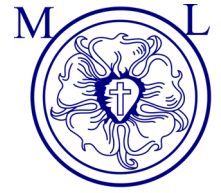


# Lutheran Clarion



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## **The Way Forward: Fellowship, Fidelity, Fearlessness**

*This is the Third of three parts of a presentation given by the Rev. Christopher S. Esget at the LCA Conference on January 16, 2023*

### **Fidelity to the Confessions**

Let it be said first: We should be true to the Lutheran Confessions because they are true; they are a right exposition of what Holy Scripture teaches. But there is also this benefit: in the chaotic landscape of American religion, people are hungry for serious Christian teaching. They want to know what the Bible says, and to have a consistent application thereof.

One interesting finding in the AEI study reveals the lie that Christianity is for the uneducated: “Adults with a college degree or higher were more likely to attend religious services both pre-pandemic and in spring 2022.” The entertainment world sneers at Christians as ignorant buffoons. The reality is that only Christianity has a coherent answer to the source of existence (creation) and the world-situation of corruption. Luther’s *Small Catechism* is the best brief explanation of Christianity ever written. We should go all-in on that.

You don’t appeal to thinking people with a merely emotive clergy. Now is not the time to weaken the catechetical standards for our clergy. This means particularly emphasizing the study of Greek, so our pastors can proclaim to people with confidence, clarity, and certainty the message of the New Testament.

Fidelity to the Confessions means regularly reading them. You are perhaps familiar with the debate about whether the Confessions (or certain parts thereof) are prescriptive or descriptive. They are also sometimes presented as a collection of teachings that one studies once and then puts aside, to move on to more practical things.

I propose a modification to what we mean by a “confessional Lutheran.” It is certainly adherence to the doctrine and practice outlined therein. But I’ve come to think of being “confessional” not as present reality but as an aspiration for myself and my congregation. What I mean by that is, I want to think the way the confessors thought. In the Smalcald Articles, Luther sets forth what is central:

The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, “was put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). He alone is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). “God has laid upon him the iniquities of us all” (Isa. 53:6). Moreover, “all have sinned,” and “they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, by his blood” (Rom. 3:23–25).<sup>9</sup>

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## **Evangelism in the LCMS Seven Theses for 2024**

*The presentation below was given by the Rev. Dr. Ken Schurb at the 2024 LCA Conference in January at Fort Wayne, Indiana.*

Thank you for inviting me, and thanks especially for the topic. Evangelism is important, we all agree.

When I have seen evangelism surfacing as a topic at gatherings of concerned people in the Missouri Synod, it has often arisen in relation to matters liturgical. Then, at least in circles with which I am most familiar, the ensuing discussion usually ends up centering around the premise, with which I completely agree, that church services are not basically designed for unbelievers. These sessions ostensibly on “liturgy and evangelism” turn out long in their treatment of liturgy, but pretty short as regards evangelism. While we can acknowledge evangelism’s importance, at least those conversations don’t seem to have a lot to say about it.

You want to talk about evangelism. Thanks again!

Last fall I spoke to a class at Concordia University Wisconsin, then the next week at a seminary convocation in Fort Wayne. The title of my talk was “Evangelism: A Thing of the Past?” – with a question mark. First, I observed that for some people, including some in our Synod, it might seem just as well if evangelism were really a thing of the past. Evangelism has taken on odious associations in their minds. I’ve already mentioned one, the association of evangelism with seeker-sensitive services that make a botch of Lutheran theology of worship.

Other odious things have also become associated with evangelism. One that springs to mind readily is synergism, subtle or outright. Even sometimes under putatively Lutheran auspices, evangelistic conversations have culminated in asking people to commit themselves to the Lord, make a decision for Christ, or some such thing. I recall Dr. Erwin Kolb of the Synod’s Board for Evangelism, back in the 1970s when we still had this board, offering some of the best pastoral advice I have ever heard. He was trying to stamp out synergism in evangelism. He cautioned that people will want to stay with Christ the way they think they first got to Christ. If they imagine this was by their own effort, even in part, their thinking will set them up for trouble in the future – even possibly making a shipwreck of their faith. Of course, in saying this Erv Kolb was not throwing out the baby

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## Evangelism in the LCMS Seven Theses for 2024

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with the bathwater. He was not ditching evangelism in an effort to avoid synergism.

