

Lutheran Mission Matters



Volume XXIV, No. 1 (Issue 47) January 2016

God's Plan, My Mission

Gerald Perschbacher

Abstract: This article unfolds the shaping of mission from a Lutheran/biblical perspective. The goal is to “reach” with the Gospel, through a motivated body of believers (the Church) which is heavily lay orientated. With the action of witnessing comes the practical application of mercy and the comprehension of grace. Examples of “doing mission” past and present, with special reference to the work of the Lutheran Laymen’s League (LLL) and Lutheran Hour Ministries (LHM), are explored and elaborated as signposts on the trek of future outreach in an era of multicultural realization amid a shrinking world with a burgeoning population.

Since the first action of God in creation and up to the present day, He is at work in the hearts, minds, and lives of people like you and me. Whether we are experts or amateurs in our abilities to communicate, He chooses to instill, guide, and bless our actions through the Holy Spirit as an extension of His own. Thus, the growing movement of sharing the Word of God has advanced mightily and knows no bounds.

A dozen men gathered.

These were practical men, a good number of whom were fishermen. Their period of waiting wasn’t easy, especially for men of action who gauged their accomplishments by the number of fish they caught, the number of fishing nets they owned and mended, or things they did in a given day . . . or week . . . or month . . . or longer. Truly, most people are impatient. They are impatient in reaching their goals and in achieving their ideals.

When the great Day of Pentecost arrived for the disciples-soon-to-be-apostles, it was already a special date set apart by the Jewish calendar. But little did that handful of men realize the importance of their experience that struck shortly after the Ascension of Christ Jesus.

And “strike,” it did!

In Acts 2 and 3, Luke records the series of events. A public location was the site when a sudden sound from heaven was heard, like a mighty rushing wind (which evidently did not create a storm-like disturbance, or detail-minded Luke would have recorded that factor). Then came the apportionment of “tongues as of fire” that

Dr. Gerald Perschbacher is editor of The Lutheran Layman (official publication of the Int’l LLL) and is head historian for the Int’l LLL and its Lutheran Hour Ministries. He has authored 17 published books and written thousands of published articles. persch3@hotmail.com

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appeared and rested on each of the dozen men gathered in that place. Devout Jews and religious neophytes from various parts of Roman territories stood in awe of what transpired. The twelve relatively uneducated men spoke in languages common to the hearers. The words were different, but the thrust was the same. They spoke of God's mighty acts. They proclaimed with authority!

These men did not have the benefit of higher education. These were not elocutionists trained in the art of debate or rhetoric. They had not sat at the feet of numerous learned men who were highly recognized for special qualities as teachers. But they held one thing in common. They had walked beside Jesus, experiencing much of His earthly ministry. They formed the "corporate knowledge" of their Leader, whom they acclaimed as their Savior. More than that—they proclaimed Him as Lord of lords and King of kings, the Great, the Almighty, the very Son of God: Grace Incarnate and the Fulfillment of Prophecy.

To them, it was no secret what God had done and was going to do. They did not fully grasp the nuances of it all, but they knew He held time and events in His hand. They trusted their Master.

These were men of experience. They worked hard and seemed the part in sight and (probably) smell. They held no special positions by the measure of important men. But they had a commonality that set them apart. These were men of faith, speaking at the urging of the Holy Spirit on that Great Day. That God chose *them*, instead of potentates and priests, to speak on His behalf seemed incomprehensible. Yet . . . wasn't it a young David with sling in hand who won the field for God? Didn't a humble and trusting Abram hear the calling to move forward to a place he had not seen, so that faith could grow and be shared among the nations? The examples of the humble being chosen as vessels of God's goodness are replete with people like Ruth, Deborah, Gideon, and more.

From that Pentecost hence, the Church has been moving, proclaiming, sharing, confessing, professing, educating . . . in a progressive movement instilled by God and guided by Him.

