

## *Accountability and Faithfulness in Reaching the Lost*

Dearest brothers and sisters in Christ,

Grace, mercy and peace be yours in and through our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the True and Great Apostle of the living God, sent by His Father, *not to condemn the world, but to save it.*

I was recently asked by brothers Dwight Marable and Terry Tieman to write a “white paper” discussing the issue of accountability and faithfulness in proclaiming the Gospel to the unchurched, that is, to those who are yet outside the household of faith. Dwight and Terry serve the Board for Mission Services (BfMS) as the strategic leaders of the synod wide effort of revitalizing 2000+ LCMS congregations to become mission outposts. A mission outpost is a congregation deliberately focused on the unchurched people of the community with the intention of bringing the saving Gospel of Christ to them. The attending fruit of such outreach, naturally, is new believers made through the ministry of the Holy Spirit as He works faith through the Gospel, where and when it pleases Him. This revitalization effort is a key element of the Ablaze! initiative. Synod resolved in its 2007 convention to “adopt a goal of praying and working for the mission revitalization of at least 2,000 existing LCMS churches by 2017.”<sup>1</sup> A revitalized congregation, according to the BfMS, “is regularly and consistently making new disciples who make new disciples through the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup>

The revitalization effort, as it has gotten underway, has encountered a significant challenge that needs to be addressed theologically. What is being challenged is the issue of being faithful or obedient to the Great Commission. Coupled with that faithfulness is the development of a method or structure (set metrics) by which congregations can examine whether or not they have been obedient to Christ’s call to join Him in discipling all nations. Such a call to faithfulness and its concomitant “measure” are being labeled by critics as legalistic, that is, they are “Law” and not “Gospel.”

While intending to address this challenge in an open theological discussion, thus a “white paper,” I prefer to present my thinking in the form of a personal and pastoral letter to our beloved Synod. Personally, I love our Synod and I want with all of my heart to see her remain faithful to her Lord and Savior. Pastorally, I am charged to provide ecclesiastical oversight, that is, to apply the Word of God to the theology and practice of our pastors, commissioned workers, and congregations of the California-Nevada-Hawaii District. At the same time I hope that the thoughts and concerns raised in this paper might be shared by other districts in the Synod and that they prove helpful in their theological discussions. In the end, it is my desire that by “speaking the truth in love . . . [we in the LCMS] grow up in every way into Him who is the head, even Christ.” As such this letter invites brothers and sisters in our Synod to join me in fraternal conversation regarding the place in our theology of Christ’s mission to seek and to save the lost and how what He is about in this world informs our practice as orthodox Lutherans.

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<sup>1</sup> Resolution 1-01A To Support Revitalization of LCMS Congregations, 63<sup>rd</sup> Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

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Two questions were given to me to discuss: (1) Is the call for Christians to participate in Christ's mission to reach the lost Law or Gospel? (2) Is accounting for whether or not a given pastor and congregation are actually reaching the lost Law or Gospel? Any question regarding Law and Gospel concerns both our salvation in Christ—*we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law*—and our motivation for and ability to serve Christ in His Kingdom—*For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and He died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for Him who for their sake died and was raised*. In each case we maintain that the Gospel must triumph over the Law, even as St. Paul reminds us, we “are not under law but under grace” (Romans 6). Thus this paper assumes a Gospel, rather than Law orientation.

Additionally, the paper is written from a spirit of Christian hope. Hope that does not and cannot disappoint because we know that Christ's church and mission belong ultimately to Him. He is the personal guarantee that the mission He was sent on by His Father will be accomplished. He is also the guarantee that we will be faithful in our participation in it. We echo St. Paul's conclusion, “I am persuaded that He is able to keep that which He has entrusted to me” (2 Timothy).

While filled with Christ centered hope, my thoughts also bear a certain element of sadness. This sadness arises from the theological confusion that has permeated our church body regarding the priority of Christ's Commission for the church today. I saw that confusion powerfully displayed at our convention this summer over whether Christ's mission to seek and save the lost was a top priority or *the* top priority of our church in its preparation of professional church leaders. The arguments against making His Mission our top priority went something like this:

- 1) From a parish pastor: I don't question the importance of reaching the lost. But you must understand. I have many hurting sheep in my congregation. They need the Gospel too. Placing the lost as a higher priority than them is not right.
- 2) From a Concordia University professor: My school does not question the importance of reaching the lost. We work hard at preparing our students for ministry and they go out with a real concern for those who are lost. But do you realize how much it would cost for us to change our curriculum in order to make “reaching the lost” the top priority of our church worker preparation?
- 3) From an even handed brother, a cherished student of mine at the seminary: We heard what you said President Newton about Christ's top priority being seeking and saving the lost. It may be Christ's vocation; it is not ours.