Still another odious association pairs evangelism with salesmanship or gimmicks. This crowds out the Holy Spirit and His work. In 1960 Hermann Sasse put the bell on the cat like so: “The pastor schools his people so that with the right kind of pious talk they will then be equipped to win other people for the church.” He teaches them “just the right way of talking with people to make maximum use of the techniques of psychological manipulation. . . . What the Word of God is no longer trusted to do is achieved with . . . psychological techniques,” largely borrowed from American business.<sup>1</sup> If *that* is evangelism, I know I want nothing to do with it. Maybe it would be better if evangelism *were* a thing of the past. This is what people can conclude, and sometimes do.<sup>2</sup>

Yet evangelism does not have to be done poorly. It need not be unbiblical and un-Lutheran. To sketch a more excellent way, a way that commits to *Lutheran* evangelism and commits Lutherans *to* evangelism in 2024, I offer the following seven theses.

**THESIS 1:** *The biblical messages of Law and Gospel should fill and shape our approach to evangelism.*

Certainly, biblical Law and Gospel should shape our evangelistic message – the address that we make, as it were, to non-churched people. Such shaping will rule out the works-righteousness that comes with synergistically oriented evangelism. For the Law cannot save a sinner; only God in Christ can do this, by the power of the Holy Spirit. He does so through the message of the Gospel, the power of God unto salvation.

But not only should Law and Gospel fill and shape our evangelistic *address*; in due distinction, they should also fill and shape our *approach* to evangelism. Why engage in it? Why should the church do this? Why does the church do this? And why would I get involved?

Toward the end of a recent workshop on evangelism in our District, a young pastor politely made a valuable observation. He said we had talked all morning about basic ways and means – that is, about the *how*. He appreciated that and said nothing against it. Still, he did not think it would be good if our time together were to end without a word about the *why*.

Gentle rebuke duly noted! The *why*, of course, forms the key to moving Christians to evangelism evangelically. We cannot talk about the *why* without talking Gospel.

For years I have told a story from when I was much younger. I listened to an evangelism leader, and he recalled that he used to motivate people for evangelism by the Law. As he characterized it, he used to tell them they had to get out there and do it. They had to. They just had to. But this man went on to say that more recently he had started motivating people for evangelism with the Gospel – he told them *how* to do it. Now, telling people how to do something amounts to still more Law. It does not proclaim to them reconciliation and peace with God on account of the Christ Who lived and died for them and rose again.

I know all this. Still, in an evangelism workshop I showed myself quite capable of gliding over the best part of the *why* for

evangelism, namely the crucified and risen Christ and the salvation He brings.

C.F.W. Walther said:

After a long season of sluggishness and lukewarmness, during which you began to hate yourself because you saw no way to change your condition, you happen to hear a real Gospel sermon, and you leave the church a changed man and rejoice in the fact that you are a child of God. You suddenly become aware of the fact that it is not difficult to walk in the way of God’s commandments; you seem to walk in it of your own accord.<sup>3</sup>

I still like an analogy I learned years ago. The Law is like a rudder that keeps a ship on course, but the Gospel alone can serve as the wind in the sails to move that vessel along.

There is nothing wrong with reminding God’s people about any of their responsibilities. However, they receive the power to meet these responsibilities through the Gospel, not the Law. “I will run in the way of your commandments,” said the psalmist, “when You enlarge my heart.”<sup>4</sup> When people hear and believe that their robes are washed white in the blood of the Lamb and that they therefore stand ready to face the judgment of Christ and take their places in His heavenly throng – so with joyful confidence they say, “Come, Lord Jesus, come right away!” – the Lord frees them to do His work now.<sup>5</sup> So it is for us forgiven sinners.

**THESIS 2:** *Confession of one’s faith before others starts with confession of one’s sins before the Lord and receiving His absolution.*

To elaborate on this thesis, let me tell you a story, a true one.<sup>6</sup>

In the summer of 1530, Lutheran princes and some theologians went to the imperial meeting at Augsburg and faced the challenge of confessing the faith. Easily they could dwell on how meager their group was, as well as how many and how mighty the forces arrayed against them seemed to be!

Martin Luther remained at the castle Coburg for the duration, keeping in touch with friends in Augsburg via mail delivered by courier. That summer, Luther wrote several letters that can help us as we seek to confess the faith – that is, tell the Good News about Jesus – under much less intimidating circumstances today.

Luther spent a lot of time at Coburg on his knees, as it were. He kept praying for the delegation at Augsburg.

Not only was the good doctor praying; he was also writing. To Philip Melancthon, who was beset by fears that the general peace could be disrupted, Luther sent some especially poignant letters. He wrote one a couple of days after the Augsburg Confession was presented (although Luther did not know this fact at the time when he was writing).

