order to survive, or in order to have the favor of her Lord. It's the other way around. People need the Church, because Christ is with her with his words of eternal life.

Fear and insecurity make it seem that we do need more people. If we go about outreach with that thought in mind, then no matter how much we talk about caring for the lost and loving our neighbor, the fact is we're only caring about ourselves and using our neighbor. Now I'm going to say something really obvious, but perhaps not so obvious when we apply it to converting unbelievers: in order for love to be love, it must be for the sake of the other and not for one's own sake. If we go to great lengths to spread the Gospel and we do it out of concern for ourselves, then, regardless of the outcome of our efforts, we have not loved our neighbor.

But, as I said, we are free to love our neighbor. Fear and insecurity have been nullified, and thus we can be concerned about the conversion of our neighbor simply for our neighbor's sake. Will it break our heart if our neighbor is hard-hearted and hates Christ? Yes, it will. But our heart will break out of mourning for him, not because we personally suffer harm from his rejection of the Gospel. On the other hand, will our hearts rejoice if our neighbor comes to church, believes the Gospel, and joins the congregation? Of course! But our hearts rejoice not because of a gain to our membership rolls, but because Christ has found his lost sheep, and the sheep is safe and sound.

Part III: *Come to the Wedding Feast*

We now come to the practical part of the presentation: what does Lutheran outreach look like, and how do we do it? You'll note that I'm using the term "outreach." Like I said, it's a fine word, if used in a

Scriptural way, and I'll define precisely what I mean by it as we go on. Now in the previous section I had been using the phrase "spread the Gospel" quite a bit, not because it's necessarily an accurate picture of outreach, but because it's understood easily enough. I would now, however, like to be a bit more precise in defining outreach, and I would like to specify exactly how it is that we go about our usual Christian speaking in our stations in life.

Previously I had noted "there is no type of Christian speaking that is specifically labelled in Scripture as presenting the Gospel to unbelievers. There is simply description of what comes out of a Christian's mouth regardless of location and audience." And I quoted from the psalms such phrases as, "Tell among the peoples his deeds" (Ps. 9) and "My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all the day" (Ps. 71).

The Hebrew verbs at play are significant. Psalm 9:11 says, *הַגִּידוּ בְּעַמִּים עֲלֵי־לוֹתָיו*, "Declare among the peoples his deeds." The verb *נָגַד*, "declare," is no pansy word. It means to report, to say with certainty, to relate the facts and the truth. This is how Christians speak. We aren't guessing who God is or what man is or how the world works. We're simply telling it like it is. We're *declaring* it. People can disbelieve it if they want. But if we speak of Christ and people try to make us feel like idiots, this would be the same as us saying the grass is green and people trying to argue that it's purple. Tell me, who's the real idiot in that situation?

Likewise in Psalm 71, *פִּי יִסְפֹּר צְדָקֹתֶיךָ כָּל־הַיּוֹם תְּשׁוּעָתֶךָ*, "My mouth will *recount* your righteous deeds, all the day your salvation." The verb *סָפַר* means to recount, to say it again. Our mouths simply repeat what God has said and done. This is not complicated. If you know the Creed by heart, your mouth can recount the righteous deeds of the Lord. But what does this look like?

Let's take an example from Scripture of a Christian engaging in outreach: Andrew in John 1:

The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus... One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus." (Jn. 1:35-37, 40-42).

"He brought him to Jesus." Those are some of the most comforting words for us when it comes to outreach. Because these words are not metaphorical. "He brought him to Jesus" does not mean "he converted him" or "he convinced him to believe." "He brought him to Jesus" means exactly what it sounds like: Andrew brought Peter from the place where Peter was to the place where Jesus was. And Andrew did it with words that were a simple declaration of fact and a recounting of what he had learned from Jesus: "We have found the Messiah." Now I wouldn't count on those exact words bringing anyone to church today. Peter was looking for the Messiah, and his brother, whom he trusted, had found the Messiah. But if we're to take Andrew's words and apply them to ourselves, we could say that bringing people from the place where they are to the place where Jesus is happens with a simple *invitation*.

Note that an invitation is not nearly as daunting as thinking of outreach as an all-out presentation of the Gospel. An invitation is not threatening. People can decline it without awkwardness, and you can ask again later without awkwardness. Whereas, if we think of outreach as having to be little preachers and to deliver a sermon to those around us, well, then we're going to gravitate toward doing outreach with total strangers whom we never have to see again, if we do it at all. The thing is, outreach happens most naturally with people whom we know from our stations in life. Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Then think of the people whom you encounter in those stations in life and simply invite and bring them to church.

“But,” someone might say, “isn’t an invitation a different thing from the ‘declaring’ and ‘recounting’ that you just mentioned? An invitation doesn’t declare and recount, does it?” Well, try extending an invitation without declaring and recounting God’s deeds and then get back to me. When the time comes to extend an invitation—and it is perfectly possible to be patient about it without being faithless—you’ll probably find yourself saying such things as, “You should come to church with me. God is there. He forgives our sins for Jesus’ sake. He gives us peace.” That’s inviting, and declaring, and recounting. You’re bringing someone to where Jesus is, while telling it like it is, and repeating what you’ve heard from him.

Outreach as bringing people to where Jesus is by bringing them to church is not something new. Pastor Gregory the Great once preached in a sermon on Matthew 11, “...On the way to God, desire to have companions. If any one of you, brothers, is going to the forum, or perhaps to the bath, he invites one whom he thinks is at leisure to come with him. Well then, this earthly act of yours is itself agreeable to you, and if you are traveling to God, take care that you do not go to him alone. Here indeed is the Scripture, ‘He who hears, let him say: Come’ (Rev. 22:17), that he who has already received in his heart the voice of celestial love should also repeat outside to his neighbors the voice of the invitation” (*On the Gospel: Mt. 11:2-ff.*).⁷

I’d like to conclude by returning to the image of outreach as the arm of God sweeping into the world and gathering people back to himself. This outreach has as its end the same end as Andrew’s outreach to his brother: bringing people to Jesus. Jesus has located himself in a specific place. He has bound himself to his Word and Sacraments for our sake. Not all Christians evangelize and witness, but all Christians can bring people to the place where the called ministers of Christ evangelize and where the eyewitness testimony of the Apostles sounds forth. Evangelism and witnessing continue to this day, though perhaps not in the way those words have come to be used. But this is a much more relaxed and leisurely approach to outreach, where evangelism is the pastor’s duty, and witnessing is the Holy Spirit’s doing through the writing of the Apostles, and the average layman simply invites. “Come. Come to the wedding feast,” the servants of Jesus say (Mt. 22:4). And outreach doesn’t have to be any more burdensome or complicated than that. Praise be to Christ. Amen.

⁷ Gregory the Great, 40 Homilies on the Gospels, Book 1, Homily VI, translated by the author from Migne’s *Patrologia Latina* Vol. 76, column 1098.