I am equally saddened by the confusion of Law and Gospel as it pertains to our exhorting and encouraging one another to participate in His mission. There exists much confusion as to how and why we participate in His mission and what empowers us to do so. Well meaning pastors and people diligently seek to persuade all of us to take seriously the business of the Master. They earnestly seek to inspire and motivate us to be in mission. I sympathize with these brothers and sisters. My entire life and ministry is devoted to this one thing: *that the heart of the Father that moved Him to give His Son for His world would beat loudly and clearly in the breast of every believer in the CNH*. I am also aware, however, that in our zeal for that to happen or in our attempts to make that happen, we can resort to concepts and words that miss the Gospel mark.

Much of our mission minded motivation, then, results in placing the burden of Christ's Commission upon our shoulders (the spirit and effect of the Law) rather than on Christ's shoulders (the message of the Gospel). Rightly distinguishing between Law and Gospel is exceedingly difficult. Just ask Luther and all of the great Lutheran preachers since his day. None of us gets it completely right. Now as always we plead God's mercy.

## I

We turn now to our first question. Is the call for Christians to participate in Christ's mission Law or Gospel? That's not the way we ordinarily hear that question. The question goes more like: Is the call for Christians to obey the Great Commission Law or Gospel? Note the difference in "obey the Great Commission" and "participate in Christ's mission." I think it's equally important not only to answer the question biblically but to ask it biblically. In this case it's much more appropriate or accurate to speak about participating in Christ's mission rather than our obeying the Great Commission.

The critical point here is that God's mission to save the world, what we call often the Great Commission, was not given to the church, at least not directly. There has been a longstanding debate in our Synod, (it was current even when I was a professor several years ago at the seminary,) as to the rightful recipients of the so called Great Commission. Was it given primarily to pastors or to the church. My response to that question, then, as well as now is that it was not given to either. God the Father gave it specifically to our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord said clearly in Matthew 28: "All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me." That's the key. Commissioning has to do with the granting of authority in order to carry out a specific mission or responsibility. Our Lord was given all authority by His Father, thus, He is the great commissioned one of the Father. The Father commissioned His Son to carry out the evangelical mandate to save the world as St. John writes in the third chapter of his Gospel. "The Father sent (and the word for sent here is *avpe,steilen*) His Son into the world not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him." Specifically, the Son of God is the Father's great apostle or missionary to the world. In being the great apostle. that is, in being commissioned by the Father as His missionary to the world, the Father bestowed on His Son the authority to forgive sins. Our Lord revealed in both word and deed What was the source and what was the purpose of His authority: "What is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven or to say rise and walk?' But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," He then said to the paralytic, "Rise, pick up your bed and go home." (Matthew 9)

In Christ's ascension as the resurrected Son of God His Father extended that authority on earth to forgive sins to encompass all creation. Thus Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Our Lord Jesus remains the apostle, the sent one, of the Father carrying to completion his Father's will, even to this day. Jesus did not abdicate His commission nor give it to someone else to complete. He holds it and rules all things with it. He will continue to do so until His last enemy, death, is put under His feet and the Kingdom, fully restored is delivered to His Father (1 Corinthians 15). That is the universal purpose and scope of Christ's commission.

It's essential to understand that Christ's mission from his Father, (what we know as the Gospel), is comprised of not two (Christ's death and resurrection) but three parts, the completion of each guaranteed by the promise of Almighty God. That is how our Lord presented the sum of His

Word to His disciples in Luke chapter 24: “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead and that repentance to the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.” Note the three aspects of His mission: (1) His suffering, (2) His rising from the dead on the third day, and (3) His proclaiming repentance to the forgiveness of sins to the world for which He died and rose. Note also that these three aspects or elements of the Gospel are the center and the summation of the entire Scriptures. Nothing else is more comprehensive or more core to what God revealed to the world in his Word. If we desire to be faithful to God’s Word in its entirety, then, the Gospel must include not only His death and resurrection, but also His proclamation to the world of what His death and resurrection procured.

Reflecting our Lord’s words in Luke 24, St. Paul confessed this same Gospel before King Agrippa. “To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26). St. Paul’s entire ministry was devoted to the proclamation of the Gospel, as he said elsewhere, “I would know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” For Paul that Gospel contained three essential parts: Christ’s death, His resurrection and His proclamation of light or salvation to the whole world. We err, therefore, when we restrict the work of Christ to two areas, that is, his death and resurrection and, then, assign the third aspect of His work--the proclamation of repentance to forgiveness to the world—to someone (the apostles) or something (the church) else. The mission, start to finish, including His death, resurrection and proclamation of forgiveness belong foremost and primarily to Christ. That is the first and most critical of points.