The dozen men who had walked and talked with Jesus Christ knew something was in the air that day. They also sensed it was the beginning of something never before witnessed on the face of the earth. They were now part of something far, far greater than they ever expected or dreamed. They were ready for the tasks, whatever those would be and wherever those might take them. Their time, energy, effort, and ability were in the hands of God as never before.

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What were these Twelve to say to others?

Peter quoted the Prophet Joel and reminded the Pentecost audience that God can choose to pour out His Word via the Holy Spirit through sons and daughters (who, by their very ages, seemed the least equipped and educated to share the Good News). Even lowly servants were to be equipped for sharing. Their invitation to others was that they come to the Lord and be saved (Acts 2:21). Clear as that. Simple. Concise. It seemed so easy that inner thoughts too often were set against it. How can Good News be so valuable when it seems so simplistic?

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In truth, it was quite understandable from a spiritual perspective. God’s Word is for young and old, rich and poor, and for people of all walks, nations, and cultures. His Word and His Grace is the great common denominator. It is the rule and norm for life. It is the essential element for a *full* life, a taste of the perfect walk through Eden that God enjoyed with the first man and woman. Through God’s Word, we see Him . . . know Him . . . relate to Him . . . are invigorated . . . healed . . . and strengthened for the rigors of a faith-filled life.

No one needs to be a certain age to be saved through the merits of Christ Jesus. Education cannot win that salvation. Works cannot earn it. Wealth is immaterial to it. Status, culture, language, looks—none of these are criteria for eternal life.

In Christ, the Creator had formed a New Creation, the Church, come down from heaven (not the invention of man). It was the faith-walk through eternity begun on earth and continuing, unending, beyond time and space as it had been known (Revelation 21). “Behold, I am making all things new” (21:5).

Dr. Martin Luther admitted,

I am a Doctor of Holy Scripture and have now studied the lesson of faith for twenty years and have also preached to others about it. Nevertheless, when the sun burns down upon me and temptation comes along, I feel and find that I droop and wilt, as grass in the heat and drought. And if God did not refresh me with His rain and dew, that is, with His Word and Spirit, I should have to wither away. Therefore the lesson (*Predigt*) of faith is a lesson that must constantly be practiced and rehearsed...and with all confidence cheerfully rely on God’s promise (Luther’s Ascension sermon of 1533, based on Mark 16:14–20).¹

There is a freedom borne by faith. No longer did the early “Missionary Twelve” need to count their “fish” once they were “caught.” Instead, they concentrated on the “fishing.” They cast their spiritual nets, stronger and wider when the moment

offered, or in select cases when it was appropriate. Peter rose to address the multitude on the Great Pentecost but soon after was speaking one-on-one with a blind beggar (Acts 3:1–10). Lives were changed each time. Yes, the net of proclamation can be cast widely or to a pinpoint.

Luther realized keeping “tally” was not critical, since each soul was and is precious in God’s sight.

He who will not be satisfied with his ministry until he has converted and Christianized all will never find peace. Abraham found contempt of God everywhere; yet he did not become broken in spirit, but he and his family continued in the true religion and instructed others. So you should not lose courage either but should continue in the office assigned to you by God. Let Him worry about the success of the Word (Luther’s Brief Exposition of Isaiah, 1534).²

It is good to recall these words: “In His boundless kindness and mercy, God provides for the public proclamation of His divine, eternal law and the wonderful counsel concerning our redemption, namely, the holy and only saving Gospel of His eternal Son, our only Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Thereby He gathers an eternal church for Himself out of the human race. . . . All who would be saved must hear this preaching, for the preaching and the hearing of God’s Word are the Holy Spirit’s instrument in, with, and through which He wills to act efficaciously to convert men to God, and to work in them both to will and to achieve.”³

On Mission with the First Vital Element of Witnessing: the Individual

Bear in mind that the role of “the individual” takes two directions: the individual who is *delivering* the Word of God, and the individual who *receives* it.

As to its *delivery*, the biblical mission of Gospel proclamation since early days has been integral with the activity of lay believers who, for nearly two thousand years, have carried their crosses amid a world at war with the Creator, Savior, and Comforter.