In this letter, Luther told Philip that he hated the fears that were consuming Philip. The real trouble, he went on, was not the size of the cause at hand, but rather the mammoth proportions of unbelief. Luther was reminding Philip about God.

God was working in this cause. He, the Lord, was the Author of it. Why make Him out to be a liar when He gives great promises to us? Instead, we should do what Scripture says and cast our care on Him. Luther added, “I too tremble often, but not continually.”<sup>7</sup>

You see, Luther had not only been on his knees interceding

for the Lutheran party at the diet. He was also confessing his sin. Now he was urging Philip to similar confession. If Philip was to be a faithful confessor of the faith before others, he too needed to confess his sins before God and receive forgiveness.

More from Luther: “I for my part am, so far as the cause is concerned . . . not very much disturbed – yes, of better hope than I had expected. God is able to raise the dead. He is also able to sustain His cause when it wavers; when it has fallen, to raise it up again; when it stands, to further it.”<sup>8</sup> God can raise the dead! Luther had been working on his commentary on Psalm 118, which includes: “I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord” (v. 17). Luther also found in Psalm 119 a verse that has been paired with the Augsburg Confession in printings ever since: “I will also speak of your testimonies before kings and shall not be put to shame” (v. 46).

To whom might you or I speak concerning Christ? It may be a king, or it may be someone else. We can speak, and not be silent.

Also for us, confession of the faith begins on our knees. We confess our sins – among others, that we do not tell the Good News as we should. Then we are lifted up by the Lord’s word of absolution. It raises the dead!<sup>9</sup> This word of forgiveness that is so good for us is good for others too, so we tell them the Good News about Jesus.

His absolving word quells our fears and snuffs our unbelief. We can speak of His testimonies with friends and neighbors and not be put to shame. The cause is His, and He will defend it.

Being a *confessional* Lutheran entails *confessing* the faith.<sup>10</sup>

**THESIS 3:** *The church is not only the result or end of broadcasting the Gospel; it is also a means.*

The Lutheran Confessions remind us that in the world today, God’s saving activity occurs both *in* the church and *through* the church. First, the Holy Spirit brings people onto the rescuing ark of the church through the faith-creating proclamation of Christ and His work. Then the Spirit preserves them in their faith through the same Word. As the Large Catechism famously says, everything in the church is set up so we obtain full forgiveness daily through Word and Sacrament.<sup>11</sup> The church is the result or end of Gospel proclamation.

This is a perennially important point to maintain. These days, a more or less mainstream and self-styled “missional” movement within Christianity has insisted that “the church of Jesus Christ is *not* the purpose or goal of the gospel, but rather its instrument and witness.”<sup>12</sup> This missional movement may mention God’s Gospel and the Sacraments, but I do not find its adherents affirming that the Lord grants forgiveness and life through Word and Sacrament.<sup>11</sup> They then fail to distinguish between Law and Gospel when they go on to look for signs of God’s activity in the neighborhood, figuring that the church as church needs to pitch in and lend a hand to such efforts and so follow the Lord’s lead. Sooner or later our work, say, of giving a cup of cold water becomes Gospel. The proclamation of God’s real Good News in Christ is upstaged.

Yet the Lord wants His genuine Good News to be broadcast, and the church is His means to do so. It may seem a little strange to call the church a means, but the Large Catechism does just that.<sup>13</sup> The church is a means to bring people the

means of grace. The Catechism continues: “The Holy Spirit will remain with the holy community or Christian people until the Last Day. Through it he gathers us, using it to teach and preach the Word.”<sup>14</sup> God’s saving activity occurs not only *in* the church, but also *through* it. The church is the “mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God.”<sup>15</sup>

The church, then, is both the result or *end* of broadcasting the Gospel and also a *means* to spread this saving Word. The mainstream missional enthusiasts are correct to note that the church is God’s means or instrument, yet they short-circuit the genuine means of grace that the Lord has given the church. But evangelism needs to proceed in the assurance that we give people Jesus and everything He has won for them through the Gospel.

This message really is the power of God unto salvation. It dethrones the devil. It extends the saving Lordship of Christ. As the church and her members tell the Good News about Jesus, the Lord catches us up into His own mission of seeking and saving the lost, which He now carries out not via His own local and visible presence, as in the four Gospels, but through His people.<sup>16</sup>

Why would we not want that? In 2018, a Lutheran Hour Ministries/Barna study noted a characteristic of “eager conversationalists”: they desire evangelistic conversations. They want to have such talks.<sup>17</sup> How can it be otherwise for the church, the mother that begets and bears every Christian by the Word of God? Let us then encourage church members not to avoid various opportunities to tell the Good News, but to welcome and cherish them. We believe; how can we not speak?