Now the second point--our participation as His people or church in Christ’s commission follows from it. Christ did not hand over or delegate it to us, His church, to complete. Unfortunately, that seems to be the popular understanding of the “Great Commission” among evangelical Christians and in our own Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. I have often heard, “Christ gave us the Great Commission, we must complete it. I’ve heard myself say something similar. It’s precisely at this point that godly obedience, that is, the obedience of faith, runs amuck, becoming a response to the Law rather than the fruit of the Gospel. A number of my students at the seminary used to criticize the promotion of the Great Commission calling it the “eleventh commandment.” While, some of their criticism might have been a bit sophomoric, and in some ways self righteous, they had a point. The Great Commission was often presented as a law for us to obey rather than a Gospel gift for us to receive.

What is critical for our thinking is that, with our regeneration in the Gospel, comes a personal invitation by our Lord Jesus Christ to participate with Him in completing the mission that His Father commissioned Him to complete. Our participation in Christ’s mission is an essential aspect of our inheritance in the Gospel, one for us to receive, embrace, cherish, and invest in with the hope and plan of increase. This point cannot be stated strongly enough. The entire question of Great Commission, Law or Gospel, turns on it.

The Gospel dynamic of our participation with Christ and his commission lies at the very heart of God's gracious dealing with mankind. It traces itself all the way back to the beginning, that is, to day six of creation and to the day the Lord gave the first Gospel promise to His children after fell into sin. The promise reads this way, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel." In this announcement to Satan, this declaration of war upon him, Jesus elected us to join him in the battle that he will effectively fight and win. From the first day that He launched his mission he chose his sinful brothers and sisters to participate with him, that is, to be partners with him in the fight. Even before the fall He made man and woman to be partners with Him in His creation. He gave them dominion, that is, ruling authority over the rest of creation, Genesis 1:26. Adam, doubting or rejecting that he was already like God and that he held this divine service by sheer grace, chose to grasp it for himself. Following Satan's recommendation, he and his wife ate the forbidden fruit. All became ruined. It's at that point that God Himself and alone broke into the quagmire of sin. His missionary words were simple, "Where are you, Adam?" He was already seeking and saving the lost. No sooner did he call his children back to himself then he called them into partnership with Him in His mission of re-creation, "I'll put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring. He shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel." In so many words God was saying the following, "Satan, I declare war against you. I choose this day to get my son and my daughter and their offspring back and to bring back to myself the entire creation which is alienated through their sin. In my grace I elect my son and my daughter to stand with me as allies in my war against you. Indeed, I will personally bring salvation and healing back to my creation. I will do this great work, but I choose not to do it alone." Can you imagine what those words said to Eve? Eve was in the corner of this conversation. Broken by her sin, still trying to answer the question that the Lord had put to her, "What is this that you have done?" God's words must have broken into her thoughts. "Eve I've chosen you as a partner in my mission. Through you, Eve, I will bring forth the champion who will destroy this monster and make all things new."

That's grace, isn't it. It's grace upon grace. Grace saves each of us and makes us sons and daughters of the King. Then, grace goes on to put us to work in the Father's business, His business of seeking and saving the lost. That's the grace that called each of the great saints of the Old Testament into His mission. It's the grace with which He sent out the twelve or the seventy-two in the New Testament. It's the same grace that called each of us as His own and as His own has sent us, together with His Son, into some part of the world, that is, the domain of darkness. God chose sinners, those who are as often in collusion with the evil one as they are in love with the righteous Christ, to partner with Him in bringing forth the new creation. As Luther reminds us we are both sinful and justified at the same time. As such we are His co-warriors, His partners in mission.

Paul wrote in Ephesians 1, "even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before him." Our Lord said in Luke 10, "nevertheless, do not rejoice in this that the spirits are subject to you but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will." God does not have a

game plan different from this one, electing redeemed sinners to contend alongside Him against the domain of darkness, “to proclaim salvation to the captives,” Luke 4, and to “take every thought captive to Christ” 2 Corinthians 10. God has no Plan B. His grace enables him not to need one.

God’s choosing to have us join Him in His work of reconciliation is the greatest statement that He might possibly make of His love and forgiveness. Choosing us to be partners with Him in His mission is an essential component of His holy absolution. So He absolved Simon Peter that day on Sea of Tiberias. As He asked Peter three times if he loved him, he absolved Peter three times with the words, “Feed my lambs or feed my sheep.” It was not enough for our God to restore Peter to a relationship with himself as brother. Our Lord wanted Peter to experience the fullness of his grace which included participation with Him in His Kingdom coming to the world. You can see why one might become agitated over the accusation that obedience to the Great Commission, or if you will, participation with Christ in his mission, is Law and not Gospel. Such accusations indicate little or no understanding of the grace-centered economy of God.