Back to the beginning, Adam and Eve were the first of the laity. While they initially walked in perfection, the result of their downfall (Original Sin) was cast upon their descendants. Imagine the stories Adam and Eve may have told their offspring and descendants for generations: what it was like to experience the glory of walking in Eden, to know the grace of God who did not immediately destroy them after the Fall, and to experience life as it had been meant to be before sin.

Did their witness lessen over the years? Perhaps. And maybe the hearts of men turned callous toward it, as if the whole thing were a fable. Somehow, the ways of man superseded the spoken Word about God. As generations came, His grace and kingship were forgotten—or at least taken for granted—as the evil will of man and

the temptation brought by Satan and the world eroded the number of faithful to a mere eight (Gn 6:18; Heb 11:7).

We can surmise that the witness of Eden and God's promise that Eve's offspring would seriously bruise the head of Satan (Gn 3:4–19), along with talk of the glorious walk with God in perfection, was conveyed through the years to the ears of Noah, a righteous man in God's sight. It is likely that most or all of the people who shared the true faith during that time were not priests or educated leaders of religion but laypeople with practical application of their faith.

The list of proclaimers lengthens to include Enoch, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samson, Samuel, and more (Hebrews 11). While some were educated, some were rich, some were lowly, some were strong and obstinate, none was educated as a religious leader from what we know. Still, in their own ways peculiar to them, they no doubt gave witness.

How Do You Define Witnessing?

First, it is a *mission*. It involves at least one who delivers the message of God's Plan of Salvation and at least one who hears (or reads) it. The simple beauty of the message is such that it takes no multi-degreed theologian to deliver it.

The *mission* is to *find* the person(s) in need and *deliver* the *message* in terms and images that listeners/readers can understand. More than that, it should hit the bull's-eye of the person's life.

Simply stated, a good word of witness brings a person to the foot of the cross of Calvary whereon he/she sees the Savior hanging in suffering for the wrongs of the person who watches. With spiritual tears of regret and sorrow, the person then is verbally whisked to the open tomb from which the Savior was resurrected and, in so doing, brought—and brings—salvation by grace through faith, apart from works. Thus, the faith-relationship is established through the Holy Spirit. Feelings of relief and release often bring tears of joy and a lift to that person's life!

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That movement toward faith continues to the present, and we can anticipate it will continue until the Return of Christ.

Second, witnessing involves two very common elements akin to those in a court trial as practiced in the United States and many other lands. Witnesses tell about *whom* they know and *what happened*.

In a trial, witnesses may be called to testify that they know the *person* who is the main subject of the trial. Those witnesses may speak about the “character” of the defendant and provide testimony of the defendant’s upright character. Witnesses may also know *what happened* because they saw the event unfold.

Transferred to the Christian’s role, witnessing is the *testimony* that Jesus Christ is Lord, and includes what the witness *knows* about Him through first-hand experiences, especially via Word and Sacrament.

On Mission with the Second Vital Element of Witnessing: Creative Forms of Outreach

The mission, ever guided by the Lord as His people are empowered by His Spirit, is endless and timeless, but technical forms of outreach change. First-person, word-of-mouth witnessing via conversation will never go out of vogue. But as the means of communication have multiplied and advanced, so have a myriad of options in *mission* and in *witnessing*.

Basically, it is a matter of communication, meeting people in a means and manner that are conducive to their understanding and comfortable to their lifestyles. Much as Jesus Christ chose the time and place for His words of witness, e.g., the Sermon on the Mount, His entry to Jerusalem, the woman at the well, timing with miracles, and the delivery manner which He selected (one-to-one with few people/many people watching, scribbling in the dirt in the case of the woman caught in adultery, His teaching in the temple, etc.), so we, too, have the opportunity to meet people where they are.

Much as Jesus Christ chose the time and place for His words of witness, . . . so we, too, have the opportunity to meet people where they are.

