

Evangelism

I am different than most Lutherans; I was converted to Christianity in my late teens. Most Lutherans are baptized into the church as infants and grow up in the Christian culture. I grew up in a rather dysfunctional family; I was nine when my parents got divorced; I spent three years in an institutional foster home; by my senior year of high school, I had attended 14 different schools.

It was early 1971, during the middle of my junior year that a friend introduced me to Mr. Bizansky; he taught Russian at my high school. At a home fellowship gathering, he witnessed the Gospel to me, and I accepted Christ into my life. The Holy Spirit moved in my life and transformed my outlook on everything that was happening around me.

Having experienced the liberty of Jesus' saving grace, I wanted to share this with my brother. After weeks of gently trying to persuade him to accept for himself, the salvation that I had found, I confronted him. "Daniel," I asked, "Why don't you want to be a Christian?"

"Charles," he began "Do you remember that little church next to our foster home, when we were kids? Well, those people were like death warmed over.... And, I've got better things to do on a Sunday, than to keep a pew warm."

Scripturally, the prominent reference for evangelism and discipling comes to us from, Matthew 28:19-20:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

I have to ask, do Lutherans know what the word "discipling" really means? It seemed that our Lutheran brethren believe that if we read our Bibles more directly, it would turn our assemblies back on the right path.

However, I am concerned that this would be form-without-substance. Culturally, anyone can live according to the principles of good living, as advocated by the Bible. This is the whole reason why the non-liturgical evangelical Christians will ask people if they are, "born again?" They are not asking if you are a neo-Pentecostal who speaks in tongues. They want to know if you have been through the evangelical process, and have a testimony to share. The central mechanism of the evangelical process is the discipleship sub-process. The other, prerequisite sub-process is revival.

For the non-liturgical church, evangelism, revival and discipling are a specific process. The nearest equivalent historical example that we as liturgical Christians have occurred during the Wesleyan Revival within the Anglican Church of England. (I would invite anyone who wants a short synopsis on this revival to read the Wikipedia article on the "United Methodist Church" and the more general "Methodism".) This whole process of evangelism, revival and discipling operates under the assumption that, not everyone who goes to church is really a true Believer in the Gospel. It begins with the evangel witnessing a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ to the would-be supplicant. The first question an evangel or discipler asks the prospective disciple (under this practice) is, "Do you know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior!"

The prospective disciple has two hurdles to cross: first, he or she must be able to explain where the line is at, between being saved verses' being un-saved; and next, give witness to his or her salvation. Otherwise, they are viewed as non-Christian. Otherwise, how can a person be a disciple of something that he or she is not a part of?

My generation of Jesus People used to call people without a witness, "plastic Christians." Today, my son would call them, "posers." The church has always had "want-a-be's" diluting the ranks of the active Believers. Only God knows whether these pretenders are going to heaven, or not. Still, we as Christians on earth can make an assessment about their functionality, if not their salvation. Usually, the people of The Way have tolerated the presence these questionable ones in hopes that they would find personal salvation or engage in sanctification.

However, to our great chagrin the posers have taken control of our church. For years, Lutherans have assumed that because of their infant baptism, the pretenders were automatically Christian and going to heaven. Too many have leaned on the faith of others, never developing a saving faith of their own. And even though they might have never crossed the line into a saving grace under the shed blood of the Lamb, these pretenders now feel entitled to the inheritance of the church because of their longevity. And, if anyone tries to challenge the integrity of their Christian-ness, they will fight tooth and nail to hold on to their worldly gains. They will not admit the poverty of their souls and transition into the light as long as they can hold onto the facade of worldly piousness; or in this case, a cozy denomination.

The Bible in a Bible study has two applications. As Lutherans, we have no real problem with the first application; using the Bible as a tool for living our personal daily life according to Christian values. The problem is, everyone stops at the Ten Commandments plus John 13:34 (*A new commandment I give unto you: That you love one another, as I have loved you...*). When we apply the Bible to ourselves, it is the latter end of the "make disciples" process that we read about in Matthew 28, above.

Many just assume that because they were baptized as babies, they don't have to think about salvation. But, baptism is not a singular event. Too many of us treat baptism as if it were some magical incantation that happened to us once, which automatically makes us bulletproof, and gives the user a free pass into heaven. And even when we know this is not true, too many of us still act as if this were true.