**THESIS 4:** *In making disciples, the church needs deliberately to GO.*

At the end of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, Jesus gave instructions to make disciples by baptizing and teaching.<sup>18</sup> He said this to His disciples-now-apostles, perhaps others too.<sup>19</sup>

Every imperative has an implied subject. In this case: *you*, plural, *make disciples*. Who is the “you?” Even if we consider only the eleven, that is, the twelve minus Judas, I suggest two points.

First, even while these men were apostles, they were also representing the church, the entire New Testament people of God corresponding to the twelve tribes of Old Testament Israel. Jesus was speaking to the church, not only the apostles.

Second, Jesus followed His command with “Behold, I am with you all of the days until the end of the age.”<sup>20</sup> Again, who is the *you*? This last sentence of Matthew forms a bookend with the first Messianic prophecy quoted in chapter 1. Here Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah’s words about Immanuel, a word meaning “God with us. (cf. Isaiah 7:14)”<sup>21</sup> Is it at all likely that now at the end of the book, with the atoning work finished, after Jesus died and rose, that He would promise to be with only a limited group, such as strictly the apostles or just the pastors? No, Immanuel is God with *us*, with His church. Who was He telling to make disciples? His church! Elsewhere, the prophet Isaiah told *Zion* to proclaim from the mountain: “Here is your God.”<sup>22</sup> Small wonder the catechism says the church is the mother that begets and bears every Christian by God’s Word.<sup>23</sup>

But let me also note a word in this text that we have not yet

mentioned: “go.” It is a participle in Greek, which some think would be better translated: *as you are going*. That might mean: *make disciples whenever you can work it into your regular course of things to do*. I hope the text will move you to reconsider if you figure that making disciples amounts to just one more item to put on your agenda without much deliberation or purpose.

It seems that people, including some pastors, do think that way. Responding to a survey in the Central Illinois District last year, one pastor said he speaks of Christ with those who are not his church’s members “when the opportunity arises,” but he has “no set time.” He reports that he averages only one hour a week directly bringing the Gospel to non-churched people. Another said he speaks of Christ with people outside his congregation “when the opportunity comes up.” He says that each week he spends from one hour on this down to no time at all. If these are the time investments made by some pastors, imagine how much lower those of laypeople might be!

If the Greek word *poρευθεντες* means “as you are going” in Matthew 28:19, that would be the only instance in Matthew where it means this. Earlier, for example, Jesus had instructed the disciples of John the Baptizer to go and tell him what they saw and heard.<sup>24</sup> He was not telling them to speak to John whenever the opportunity seemed to arise amid their other activities. He was giving them a definite directive: tell John.

To do this, they had to move to the jail where John languished. In his *Concordia Commentary*, Jeffrey Gibbs explains that throughout Matthew the word “go” in the expression “go and do something” doesn’t have a lot of force in itself. These “gos” are aorist participles of attendant circumstance that do not add much. The freight is carried by the following imperative, “make disciples of all nations.” Since the nations were not all present in Galilee when Jesus spoke, purposeful movement had to be made to them.<sup>25</sup>

The participle *poρευθεντες*, best translated “go,” may not add anything to the imperative that follows. But it does not take anything away, either. Now, the church has gone into the world ever since Jesus spoke the words at the end of Matthew. Still, there remain people to make disciples of, sometimes right across the street. Wherever they are, the church should deliberately go to make disciples of them, not wait around for them to come to us.

**THESIS 5:** *Pastors should play their proper role in evangelism.*

Pastors hold the divinely instituted office in which they are called to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments. They baptize and teach, and baptizing and teaching are mentioned at the end of Matthew as means for making disciples.

Not that this command has somehow been re-assigned from the church, though! As Kurt Marquart summarized: “Christ’s church . . . baptizes, teaches, consecrates, prays, serves, and does everything else, including the appointment of ministers – and in so far as she acts publicly and officially, she does all this with and through her (and Christ’s!) public, official ministry, without any competition between them.”<sup>26</sup> The Augsburg Confession says that “no one should teach *publicly* in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called.”<sup>27</sup> Already in the Old Testament, not only did Isaiah exhort Zion to announce, “Here is your God;” the same prophet wrote about the beautiful feet of

the messengers, comparable to pastors today, who proclaim salvation and say much the same thing that Zion says. They say: “Your God reigns.”<sup>28</sup>

When pastors baptize, preach and teach, and administer the Lord’s Supper within their congregations, they are carrying out the mission of the church. The Lord’s command is not only to bring new people in, but also to keep providing the Word to members already in the church.

