

<sup>15</sup>When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” <sup>16</sup>Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.” <sup>17</sup>The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” . . . He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.” (John 21:15-17 NIV).

In Acts 20:28, Paul under inspiration stated: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [pastors]. Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood” (NIV).

These verses from John and Acts speak directly to the pastoral office and what the men called by God are to be primarily about. That work is reflected in Article Five of the Augsburg Confession (Tappert, page 31): “In order that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted” (Latin translation). Article Fourteen of the Apology (Tappert, page 214) further identifies the work of the pastoral office as rightly teaching the Word of God and rightly administering the sacraments.

Unfortunately, not everyone in our synod agrees what the pastoral office is to be about or for that matter what congregations are to be about. On May 9<sup>th</sup>, I attended a seminar on a “new” outreach program that is supposed to be the catalyst for unprecedented growth in our synod churches. It’s a two year program that is being implemented in Wisconsin and our surrounding states.

When I was at the seminary, the mission and outreach classes talked about “Law One” and “Law Two” churches. A law one church (the preferred church growth model) was identified as a congregation that saw outreach as its primary responsibility, whereas a law two church was a congregation that went primarily about the business of hearing the preached word and receiving the sacrament. Law 2 churches were said to be turned inward and needed to reinvent themselves or die.

The seminar I attended showed once again that there is nothing new under the sun (Eccl 1:9). This “new” program is called: *Ablaze by Grace: Hearts on Fire to Share Christ’s Love* — Church Revitalization: Congregation Transformation. It was a troubling presentation for a number of reasons. The presenter of the program said that the problem in synod was that most congregations are focused inward with membership statistics on a plateau or in decline. He said that on average, 90% of synod churches average 90 members or less on any given Sunday (Hey! That’s us!). That means, he said, that only 10% of our churches are growing and effectively reaching out to the lost.

What was noticeably absent here was any reference to what actually grows a church—the pure preaching of God’s Word and the right distribution of the Sacraments. Everything revolved around

numbers. The assumption was made that if a church is large, it means it is doing everything right, whereas, a small church must be doing almost everything wrong. But what about Jesus speaking of the two or three (people) gathered together in His name in Matthew 18:20, or, what about Jesus calling His church a “little flock” in Luke 12:32?

This, however, was not my biggest concern with the presentation. That had to do with where the material came from for the program. We were told that the program is based on two books written by a member of the American Baptist Conference of the West (the ABCW). The presenter noted that the number of growing churches in this denomination went from 37 to 153 and average worship attendance went from 100 to 188.

I am deeply concerned about our synod adopting this program. First of all, it’s a church body that has a completely different perspective on what happens on Sunday mornings. According to Baptist Churches, God is not the main actor in worship. What the people are doing is the main thing. That is contrary to Lutheran teaching and the Bible (see Psalm 51:16-17). The main thing God wants us to do is to first of all confess our sin, and then He wants more than anything else to do give us His forgiveness for Christ’s sake. That’s why original sin is so pivotal in rightly understanding our position before God. The Baptist church does not hold to the Biblical doctrine (Psalm 51:5) of original sin. Furthermore, the Baptist church does not teach its pastors to rightly divide law and gospel in preaching. Nor do they teach the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper for the forgiveness of sin. Therefore, some of the main things that God uses to grow His Church are denied in the very group that our synod is modeling their outreach program after. Having hundreds or thousands in the visible church on Sunday does not mean the invisible church of true believers known only to God can be equated as the same.

In describing the program, the presenter said “the DNA must be changed in the congregation”. Only God’s Word makes effective change—not our effort! One pastor commented at this point that he found out in his church that being faithful was not enough. He said it was more important to be “fruitful”. These two things are not mutually exclusive. They can’t be separated anymore than justification and sanctification can be separated. The latter is the immediate response of the former, and it is God who determines the effectiveness.

Another troubling comment made by the presenter was that every Sunday morning it’s the vision that should be preached—the vision of outreach! St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:23 clearly tells us what is to be preached on Sunday mornings: “We preach Christ crucified.” If that is being done, God will accomplish through the preached word what He wants done (Isaiah 55:10-11), whether the church is large or small or growing or declining. The truth is that the Holy Spirit does not need our help. He will use us how and when and where He wants, not according to our agenda or our preoccupation on numbers.

The presenter then went on to explain how the congregations committed to this program would learn to “change their DNA”. The model calls for setting up clusters of five congregations that meet regularly over the next two years and work together. These five congregations would study the books assigned and meet once a month. At each meeting, one of the congregations would be critiqued by the other four as to their progress in the program. It’s one thing to work together on something. It’s another thing to

have other congregations judging your progress. This reminded me of the time in our synod when many churches published everyone's financial giving at the end of the year. It was nothing but blatant law motivation that built resentment among members. It's no different with this program, and I as a pastor should not be telling another pastor how to shepherd his congregation nor should he be telling me how to shepherd mine. This responsibility also extends to the laity in the congregation.

Perhaps the biggest concern I had was in the following statement given in the presentation concerning church revitalization: Providing structure that relies on the pastor as leader, the staff as managers, and the congregation as the ministers. For the last hundred years, the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 has been misapplied to the laity and the church growth model has been to make everyone "little ministers". The commission to baptize all nations and to teach everything that Jesus commanded was given to the apostles and through them to the called pastors of today. Jesus clearly tells us in John 6:29 what the main work of the laity is: "The work of God is this: to believe in the one He has sent." If members of a church have true faith in Jesus, they will be paying attention to those around them who are in danger of being lost, and they will be supporting the work of outreach by bringing them to the pastor for instruction and possible inclusion in God's invisible church on earth. If, on the other hand, that sin makes this work less than perfect according to man's standards, it does not mean that anyone who God has chosen in Christ before the creation of the world will be lost. As Jesus said in John 10:28 and 29, no one can snatch His sheep out of His or His Father's hand! Everyone God wants saved will be saved in spite of our own unbelief.

As I said earlier, there is nothing new under the sun. I do not believe this is a God-pleasing program given our confessional understanding of Scripture. I am not a "leader" that is supposed to train the people of Trinity to be "ministers". I am an undershepherd of Christ. I have therefore informed the synod that we at Trinity will not become involved in the program. However, we do need to pray for our synod, especially in light of our convention this summer and the direction it seems to be going, and for our church here at Trinity, and for ourselves, that God will do His work through us, and that it will be pleasing to Him. Are we paying enough attention to those around us who are being lost—of course not! We are sinners—all of us! Perhaps this will help us focus on what's really important (Jesus' forgiveness) instead of the mode of church inactivity so prevalent during the summer. In one sense, we do need the kind of zeal found in church growth programs, but not at the expense of the pure Word of God.