Thus, where we fall down is with the second and primary application of Scripture; when we try to use the Bible as a tool to witness the Gospel. How many Lutheran Christians can sit down with another person, and explained the Message of Salvation from the Word of God? It's not that hard. Bill Bright in his booklet, "The Four Spiritual Laws" uses only ten New Testament passages to define the path to salvation. Yet, Lutherans struggle with being able to witness a basic Gospel message. Why? Because, the average Christian (not just Lutherans) has never experienced their own salvation (even the ones who are saved).

Once you have experienced your salvation, then you can live the Gospel from the inside-out with profound epiphany; that sudden intuitive leap of understanding. When you live the Gospel from the inside-out, then you can witness the Gospel; even more, you experience a burden to witness the Gospel. When you experience your own salvation, then the Gospel message is reveled as being more than just an announcement, or a basic truth to be impressed upon unbelievers. The epiphany is that the Gospel message is just as applicable to the converted

church member, if not almost certainly more so. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he commends the congregation at Rome because their *"faith is spoken of throughout the whole world"* (Romans 1:8). The congregation was already established and apparently thriving. Yet Paul says, *"So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome, also"* (Romans 1:15). Why did Paul want to preach to them; for them to be converted? No, but to continue the process of conversion.

There is a paradox in all of this; we are called and commissioned by Christ to witness the Gospel, while our own conversion to the Gospel is still a work in progress. This is the heart of evangelism; and (when practiced correctly) that makes our baptism an on-going event.

Thus, the great weakness of the liturgical church has always been a failure to understand and foster evangelism as a specific Spiritual vocation. We have done a great job of developing the gifts of pastors, teachers, and even administrators. But the circuit evangelist stands unsupported by the mainstream liturgical denominations. For a contemporary liturgical congregation, having someone come around and challenge the integrity of its member's faith is as welcomed as a colonoscopy.

(My wife asked me, why would we call ourselves "evangelical" if that's not what we are? I answered, just as every soldier wants to be called a "Ranger"; every Christian wants to be called an "evangelical." It makes you sound, "hooah!"; but, not everyone wants to pay that price.)

How can we make discipling work? I found the idea of discipling as it was presented in the liturgical churches to be a stand-alone tactic without a strategic context. It seemed to be an attempt to borrow a good idea from our Bible thumping brothers, without any insight as to how it works. The programs that liturgical communities offer strike me as being incomplete; a band aid on a laceration, where stitches are really needed. For a discipleship program to achieve its full potential, it would have to be a part of an institutionalized evangelism program. The non-liturgical churches (some, not all) in America have a tradition (a de facto institutionalization) of circuit evangelists. The pastors willingly encourage this because such tent revivals bring in new members and increase giving. Evangelical conversions are then followed by a church based discipling program. The success of such a discipling program lacking a connection to revival will be inconsistent, and dependent on the heroic efforts of a few gifted individuals. Most participants won't experience the potential of an ill conceived effort.

Should the leaders of the Lutheran churches want to consider an evangelical discipling program, they will have to come to terms with certain moral conflicts. Evangelical discipling is a back-to-basics type ministry. It is predicated on the belief that the Holy Spirit will make His Word understandable to the Believer.

Evangelists are like independent auditors who check up on the church's progress at developing the individual and collective witness of the believers. Evangelists need to be trained, their calling ratified, and their ministries endorsed. Evangelists need to be treated and nurtured in the same way we develop and sustain missionaries. There are many similarities between evangelists and missionaries, but they are different. Individual congregations should be encouraged to budget for an evangelist to visit, at least once every two years. Congregational selection committees would have to choose from a roster of endorsed evangelists to lead a congregational revival. This will make it easy for pastors to see the evangelist as a partner in tending the flock, and encourage the extension of full professional courtesy. Likewise, this will

cause the denomination to develop, review, and make available the solid literature needed to support a revival activity.

Once a revival activity has begun, *then* it is supported by a discipleship program. These disciplers do the in-house follow-up behind the work initiated by the evangelist. Through all of this, the pastor then exercises oversight, facilitating lay-Christians to use their gifts. Here, the pastor takes on a support and nurturing role, as lay-leaders practice their Christian witness. As young Christians start to show where their gifts lie, they can be directed to the experienced mentors in those areas of church life.

To give the reader an example of what such a discipling activity would look like, let me return to the story about my brother:

I didn't relent after my brother's rebuff. "Daniel, what are you planning on doing, tonight?" I asked. It was a Friday, and the question seemed appropriate for two teenage boys to discuss.