We entered into Christ’s commission by our baptism into his death and resurrection. It wasn’t given to us. Rather, we entered into it as we entered into Christ. It is inseparable from our being found in Christ. Thus, the brother at the synodical convention who stated publicly that seeking and saving the lost may be Christ’s vocation but it is not ours demonstrates a profound misunderstanding of what actually took place with us and for us in our baptisms. We were baptized into Christ and His mission for the world when we were baptized into his death and resurrection. What parts of Christ do we choose and what parts of Christ do we not choose? I choose the reconciled to God part. I choose the eternal life part. I choose the heaven part. But I do not choose being called priest to the nations. I do not choose the cross. I do not choose participating with Christ’s commission from his Father. You can see how impossible that idea is.

In the business of obeying the Great Commission, the word obedience must be understood in the same way we speak of obedience in reference to the Gospel. Often we refer to saving faith as obedience to the Gospel. That is, we receive by faith the gift of eternal life won for us by our Lord Jesus Christ. We are able to disobey the Gospel promise only by refusing to receive it. We are also able to obey it only by believing it and embracing it as our own. That is not a law. That is faith born by the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Justification by faith alone is the centerpiece of Lutheran theology.

What we need to grasp is the fact that Christ’s invitation to join Him in His battle against Satan springs out of the same Gospel. Just as His call to us to be reconciled to His Father, and thus become and be his brothers and sisters, is purest Gospel. So also is His call for us to be co-heirs with Him of this world and co-partners with Him in His work of reconciling the whole world to Himself. To be sure, we did not die for the sins of the world. Only our Lord Jesus Christ did that. We did not rise from the dead as vindication of that sacrifice. Only our Lord did that. However, we are invited, that is, called by grace to join Him in proclaiming reconciliation through repentance to the forgiveness of sins to all nations.

Like the call to salvation, we are able to obey (by faith) or disobey that Gospel call to be His partners in His mission to the world. Our Lord made this point when he was speaking to the religious leaders of His day during Holy Week. In Matthew 21, the parable of the two sons, Jesus said, “What do you think? A man had two sons and he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today’ and he answered, ‘I will not.’ But afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” And they said the first. Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him and even when you saw it you did not afterward change your mind and believe him.”

Our Lord spoke this parable to the chief priests and elders of Israel in the context of their challenge to the authority He exercised in cleansing the Temple the day before. Important to understanding our Lord’s actions are the words He spoke while cleansing it. Matthew records, “It is written, my house shall be called a house of prayer but you have made it a den of robbers.” It is possible to understand His words to indicate that the people were tampering with the scales that weighed out the money or they were tampering with the prices of the different offerings, so they were essentially “robbing” the saints who were coming to worship God in the Temple. In actuality, He was speaking to something much deeper than that. His real concern is housed in His words, “My house shall be called a house of prayer.” Our Lord was speaking from Isaiah 56, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for the nations.” The Scripture surrounding these words reads as follows: Thus says the Lord, “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off and the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord to minister to him to love the name of the Lord and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it and holds fast my covenant. These I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

Our Lord was clearly stating that His own people, elect by Him not only as precious to Him but as His priests for the nations (Exodus 19) had taken the salvation that was intended for Israel and the nations and kept it merely for themselves. God’s people effectively stole the inheritance of eternal life which belonged to all peoples. There is more than one way to be a thief. One way is to break into a neighbor’s home or business and steal what belongs to him. Another is to choose not to help our neighbor keep his property or business (Luther). A third way to be a thief is to choose not to give to my neighbor what is actually his own. For instance, if I were the executor of an estate and it was my responsibility to distribute to all the inheritors their portion of the estate but chose instead to keep their portions of that inheritance for myself, then, I stole their inheritance from them. That is what our Lord meant in these words, “You have read that my house shall be a house of prayer for the nations but you have made it a den of thieves.”

That understanding, then, places missionary significance into the story of the two sons—one who chose to obey his father and the other who chose not to. The point of working in the vineyard, however, was not one of obedience or disobedience, but rather of one who exhibited the fruit of a

true son and the other who did not. Being a son assumed automatically that one worked in his own inheritance, that is, in his own vineyard. The story of God's people from Genesis 3 to Revelation is the story of a God inviting his people to be His own children which includes owning and working the Kingdom of God (the family business). Luther suggested that God made Adam and Eve to be co-creators with Himself (Genesis 1). After the fall, our Lord returned to His disobedient children, not only to restore them to Himself, but to restore them to their divine vocation in the world. Along with being co-creators with God, they would, by grace, join Him as co-re-creators: I will put enmity between you and this woman . . .