Still more should be said, though. When pastors take the saving Gospel to non-churched people, then too they are carrying out the church’s mission. So, to what extent are pastors actually doing this?

Our Central Illinois District pastors’ survey last year found that pastors spend an average of 1.6 hours a week directly bringing the Good News to the non-churched. They spend an average of 1.7 hours a week on outreach activities that are aimed eventually at bringing the Gospel to the non-churched. Put together, we can say that a CID pastor averages just over three hours a week on evangelism, directly and indirectly.

This figure is not inconsiderable. It comes to more than 165 hours a year per pastor, to be multiplied by the total number of pastors. Such an investment of time is nothing to sneeze at.

On the other side of the coin, three hours a week amounts to not even 10% of a pastor’s workload. If he works 60 hours a week, it is more like 5%.

Pastoral practice manuals used to tell pastors to regard themselves as called not only to their congregations but also to their communities. In the latter role, pastors were to consider themselves domestic missionaries. Therefore, they were to canvass the area and reach out to the non-churched with the Gospel.<sup>29</sup>

I don’t think my generation of seminary students came away with this cast of mind strongly impressed on us. I won’t say nobody told me, but I didn’t pick up on it – and that showed in my work as a parish pastor.

And maybe it is not only me. When our survey asked pastors to identify various impediments that keep them from doing more specifically to bring the Gospel to non-churched people, almost two-thirds of the responses said, “lack of time.” That is understandable as pastors are in short supply, resulting in many vacancies to cover. In addition, a bit more than one third of the pastors in our survey said they need to step out of their “comfort zone.” About a third also said that they were uncertain over how to go about the task.

It seems some progress will be needed for pastors to move into their proper place in evangelism. They need the time, and a lot of them say they need confidence as well as skills. Then too, pastors can teach others to tell the Good News about Jesus.<sup>30</sup> To this we turn in our next thesis.

**THESIS 6:** *Evangelism skills should be included in parish education, also practice of them.*

Pastors responding to our CID evangelism survey last year reported a number of inventive ways they bring the Gospel to non-churched people. One was for them to sit down in some public place, and display a sign with a message like “Can I pray for you?” Then they talk with anyone who responds. Pastor Mark Wood of LCMS Witness and Outreach says that although

this can be worthwhile, given a choice between pastors spending an hour sitting by a sign that may go unnoticed OR spending that time teaching laypeople to tell the Good News, he would prefer that they teach.

At its convention last year, the Synod encouraged pastors and congregations to “take serious and realistic stock of how often and how well they employ recurring parish education opportunities (including, but not limited to: Bible and catechism classes, youth ministry, retreats, etc.) to teach church members key witnessing skills.” The Synod went on to give four examples of such skills: “listening discerningly to non-churched people, beginning a spiritual conversation, making a simple statement of the Gospel, [and] defending the resurrection.”

In fact, our CID survey last year had asked pastors where, in their congregations’ Christian education programs, members learned these very same skills. Some of the numerical results were surprisingly high. For example, 89% of respondents said that in adult Bible classes members learn to begin spiritual conversations, and 91% said that in those same classes people learn to make the case for the resurrection. By the way, across all parish education platforms the numbers came out the lowest for learning to listen discerningly to the non-churched.

Frankly, I find the really high survey result numbers hard to believe. I’m guessing that in most adult Bible classes these points may have come up, say, within the last six to nine months, perhaps even two or three times. But how many class participants would say that they are now able to begin a spiritual conversation or defend the resurrection? The measure of learning is not what the teacher says, but rather what the students take with them.

Note, too, that the items specified in the Synod’s resolution are skills. Think of how people learn skills, like playing the organ. Suppose you had organ instruction that detailed the history of the organ, told you all about organ design, let you hear great compositions written for the organ over the years, but you never touched a keyboard. With such instruction, would you say that you had learned to play the organ? Would any honest organ instructor claim to have taught anyone to play the organ in this way?

Let’s not kid ourselves into thinking that we are teaching people evangelism skills if all we do is speak to them. That would be a beginning, but not everything. Wisely, the Synod went on in its recent resolution to say that congregations, pastors, and other church workers should not forget “the provision of opportunity to practice such skills.”<sup>31</sup>

Setting aside time for practice within a congregation’s schedule of activities may prove challenging. Some people may shy away from class exercises that call upon them to do something. Yet these difficulties hardly constitute reasons not to try to follow the Synod’s advice, at least in some parish education settings. I know one pastor who is building into his youth catechism classes some evangelistic role-playing. There’s a start.