"Well, I was planning on going to the shopping center, and hanging out with my friends." he answered.

"Do you mean with Doug, Jim, and Randy?" These were my brother's best friends, and they were out in the living room.

"Yes." he answered. With that said, we turned and walked into the living room.

"Hi, guys." I said, greeting my brother's friends.

Just then, the doorbell rang. When Randy saw that it was my friends Keith and Wayne, he opened the door and let them in.

"Hello, everyone." Wayne said, "Are we ready to go?"

"Yep." Doug replied.

"Daniel," I said, as his friends turned to leave with Wayne, "We're all going to Mr. Bizansky's Bible study. Do you want to come? We're going to Denny's, afterwards." I had already invited him to come, but hadn't gotten around to telling Daniel that his friends were there going with my friends to a home Bible study.

"Come on, Dan." Jim beckoned. Daniel shrugged his shoulders and followed. I had been witnessing so hard to my brother, even in front of his friends, that Doug, Jim, and Randy had become Christians, and now wanted to go to a Bible study.

When we arrived at Mr. Bizansky's house, there were already twenty-five people in the living room. Wayne brought three car loads of about fifteen more friends; most of us, for the first time. It was literally a packed house, with overflow going into the kitchen, and up the bedroom hallway.

We arrived just after the opening prayer, during the first hymn. After the hymn, Mr. Bizansky stood up, opened his Bible, and took out his notes. He stood motionless for a few moments.... Then, he put his notes back in his Bible, and closed the book. "Brothers and sisters," he began. "I feel the Spirit telling me that He has a different message for me to deliver,

than the one that I had prepared for you, this evening. So, let us see where the Lord wants us to go....”

He began with a discourse on the nature of sin, and its impact on humanity. Then he discussed God’s promise in the Old Testament of a Savior. He demonstrated how Jesus satisfied that promise. Next, he explained atonement. It was a very eloquent presentation of the basic plan of salvation; in a way that I recognized would move a very specific listener. And, I walked into the kitchen and cried.

It was dead silent when Mr. Bizansky finished. For several moments, no one moved.

Then, Mr. Bizansky said, “There is one person in this room who does not know Jesus as his Lord. He wants you to raise your hand and accept him as your Savior.... Would you raise your hand!”

As Mr. Bizansky finished his teaching, a great conviction fell upon Daniel. The fruitlessness of trying to run his own life, without God, took hold of him. When Mr. Bizansky made His call, a rushing sound filled Daniel’s ears, and he hear a voice say, “Stand up, and raise your hand!” Then he heard another voice, the devil say, “You don’t want to make a fool out of yourself in front of all these strangers? You can do this some other time.” Daniel felt torn in two, as a spiritual struggle raged within him.

With his head bent in prayer, again, Mr. Bizansky said, “There is one person in this room who does not know Jesus. He wants you to raise your hand and accept him as your Savior.... Please, raise your hand!”

Daniel was sitting in the second row, right in front of Mr. Bizansky. And even though his eyes were closed in prayer, Daniel could feel Mr. Bizansky looking straight at him. The sense of conviction was weighing heavily on Daniel, and he could not get away from it.

At Mr. Bizansky’s second call, I watched my brother raise his hand.

Forty people witnessed a miracle that evening. The twenty-five some odd guests that were in the house before Wayne and I had arrived with our friends, were all regulars at the Bible study. I knew that, and I am sure Mr. Bizansky knew that, too. But, only Wayne and I knew that out of the fifteen teenagers who arrived late, Daniel was the one and only non-Christian. There was no earthly way that Mr. Bizansky could have known that only one person in that house was in need of salvation. Yet, God personally intervened to call Daniel into the fellowship of Believers ... and answer my prayer.

For the next year, Daniel discipled under Mr. Bizansky. When Daniel went to college, he became one of the founding organizers of one of the largest Roman Catholic Renewal Fellowships on the West Coast (and he wasn’t even a Roman Catholic). The meetings he helped stage-manage in the mid-1970s numbered just fewer than two thousand worshipers each Friday. This went on for three years. After college, he took over organizing a four day, Christian single adults’ spring break retreat for his own community church. It started at 150 guests; and five years later, it was numbering almost 3,000 attendees. The evidence of God’s power was in the irony of it all; Daniel has a mild autism.