In Exodus 19 God called His people His treasured possession to join Him and bring priests for the world. His words in Exodus 19: There Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel." These few words at the beginning of Exodus 19 are the sum of the covenant that God cut with his people on Sinai.

God, through mediation of His servant Moses, single handedly rescued His people. God struck the Egyptians with the ten plagues, the last being the great Passover event. God personally ransomed a people for Himself and brought them out of the land of Egypt. God single handedly opened up the Red Sea while the children of Israel passed through it on dry ground. God gave the children of Israel miraculous food in the desert in the form of manna and miraculous drink from the Rock that followed them. All of these were God's gracious, monergistic acts to His people. The people of God were not actors in their rescue and or care, but recipients of the grace of God and His salvation.

It's at Sinai where God now completes the graceful election of His people with one more profound element, that of inviting them to join Him in loving the world, sharing His desire that it be saved. Thus, He called them into a priestly responsibility or a priestly covenant with Himself: If you will keep my words and obey my covenant then you shall be to me my treasured possession among all the peoples for all the earth is mine and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. God cut a covenant of partnership with the children of Israel that focused specifically on being priests with Him for the nations. No priest is simply or merely a priest unto himself. His office as priest is always for service to another. Thus Israel being set apart as an entire kingdom of priests was not to understand that separation or sanctification as something to enjoy only for itself. It was a setting apart to a priesthood intentionally called to serve the rest of the world.

The story of the Old Testament is a story of God's people chafing under their priestly robes. They never fit just right. They seemed too tight, too confining, too self effacing. Priestly robes are always garments of service for others. They are not by definition self promoting, self serving or self aggrandizing. That's oftentimes why we find them uncomfortable as well. When God's people abandoned their priestly call, and we are correct to call that disobedience, God sent his prophets to call them back--back to him by faith alone and to their shared vocation with Him as

priests to the world. When they continued to disobey His call He brought their prideful self absorption to ruin and scattered them among the nations. But even that discipline was in accordance with His divine call of them at Sinai. He scattered them as his priests. There in Babylon He brought them to repentance and raised them once again as His own people including their divine vocation as His priests for the nations.

Our Lord patiently chastens His covenant people when they decline to walk with Him by faith including their recalcitrance to serve as co-priests with Him in His mission to the world. What breaks His heart, however, is when He finally comes to a place where He removes His kingdom from them and gives it to another who will produce its fruits. Following the story of the two sons our Lord went on with the story of the tenants of the master's vineyard: "There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants and went into another country. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. Finally he sent his son to them saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come let us kill him and have his inheritance.' And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons." Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes? Therefore I tell you the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits."

Those words had to have broken our Savior's heart. He had to tell those whom He had once called in covenant at Sinai to be priests with Him to the world that the kingdom was being taken away from them and being given to another. This sorrow finds voice in his lament over Jerusalem, "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you would not! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

The story of the tenants is not first and foremost about the religious leaders not knowing or believing that Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus suggests in the story that they did know who He was and that is precisely why they chose to kill him-- But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir. Come let us kill him and have his inheritance." Indeed, it is a story about true faith, however, it notes that true faith in Christ includes true delight in sharing His Kingdom coming into the world. Their rejection of Jesus as their Messiah was demonstrated in the story by the refusal of the tenants to be willing partners with the owner of the vineyard. They selfishly intended to keep the fruit of the vineyard for themselves. They proved to be robbers. Their final act of thievery was to kill the heir so that the vineyard would belong to them. We must read this story in the same light as Jesus told it. My house shall be called a house of prayer for the nations but you're making it a den of robbers.

We can see that if it is a tragic thing for tenants to rebelliously rob their Master how much more will it be for God's own children to rob their Father. Such acts would break his heart. Such acts would finally cause them to forfeit their place as sons and daughters in God's Kingdom. It would be terrible if we in the LCMS choose not to learn from their tragic example.

This robbery lies at the root of our rebellion against our Father, and, likewise, lies at the root of God sending His true Son into the world for our salvation. Note the sign of Jonah that our Lord gave to His people. When scribes and Pharisees sought a sign from our Lord, He answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign. But no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12 ). The sign of Jonah was not just that Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three nights, it was also why he was in the belly of the great fish. He was there specifically because he had refused to be God's prophet to the nation of Nineveh. Likewise, Israel had refused to be God's priesthood for the nations. Our Lord Jesus Christ paid personally for that disobedience on the cross. Thus he lay three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The sign of Jonah also includes the fact that as Jonah repented and was resurrected by God to be Nineveh's prophet and priest, so also in Christ's death and resurrection His Church repents and is resurrected to be his priests and prophets for the nations. The simple conclusion drawn here, is that we cannot separate our call as God's priests with Christ to the nations from our call to belong to Christ as brothers and sisters. Our Lord does not pull them apart; neither should we.