**THESIS 7:** *Evangelism needs to be taught at the “middle level.”*

In the resolution we have been describing, the Synod recognized that one of the ways to address Christians’ fear to speak of Christ with others is to teach them not only the Gospel itself but also ways they can become conversant concerning it. Therefore,

the Synod highly recommended its *Every One His Witness* materials for training in contextual witnessing within one’s circle of family and friends.

*Every One His Witness* features an approach that can be summarized by the acronym “LASSIE”: Listen, Ask, Seek, Share, Invite, Encourage. These six points do not constitute an outline to be covered slavishly, or even necessarily sequentially. Rather, they are more like a checklist of items that dynamically figure into an evangelistic conversation – or, more likely, a number of conversations. The core *Every One His Witness* module has sections on each of these six items. None of this is a magic formula, of course, nor does it claim to be. It forms an attempt to set the saving Good News of Jesus before people, and to follow up with the Word later.

*Every One His Witness* also includes an ever-growing bevy of context modules that can help prepare Christians for witness to people from various backgrounds, such as Muslims or Mormons, those who worship science, recently discharged military veterans, and many more. The video portions for the various modules utilize the LASSIE checklist in these very specialized applications, with guidance from expert guests.

So we have a way to teach witnessing basics, the core module. And we have very detailed context modules for highly specific cases. But to me, at least, we appear to lack material to teach evangelism in between, at what I am calling here the “middle level.”

My favorite football team is the Green Bay Packers, especially the Lombardi-era teams of the ‘60s when the staple play of the Packer offense was the power sweep. A fullback or halfback ran around end, following the blocks of two pulling guards. So stated, the play was simple. Yet Coach Lombardi spent hours drilling the offense to run it against every conceivable defensive move. Players practiced the power sweep repeatedly, down to every fine detail. In every repetition, though, two guards escorted a running back around end.

The *Every One His Witness* context modules resemble the extensive, detailed instruction that Lombardi gave the Packers in the power sweep. The core module introduces LASSIE – Listen, Ask, Seek, Share, Invite, Encourage – which would be like saying, quite basically, that a football team will advance downfield via a series of running, blocking, and passing maneuvers. Yet there seems to be some vacant space in between those two elements, the basic and the detailed. People still wonder, *what do I say?* Wouldn’t it be great to offer them one or more procedures, evangelistic counterparts to *send a runner around end behind two guards?* “Plays” like this – at, as I say, the “middle level” – could be much appreciated.

Here advances can occur in the skills the Synod noted: listening to the non-churched, beginning spiritual conversations, simply stating the Gospel, and defending the resurrection. As we all work on these, across the Synod more and more particular “plays” will surface. The formulators can write them up for the rest of us. A lot of them may take the form of “talking points,” including conversation starters, apologetics for our times, and more.

For example, in starting a spiritual conversation a potentially useful “play” can be Paul Foust’s “church testimony.” It begins with me saying that my church gives me a place where I

can express my gratitude to God, and ends up pointing out that the most important thing my church has done for me is to get me ready to die.<sup>32</sup> Then I can quote or refer to Romans 6:23 about the wages of sin and the free gift of God in Christ, putting both Law and Gospel on the table for discussion.

Although I have been using the word “play” here by way of illustration, this matter is quite serious. For we are fighting not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers. Against these, we use the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God.<sup>33</sup> What we say and do in evangelism should recognize that the Holy Spirit works through His powerful Word to afflict and comfort, to put to death and raise to life.

Let me cast a backward glance and weigh up what I have been saying.<sup>34</sup> Nothing here has been especially new. This presentation may serve to summarize several key matters we would do well to bear in mind as we move ahead in evangelism.

Concerning some of what I have touched upon, I have no conclusive solutions to recommend. Enabling pastors to allow more time for evangelism, helping them break out of their comfort zones and providing them assistance in taking the Gospel to the unchurched – these all require further attention. Likewise, including instruction in basic or middle-level evangelism skills in parish education, also providing practice for the skills – these seem to be arenas into which many of us will just be starting to step. As I have suggested, across the Synod we will be able to assist one another.

