

*Freed From the Shopkeeper's Prison*  
*How to Run a Lutheran Evangelism Program*

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Given what we have seen about the doctrine of election, example of the Apostles, and the duties of the ministry as laid out in the ordination vows and the classic Lutheran texts: what place do evangelism and outreach have in the parish? What makes for authentic Lutheran evangelism? What do we tell our people about this? How do we teach them?

First an anecdote, this one from my brother in law in Central IL. A pastor he knows recently lamented the fact that his 10 year old son, since he went to Lutheran school and has a Christian family, did not know one nonChristian with whom to share the Gospel. Here we have the apex of the Functionally Arminian takeover of Lutheranism: a father lamenting the fact that he is bringing up his child in a good environment! A father lamenting the fact that his son is not unequally yoked with unbelievers and that his own extended family is unquestionably Christian. I wonder, for folks of this pastor's persuasion, is the highest goal of a young person's life to seek out a pagan to marry? After all, what better way to evangelize. . .

This sort of approach is bested seen in Bill Hybel's *Becoming a Contagious Christian*. This book was assigned to me in seminary and gained a lot of traction in Lutheran circles. It is a “life-style” evangelism book. The idea is that you look for opportunities to spread the Gospel through the everyday relationships in your life. Which sounds pretty close to what I will be advocating below. However, Hybels must go further because of his Arminianism. Hybels, as all Arminians, believe that men have free will. Thus they believe that conversion and salvation are to a great deal contingent on the given person's mind, and thus they believe that conversion is contingent on Christians working hard to

convince, persuade, and argue with nonbelievers. And if this is so, then the greatest thing you can do in life is convert somebody.

And thus we learn from Hybels that we should cultivate friendships with nonbelievers so that we will have opportunities to convince them into the faith. And in this regard, he narrates for us how he struck up a friendship with an Indian cab driver exactly for this purpose. Frankly, this gets kind of creepy very quickly. You go out and find friends just so you can convert them? Is that what friendship is?

Another popular program for congregational evangelism programs in Lutheran churches is the Kennedy program and the the Lutheran revision thereof, *Dialogue Evangelism*. I went through this program as a student and also taught it in a parish in Chicago. This is a very intellectual program – you learn a lot of bible verses and the basic outline of an argument for the truth of Christianity. Everyone I've ever met who has gone through the program has said something along the lines of, “This program ended up being a benefit to me; I learned a lot about my faith, etc.” In addition, in the two parishes I was involved with through this program, the focus was on visiting those who had visited the church and on delinquent members. The “cold calls” or neighborhood sweeps were never very much fun, never led to many conversations.

[Look at the Synod's 72 thing here and the programs they offer. . . ]

Now both of these programs, which we might call proselytizing programs, are nigh unto the kingdom. As I said, what I will be advocating shortly sounds a lot like Hybels “life style” evangelism based on relationships. And, there is much to be gained from a program like the Kennedy stuff that teaches Christians to be able to explain the faith from the Scriptures. Yet, both approaches share a defect that can be seen by asking how popular they are in the parishes that start them. While the Bible Studies in that large parish I served in Chicago would draw in 50-60 people on a Sunday – the weekly evangelism program drew 5. Why?

Because under these Arminian influenced programs the weight of the world is placed upon the people. The eternal salvation of another human being rests on your shoulders. They try to use this as an inducement to join: this is the best thing you can do! And folks like Bill Hybels get absolutely monastic about it: all your hobbies, all your free time, all your effort needs to go into this. You aren't even allowed to have real friends: you need to go find pagans and befriend them in order to convert them.

But people are not dumb. They see the downside: what if I mess it up? If my actions can influence some to be saved, then they can influence others to be damned. I'd rather stay home and not screw something up.

Again we face that great irony of Law and Gospel. The Law demands good works with great threats and with great promises: do this and live, don't do this and you're damned. And yet, for that very reason the Law cannot motivate true good works! Because you will always be going them out of the hope of reward or the fear of punishment. But a good work done for any other reason than love is no good work at all.

So likewise, the Arminian, free will, Law based version of conversion demands evangelism. We must get out there to convince people to make their decision for Christ. And it precisely this sort of rhetoric – get out there and create a “critical event” in the Synod's latest evangelism program – that makes people afraid of evangelism. What if I mess up the critical event? What if I say something wrong? What if somebody shouts at me? What if they don't want to listen? It will all be my fault. Why should I spend another night away from my family to do that?

And that's why your evangelism programs have never been successful, why people groan when they hear about it, and why you should just quit that silly game. In the Functionally Arminian version of evangelism everyone in your community is a potential convert. If you are persuasive enough, some will convert. But if none convert – well then, you are not a success. You are screwing up. You should be doing better.

It's like looking for something you have lost, but you can't remember where. Should you look in the closet or the basement? Or did you leave it at work? There is nothing more disheartening than looking for something in a place where you are not sure that it is. You might tear about the basement for an hour and it just won't be there. Who wants to bother with that?

But if somebody tells you: I hid a present for you in the front hall, everything is different. Now I know the prize is there and I get to find it. Now the searching is fun. I can't lose. Even if I have to throw up my hands and say, "I can't find it!" you'll just go over to where you hid and pull it out and give it to me.

So also with evangelism. Once I know that I can't screw it up, that God has his elect and I can't snatch them from his hand, that he works by and through his means of grace when and where he pleases, that God has his elect in this city who will be gathered to him – well then, now I am set free. Now it's an Easter Egg hunt. God will take care of it. And, glory of glories, he might even use me! For Lutherans, therefore, evangelism is high reward and zero risk. God may use me, but I'll never be able to screw it up.

So, how to run a Lutheran evangelism program? Don't. Fire the evangelism committee. Don't ask people to come to church for a meeting away from their vocations in their families for another night during the week. Don't go wasting your time searching out pagans who hate your guts and will think about you knocking on your door just what you think about Mormons and JWs knocking on yours. After all, if we are called to "have a good reputation with outsiders" I think cold calls are right out. Instead, back to the vows, instruct both young and old. Here is how.

Teach them the Gospel – including Election.

Teach them to pray that God would gather his elect around this altar.

Teach them to be ready to give an answer and invite those who ask. I Peter 3 not Matthew 28.

Turn on the beacon, the Word: make your place a place where the elect will feel at home and make sure the elect now where to find you. You should be visible – but visible with the unabashed Word of Christ. Consider this mailing from Metro Church in my neck of the woods. . .

The elect won't care if you have a band, they will care if you have Christ. If somebody leaves your church for another church's band – good riddance. You poor pastors! You are just like wives who get upset when a husband leaves for another woman's bigger boobs. If he's such a jerk that all he cares about are boobs, then you don't want him around anyway.

[Another sort of proselytism: going after other Christians. Especially with our Hispanic missions. Does it seem odd to you that we are so desperate to go out evangelizing a whole bunch of Roman Catholics? Aren't they believers? Feuerhahn and being against proselytism. . . ]