While, our call to priesthood in Christ (obedient participation with Him in the Commission His Father gave Him) is purest Gospel, there is an aspect of law that comes into play. That naturally comes when we choose to drift away, forget, or ignore our priestly vocation with and in Christ. We Lutherans are very uncomfortable at this moment in the conversation. We do not want to be told that we have not been about our big Brother's business; that we have chosen not to join with Him in what the Father sent him to do. Being uncomfortable comes from the conviction of the Law. That's what the Law is supposed to do. It makes us uncomfortable and leads us to repentance and faith in the Gospel. Even more than make us uncomfortable, the preaching of the Law if done properly slays us so that Christ might raise us with Himself from the deadness of our sin and enable us in Him to walk in the newness of His resurrected life, thus, the sign of Jonah. It leads us rightly to true repentance and trust in the atoning sacrifice of our Lord who is the great high priest for us and for the whole world. And it raises us again to be His treasured people, a holy nation, a divine priesthood for the world. You and I will continue to be in the middle of this great tension between saint and sinner; priest and parasite; resurrected and dead until the day He completes the mission that His Father entrusted to him and in Him to us. This reality leads us to daily repentance and keeps us in everlasting hope.

## II

Now regarding the second question – accountability structures that measure, evaluate, or determine whether or not we're being faithful to Christ's commission to seek and to save the lost. From the outset, I find it a bit strange that we would consider the idea of accountability structures regarding seeking and saving the lost as Law. It's really neither Law nor Gospel in

that it neither condemns, nor saves, nor motivates. Accountability structures, or if you will accounting, are simply a God given component in our faithful stewardship of the Gospel. Accounting indicates what we value and serves as an essential means to keep what God has entrusted to His Son, and in His Son, to us (teaching them to keep all things whatsoever I have commanded you.) Accounting, including giving an account is basic to the stewardship of the Gospel. Jesus referred to accounting often in the stories of the kingdom: Luke 16, the story of the shrewd steward; or Matthew 24, the wise servant; or Matthew 25, the stories of the talents. St. Paul made accountability of our stewardship of the Gospel an essential of the “all things” he taught to the churches. 1 Corinthians 3, “Be careful how you build. Each man’s work will become evident.” or Romans 14, “So each of us shall give an account of himself to God.”

Accounting is an essential practice in business. The mission of God is the business of the kingdom coming. What earthly business do we know that does not employ some kind of accounting? So, it is with the Gospel of the Kingdom and its coming to all the world. Isn’t the summing up of all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth, the essence or goal of the family business? Isn’t proclaiming the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ to all people the means by which that goal is realized? Isn’t it appropriate that we account for whether or not we are doing that? That’s not Law or Gospel. It’s simply good business practice. At least Jesus suggests that it is.

Accounting for us reaching the lost with the Gospel becomes legalistic only when we use it to promote ourselves as deserving God’s favor or to condemn ourselves, believing that God’s favor is not for us, or when we account for the wrong things. We cannot account for how many come to faith in Jesus Christ. That belongs only to the Holy Spirit who works faith where and when it pleases Him through the preaching of the Gospel. In farming terms we cannot account for how many bushels of wheat we will produce in the harvest. That number is ultimately an act of God. However, we can account for where and to whom we preach the Gospel. In farming terms, we can account for how many acres we plant in wheat. There is a correlation between how many acres a farmer plants with wheat and how much wheat he harvests at the other end. A farmer who complains that his wheat crop is very poor or none at all might be asked a simple even stupid question. Did you plant any seed? So also a congregation that has not harvested any souls unto salvation might ask itself a similar question. Did you sow any Gospel among the lost?

Accounting is also a tool that leads to repentance, that is, the changing of one’s mind about something. Without accounting there is no basis for reflection on needed change. Accounting of my sins, that is the x-ray or the mirror of the Law, leads me to reflection and repentance to the Gospel of salvation. Accounting of a low or non existent harvest leads me to ask if or how I am planting. If I am not planting then I need to repent, that is, change my mind and start planting. If I am planting and there is no harvest I might examine how or what I planted and repent or change my mind about how I was going about this work of planting.