Note also that I have said hardly anything here about a significant adjunct to evangelism: church planting. Church planting has worked side-by-side with individual witnessing, not only in the Missouri Synod of bygone years, but also in the early church.<sup>35</sup> Our Synod is gearing up for a major re-launch of church planting.<sup>36</sup>

The first Lutheran Religious Life Survey issued in 2022 by a Missouri Synod layman, researcher Lyman Stone, discovered some tension between those on the one hand who think the way for the Synod to grow is for church members to have more children and raise them in the faith, and on the other hand those who set more store by evangelistic activity. But the distance between those two contingents turned out not nearly as large as the gap between those who want to follow either or both of these alternatives, compared with those who see no need to do anything differently.<sup>37</sup>

Do *nothing* differently? Here is one of the most significant questions our Synod faces in 2024 with respect to growing the church body and, of much greater importance, making disciples for life.

<sup>1</sup> Hermann Sasse, “Fifty-One: On the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit,” trans. Norman Nagel, *Letters to Lutheran Pastors Volume III 1957-1969*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 206.

<sup>2</sup> Remarkably, these days some Lutherans seem to be drawing the conclusion that the doctrine of election makes evangelism rather unimportant, if not totally a thing of the past, since God’s elect will be saved in any case. I addressed this matter in part one of “Foundation and Mission,” an essay for the 2022 LCMS Southern Illinois District Convention, available at <https://sidlcms.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/1-of-2-Essay.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 384.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 119:32.

<sup>5</sup> This point was repeatedly made by Dr. Louis Brighton in his clergy and lay seminars on the book of Revelation.

<sup>6</sup> The treatment of this thesis reflects Ken Schurb, “Unashamed,” *Concordia Pulpit Resources* 29/3 (June 16-September 15, 2019): 68-69.

<sup>7</sup> WA Br 5, 399.

<sup>8</sup> WA Br 5, 400.

<sup>9</sup> See 2 Corinthians 1:8-9.

<sup>10</sup> See Robert Kolb, “Confessing the Faith: Our Lutheran Way of Life,” *Concordia Journal* 20 (October 1994): 356-364.

<sup>11</sup> LC Creed 52, 55.

<sup>12</sup> Darrell L. Guder, ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 5 (italics added). Regarding this movement – which, it should be noted, is much broader than any group within the Missouri Synod that self-identifies using the term “missional” – I have subjected it to critique in “Missional? The Church in Luther’s *Large Catechism*,” *LOGIA: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 18 (Epiphany, 2009): 15-21 and in part two of “Grace, Free and Boundless,” my essay for the 2015 LCMS Central Illinois District Convention, an edited excerpt of which appeared under the title “Gospel and Mission” in *LOGIA: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 25 (Reformation, 2016):64-69.

<sup>13</sup> See LC Creed 41.

<sup>14</sup> LC Creed 53, from *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 438. Hereafter this translation will be abbreviated “K-W.”

<sup>15</sup> LC Creed 42; K-W, 436.

<sup>16</sup> Luke 19:10; Acts 1:1.

<sup>17</sup> *Spiritual Conversations in the Digital Age: A Barna Report Produced in Partnership with Lutheran Hour Ministries* (N.p.: Barna Group, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 28:19-20.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 28:16-17.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 28:20.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 1:23.

<sup>22</sup> Isaiah 40:9.

<sup>23</sup> Among others in the early church, “common” Christians told the Good News about Jesus to unbelievers. Consult William C. Weinrich, “Evangelism in the Early Church,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 45 (January-April 1981):67-68; also William C. Weinrich, “Missions: St. Paul and the Early Church,” *The First Annual [sic] Missions Congress, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, April 25, 1986*, archived at <https://ctsarchive.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/WeinrichMissionsStPaul%26EarlyChurch.mp3>

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 11:4. See Matthew 2:8 and 9:13.

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 21:1-28:20 Concordia Commentary: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2018), 1623; see 1599-1600.

<sup>26</sup> Kurt E. Marquart, *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance*, volume 9 of *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics*, ed. Robert Preus (Fort Wayne: The International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1990), 149.

<sup>27</sup> CA XIV; K-W, 47, italics added.

<sup>28</sup> Isaiah 40:9; 52:7.

<sup>29</sup> See the summary in Geoffrey L. Robinson, “Why Do Churches Grow? An Investigation into Factors that Increase and Sustain Membership in LCMS Congregations” (Ph.D. diss., Copromote and guide the mission ncordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, 2020), 108-111.

<sup>30</sup> The “Supplement to the Diploma of Vocation” that forms a part of the set of call documents for pastors in the Missouri Synod obligates pastors of congregations, among other things, to “activity of the congregation as it is related to the local community and to endeavors of the Synod and its Districts, in particular to train workers and guide them in evangelism and to enlist the support of the congregation for mission work.”