A good example of this variety took place nearly a century ago. A dozen men gathered in 1917 to form the Lutheran Laymen’s League (LLL), and since then countless lives around the world have been changed for the better by the Grace of God. Special means of communication have been a benefit embraced by supporters of the International Lutheran Laymen’s League and its Lutheran Hour Ministries. The initial form of witnessing remains with the individual and

with grouped supporters (local affiliated groups, larger regional groups) as a lay effort befitting the organization as one of two auxiliaries of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Specialized tools can simplify the delivery of the witness.

The main delivery vehicle for those laymen became *The Lutheran Hour* upon its first airing in 1930, followed by a resurgence in 1935. It was the dream of a close-knit group of men who supported seminary professor Dr. Walter A. Maier as the

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voice of the radio program (which, by the way, was limited to thirty minutes and used the term “Hour” as was a commonly employed term in that era, signifying a “special moment in time”). The program garnered a strong response as measured by notes and letters from thousands of listeners. Soon the broadcast was heard from coast to coast. In 1940 the program became international with broadcasts from Ecuador and the Philippine Islands. The program was heard at least halfway around the globe at a given time!

Behind the movement toward broadcasting was Concordia Seminary Professor and Dean of Students, John Fritz, based in St. Louis, Missouri. Nearly as indefatigable as Maier, Fritz led the charge for advancing the witness on radio. But had it not been for the support of the laity, even for the program’s resurgence in 1935, *The Lutheran Hour* might not have succeeded. Was this due to the power of mankind? Nay! Better to admit that it was the grace of God as His hand guided the witnessing. Today that advance continues with more than 1,600 radio stations proclaiming the Message!

In the 1940s and 1950s, as the world recovered from the ill effects of the Second World War and the spread of Communism, this Gospel radio advance included the healing formation of various overseas offices in such lands as Australia, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Korea, Lebanon, Nigeria, France, Germany, Brazil, Argentina, and more. It was not unusual that the work of those offices and centers provided a landing strip for the Good News of Christ in the hearts of numerous people. It was and is God’s grace at work. New offices and “centers” were formed in subsequent years. Local indigenous staff manned the offices in order to keep step with the terminology and formats that would best reach the populations.

Yet, by and large, it was the financial and prayerful support of the Int’l LLL laity that paid the bills and provided the means to continue international operations.

Print outreach also became a viable option with booklets, publications, and fliers being widely used throughout North America and key areas around the world. To this day, there is no continent of the world that lacks the outreach of Lutheran Hour Ministries.

The frailties of mankind often limit a person’s life to threescore or fourscore, with some who enjoy higher longevity. Yet, the inevitable passing occurs. Hence, the first voice of *The Lutheran Hour* gave way to the second, and him to the next, until the program now reaches listening audiences with the messages of Pastor Gregory Seltz as Speaker of *The Lutheran Hour* and Speaker Emeritus Kenneth Klaus on select Sundays.

The idea of motion picture messages of the Gospel by the LLL resulted in the formation of Lutheran Television by the LCMS. Several decades ago that award-winning blockbuster success on television was transferred to the Int’l LLL under the

title *This Is the Life* and Envoy Productions, which has spearheaded seasonal specials for many years.

Proclamation techniques have advanced mightily since Gutenberg's invention of the moveable type printing press in the 1400s. The rise of radio in the 1930s added another means of communication. In the late 1940s, the skyrocketing success of television boosted the opportunities even more. In recent years, personal automobile transportation is better than ever, thus allowing witnesses to visit others who await the Word of God. Computerized forms of communication including Facebook, Twitter, and more have widened avenues of Gospel delivery. People can live anywhere on the globe, travel at any speed, and still receive the message of salvation through various means of technology, at any time during day or night. There seems to be no limit to the potential.

Still, it is rooted in the human element for people to communicate with people. It involves people to make the messages, format them for delivery, and send them. And always, it is the true, wholesome, life-changing impact of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit that brings results!

Endnotes

¹ Martin Luther, "1430 Luther Speaks from Experience" in *What Luther Says, A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*, compiled by Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 482.

² Martin Luther, "2989 No Ministry Can Convert All" in Plass, *What Luther Says*, 952.

³ Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 530–531.