For example, for many, many years we enjoyed non-Christian people coming into our fellowships on Sunday morning. Sunday worship was a cultural value held by both Christians and non-Christians. It was on Sunday morning in divine service where we sowed liberally the true Gospel seed, planted it richly in the hearts of attendees through the Word preached and the Sacraments administered. Today, the cultural value of “Sunday worship” has waned with the

result that we have fewer and fewer non-Christians simply walking in off the street. We lament that we are not able to reach them, as one woman commented to me in a conference, “If non-Christians would only come to church rather than be on the soccer fields on Sunday morning they could hear the Gospel and be saved.” The question we must now ask ourselves in this present reality is not whether or not we are faithfully planting the Gospel seed, but where are we faithfully planting it. In a previous generation we might have been correct in the expectation that non-Christians would come (drawn by cultural values) to divine service and there hear the Gospel and be saved. Is that expectation appropriate today? If the cultural value (it’s the right thing to do as an upstanding citizen of the community) no longer draws the non-Christian to worship, what can? We would be theologically remiss if we thought they could be drawn to Christ’s Gospel by their own reason or strength. Can those who do not yet know the Gospel and, therefore do not have the Holy Spirit in them be drawn by the Holy Spirit to where the Word and Sacraments are faithfully preached and administered? Can those who do not know Christ take the first steps of faith and seek Christ out? That’s hardly the case in our Lutheran theology. In fact, we would say that those who have not received the Word cannot come to Christ. We would call that synergism and rightly condemn it. So, our theology requires us not to wait for non-Christians to come to us where we sow liberally the saving seed of faith in divine service but rather, we go to where they are and sow the seed of faith in their hearts and lives in their place. That is basic to faithful stewardship of the Gospel. If we find ourselves not liberally sowing the Gospel in those places, then, we repent, that is, change our mind about our sowing practices.

We turn, then, to the need to provide structure in order to guarantee accountability. That is how we “keep” what we hold to be valuable. Suggesting that accounting for how we carry the Gospel to the lost is legalistic is frankly, hypocritical. We have created an entire structure called the Synod with its districts and circuits to account for keeping the pure doctrine and practice of the Gospel in our congregations and for our members. As a district president I’m charged with accounting responsibilities over the doctrine and practice of 180 plus churches. These are huge responsibilities. I forfeit my office as a district president if I choose not to be responsible in accounting for the pure doctrine and practice of the pastors and congregations in my district. No one complains that such accountability is legalistic, that it is Law not Gospel. Can you see the hypocrisy? We are quick to call legalistic any accounting for how faithful we are in proclaiming the Gospel to those who have not heard it. But we would never call ourselves legalistic for accounting for how faithful we are in proclaiming the Gospel to ourselves. We’ve built an enormous and elaborate structure for accounting for the proclamation of the true Gospel to the saved yet we criticize for doing the same for those who are lost. The bottom line is we account for what we value.

So what did Jesus value? In Luke 19, our Lord said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” In Luke 15, our Lord asked, “What man among you if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them does not leave the ninety-nine in an open pasture and go after the one that was lost until he finds it? In Matthew 9, “When He saw the crowds, had compassion for them, because they were harassed and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd.” Note the definition of a sheep who is lost: simply, a sheep lost from its shepherd. In John 10, “And I have other sheep which are not of this fold. I must bring them also. And they shall hear my voice and they shall be one flock with one shepherd.” John 12, “Verily, verily I say to you unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains by itself. But if it dies, it bears much grain. And I, if I

am lifted up from the earth will draw all men to myself.” John 15, “You did not choose me but I chose you that you should bear much fruit and that your fruit might remain.” It’s obvious from these several Scripture passages our Lord places high, even highest value, on seeking and saving the lost. If that’s of value to Him He would account for its accomplishment because we account for what we value.

The real question then is not whether accounting for our stewardship of the Gospel is legalistic. Our synodical structure indicates that we do. The question is whether or not we count speaking the Gospel to the lost to be an essential part of our stewardship of the Gospel. I have presided at the ordination and/or installation of several pastors in the few years I’ve served as District President. In each service I ask the candidates to make certain confessions and promises essential to their faithful conduct of the office of the holy ministry. I preface my questions to them with these words from our agenda, “In the presence of this congregation, and before our Lord God to whom you must give an account now and at the Last Day, I now ask you:” (Note the importance of accountability in being found faithful.) The several questions that then follow identify for the candidate and the congregation those aspects of the ministry that we hold sacred (what we value) and, therefore, for which we hold our pastors accountable<sup>3</sup>. The following are among them:

- believe and confess the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired Word of God and the only infallible rule of faith and practice.
- believe and confess the three ecumenical Creeds as faithful testimonies to the truth of the Holy Scriptures and reject all the errors which they condemn.
- confess the Unaltered Augsburg Confession to be a true exposition of Holy Scripture and a correct exhibition of the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and confess that all of the other confessions as contained in the 1580 Book of Concord are in agreement with this one scriptural faith.
- promise to perform the duties of the pastoral office in accordance with our Confessions and to conform all preaching, teaching and administration of the Sacraments with Holy Scripture and our Confessions.
- promise to instruct faithfully both young and old in the chief articles of Christian doctrine, to forgive the sins of those who repent, never to divulge the sins confessed, to minister faithfully to the sick and dying, to demonstrate to the Church a constant and ready ministry centered in the Gospel, and finally to admonish and encourage God’s people to a lively confidence in Christ and in holy living.
- promise to honor and adorn the office of the holy ministry with a holy life.
- promise to be diligent in the study of Holy Scripture and the Confessions.
- promise to be constant in prayer for those under his pastoral care.

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<sup>3</sup> Citing here the duties and responsibilities of the pastoral office intends only to demonstrate the stated value we maintain in the LCMS for the faithful administration of the Gospel, including public accountability for the same. By presenting this list, I do not suggest that the entire administration of the Gospel, including its proclamation to the spiritually lost and condemned, is the exclusive role or even the primary role of the called pastor over against the role of Christ’s priests. While there exists a divinely instituted office of the holy ministry for the sake of proclaiming the pure Gospel to the world, the church has been given the Keys of the Kingdom and thus, in partnership with her risen Lord, proclaims the Gospel to the world, collectively as His Body and individually as baptized believers and priests. God’s chosen people, His royal priests, collectively and individually, are accountable in and with their Lord for the faithful proclamation of the Gospel to nations.

Note what is missing in the list: Seeking and saving the lost. To suggest that it is implicit in these promises simply dodges the point. We do not take for granted the importance of instructing the young and old of our congregations, hearing confession, ministering to the sick and dying, holy living, study, and prayer. Thus, we spell each out. Yet, the lost, at best are implied. We have to ask ourselves honestly, are they really valuable to us? If they are then we will be accountable to God and each other to find them and to proclaim the saving light of the Gospel to them.

We resolve the concern whether it is legalistic to hold our churches and pastors accountable for reaching the lost simply by including it in our list of nonnegotiable responsibilities of the office. The Scriptures would commend the same. In the same agenda referred to above for ordination and/or installation a number of Scripture passages are presented as foundational to the institution of the office of the holy ministry. The two often quoted are Matthew 28:18-20, *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Going therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age,* and John 20:21-23, *Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you." And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld."* In both statements, the Lord's target recipients of the Gospel are primarily the world outside the church. All peoples (ethne) is the clear and specific focus of Matthew 28. The unsaved world is the implied recipient of John 21—"as the Father has sent Me [into the world (John 3:16-17)], even so I am sending you."

Likewise, the Apostle Paul makes the lost, that is, those who do not yet believe, the focus of the Gospel ministry: *For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"* (Romans 10). Dr. Joel Okamoto in the April, 2006 issue of *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, notes that St. Paul identifies the preaching of the Gospel as an essential component in God's economy of salvation. "In this way," writes Okamoto, Paul locates the ministry of the word and the office of the ministry within the context of justification by faith in the gospel" (Okamoto, 102-103). The conclusion he draws both from the Scriptures and our Confessions is that Christ established the office of the ministry with a very specific purpose in mind: to save sinners. As those accountable to God and His people for the faithful administration of the pure Gospel, this fact must not escape our attention as we consider the responsibilities of the office.

Therefore, the fact that the Scriptures and the Confessions locate the office of the holy ministry within God's plan and work of salvation also directs us always to reflect upon and talk about this office in that context. Accordingly, a basic test of any understanding of the office of the holy ministry is whether it is consistent

with God's plan and work of salvation and with his activity of justification through his means of grace. (Okamoto, 103)

St. Paul makes clear that for Christ's blood bought salvation to affect any final benefit to sinners, preachers of the Word are not only appointed by God, but also sent by Him to those who have not yet heard and, therefore, do not yet believe. The context of St. Paul's explanation of the ministry of the Gospel in these verses is specifically the lost unbelievers of this world, not the already believing. In so many words St. Paul states "God established the office of preaching the Gospel, particularly for the sake of the unsaved, those who do not believe and, therefore, are not able to call upon the name of the Lord." That being the case, then, it behooves us as faithful ministers of the Gospel to account for whether we are actually going and proclaiming to those who do not yet believe and as such remain unsaved.

S.D.G.

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