<sup>31</sup> 2023 LCMS Res. 1-01A.

<sup>32</sup> See Paul J. Foust, *Reborn to Multiply: Tested Techniques for Personal Evangelism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), 27ff.

<sup>33</sup> Ephesians 6:12, 17.

<sup>34</sup> For more on almost everything in the present presentation, and more, consult a series of *Issues, etc.* audio interviews on evangelism from September, 2023: <https://issuesetc.org/evangelism/>

<sup>35</sup> I refer again to the Weinrich lecture, “Missions: St. Paul and the Early Church” cited above.

<sup>36</sup> For resources that can help a pastor and congregation to begin discussing church planting, see <https://www.cidlcms.org/outreach-church-planting.html>

<sup>37</sup> [Lyman Stone,] *What is Our Life Together? Report on the Results of the Lutheran Religious Life Survey*. See <https://www.lutheranlifesurvey.church/>

## The Way Forward: Fellowship, Fidelity, Fearlessness

*Continued from Page 1*

To become a confessional Lutheran is to have that not merely in the “What We Believe” section of a congregational website, but to have it be the center of all that we preach, sing, and do, and give shape and meaning to our daily existence.

Think about the beautiful order, the flow of the articles of the AC before it gets to the abuses: God, Original Sin, The Son of God, Justification, The Preaching Office, The New Obedience, The Church, and sacraments. Or the flow of the *Small Catechism*: Repentance, Faith, Holy Living. We don’t need new ideas. We need to return and reemphasize the old ideas. The path forward is found in the sources (*ad fontes*).

In this fidelity, the way forward is to be diligent in whatever the Holy Spirit has given into your hand to do. What appears to be great and important may in the end be terribly insignificant, while the small and obscure might have the greatest impact. Wilhelm Löhe put it this way:

It is a hidden glory in the Christian life to practice faithfulness in little things, that is, in one’s vocation; yet it is more difficult and more glorious than martyrdom. Martyrdom is aided by an agitated time, an emotional disposition, and it is often quickly won; it only takes a brief moment. But being faithful in little things involves bearing patiently the quiet tedium of a monotonous, elapsing life to the praise of the Lord.<sup>10</sup>

This fidelity in the little things will cultivate fearlessness for the church’s little ones in the coming tribulation.

### The Coming Tribulation

Suffering is coming for the church in America. Our hope is not in coming elections. “Trust not in princes, they are but mortal...”

A pastor in the Ukraine named Magdich spoke about how the war has changed him and his church: “Ten minutes under heavy shelling in the bunker changes your theology, changes the way you think about God and everything.” Our God is abstract because we live in a world of abstractions. Our Christianity has by and large conformed to the culture. The heavy shelling is coming. Either it will bombard us into submission, or shock us out of our lethargy.

### Fearlessness before the Enemy

One of my parishioners recently read the Tolkien *Lord of the Rings* trilogy for the first time. One of his observations struck me: The characters openly speak about “the enemy’s” schemes and machinations. We should speak that way, he said. He’s right. Talk of the devil is relatively infrequent among us. We will be branded as weirdos. But there is an enemy, and being subtle about it won’t prepare us to defend against his crafts and assaults.

The Lord Jesus exhorts us to fear not the plots of those who would harm us. They can harm us none. “Do not fear those who

can destroy the body, but fear Him who can destroy both body and soul in hell.”

In the coming storm, God will work the suffering for our good. Our Confessions comfort us:

God in His purpose has ordained before the time of the world by what crosses and sufferings He would conform every one of His elect to the image of His Son. His cross shall and must work together for good for everyone, because they are called according to God’s purpose. Therefore, Paul has concluded that it is certain and beyond doubt that neither “tribulation, or distress,” neither “death nor life,” or other such things “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>11</sup>

### Conclusion

The post-Covid path forward for our congregations is strengthening the core of our members through fellowship in the means of grace and daily life. We do this with fidelity to Christ and the confession of Him. We fear not those who can hurt the body. The strong core grows the church spiritually, and where and when the Holy Spirit pleases, numerically, through their own life of faithfulness under the cross. The Lord will care for His church. This is most certainly true.

<sup>9</sup> *SAIL*, 1.1-3 (Tappert p292).

<sup>10</sup> *The Word Remains: Selected Writings of the Church Year and the Christian Life*, p81.

<sup>11</sup> FC SD XI.49 (Concordia p609).

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# *In This Issue:*

## **Evangelism in the LCMS**

### **Seven Theses for 2024**

***The Way Forward:  
Fellowship, Fidelity,  
Fearlessness***

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