

Divine Monergism of the Third Article and Evangelism Methods

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The modern history of the LCMS is rife with a sundry of evangelism programs, many of which look to be “Lutheranized” (or so it is said) versions of programs cast off by American Neo-Evangelicals. Periodically released new books by the Barna Group are devoured by mission execs and church growth consultants. Barna might do some good sociological analysis, but his suggestions are usually simply indulgence of the refined-flesh of the culture. Pastors and parishioners will recount stories of LCMS churches being foot soldiers preparing the way for upcoming Billy Graham revival rallies in the 1950s and 1960s, while the same churches still had catechumens memorize the catechism’s explanations of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed and Holy Baptism. I can recall going through catechesis as youth at a church in southern Minnesota while at the same time being given the song “Do Lord” in Vacation Bible School, which contained the lyrics, “I took Jesus as my Savior – you take Him too!” We are full of inconsistencies, whether they are what Franz Pieper calls “felicitous” inconsistencies are debatable.

Luther’s Small Catechism reminds us of the monergism of grace even in matters of faith and conversion in his explanation of the Third Article of the Creed. “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” (Never mind as a youth I was given three different translations of the Catechism in 6th through 8th grade.) Original sin renders us spiritually blind, dead, and enemies of God, not just broken or disadvantaged (*incurvatus in se*; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Psalm 51:5; Ephesians 2:1). The will is in utter bondage with regard to things above us and not so free as we would imagine even in things below us where we exert some freedom. Concupiscence itself is sin. (The word “broken” in Scripture is not used for sin but rather as a word for divinely-wrought contrition – changing that usage has several consequential theological deviations.) Even our actual sins exact damage within and without. Furthermore, Satan and his demons are glad to take advantage of such fallen creatures for his ends. This we acknowledge in our historic baptismal liturgy. And so consequently conversion is described as a “new birth” or better, being “born from above.” It is an inner Spiritual resurrection from outside of us (*extra nos*) by means of the external Word of the Gospel (*externum verbum*).

Even in the miraculous healings of Jesus, as they happen as real historical events described to us in the inspired and inerrant Scriptures, are at the same time illustrative of our natural state before God and what it means to come to faith. We are given to stand out of paralysis. We are set free from the domain of darkness and the devil. We are given sight out of blindness. We are given ears to hear through the Word of God. We are healed out of leprosy. We are raised from the dead. This is what it means to be given the first resurrection of faith and the forgiveness of sins by grace alone for the sake of Christ’s death and resurrection for the world.

Titus 3 makes quite clear that Baptism is not our work but is the work of God, if we read this passage in context. In the Large Catechism, Luther expresses the objection of some to this way of thinking. In his discussion of the sacrament of Holy Baptism he says:

But as our would-be wise, new spirits assert that faith alone saves, and that works and external things avail nothing, we answer: It is true, indeed, that nothing in us is of any avail but faith, as we shall hear still further. 29] But these blind guides are unwilling to see this, namely, that faith must have something which it believes, that is, of which it takes hold, and upon which it stands and rests. Thus faith clings to the water, and believes that it is Baptism, in which there is pure salvation and life; not through the water (as we have sufficiently stated), but through the fact that it is embodied in the Word and institution of God, and the name of God inheres in it. Now, if I believe this, what else is it than believing in God as in Him who has given and planted His Word into this ordinance, and proposes to us this external thing wherein we may apprehend such a treasure?

As proper biblical Baptism is rejected, the axiom is true, those who reject the proper means of grace tend to invent their own. Interestingly enough this happens often amongst those Christians who do not acknowledge clearly that the attributes of the divine nature in Christ are communicated to His human nature, as the Confessions cite the patristic example of the rod of iron put into the fire, or like the burning bush. If the two natures in Christ are joined together no more profoundly than two boards glued together, then there remains a separation to be addressed. Inevitably with that Christological misstep amongst some confessions, it is always compensated by human activity in some form such as covenant theology, the system of purgatory, the cult of the saints, decision theology, dependence upon charismatic experience, self-referential Pietism, Calvinistic self-referrals to proofs of election, etc. This consequential synergism is exhibited in both various protestant theologies and in Roman Catholicism. The doctrine of forensic justification and the universal atonement of Christ are compromised or utterly denied under those unapostolic departures.

As confessional Lutherans, holding to the apostolic faith that is both evangelical and catholic, we acknowledge a tension when it comes to outreach or evangelism. The Word is powerful. It does and bestows what it says. The Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16; 10:17). And yet God suffers the Gospel to be rejectable that it might be gift and not forced. The Word of God gathers even as it divides. One need only look to the account of the crowds departing in John 6 to see that even for the holy Lord Jesus, the preaching of the Word did not guarantee a positive result for all who heard the good news. But the one thing needful is to hear that Word and believe it, rejoicing to receive His gifts in His presence. Faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ. The law does its job crushing, accusing, and tearing down, revealing the picture of the spiritual MRI. We are dead. Bandages, crutches, positive thinking, personal affirmation, and support groups won't cut it. But the Gospel raises the dead and creates a new clean heart *ex nihilo*. The old is put to death and the new is raised in Christ. Christ makes all things new as the firstfruits from the dead.

Evangelism methods that rely upon personal decisions for Jesus are clearly at odds with a proper biblical understanding of sin, repentance, faith, and the monergism of the Holy Spirit's work through the external Word of the Gospel. Similarly outreach methods that are aimed at recruitment, enticement, entertainment, or just convincing the world that we're decent people after all, put too much stock in the target demographic and either downplay or forget altogether about the effects of original sin upon post-lapsarian mankind. It is simply a group dynamics version of decision theology that perhaps dispenses with decisions but still is essentially relying upon a good old American sales and

marketing model. Recent growth consults affirm this with the multi-site ministry model which essentially promotes a “successful DNA” paradigm that isn’t so far off from fast food restaurant franchise models for expansion. Its view of the ministry of the Word is hardly congruent with that described by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 3 or 2 Corinthians 4. It is personality and leadership driven rather than dependent upon the monergism of the Third Article and the Lord’s work of bearing witness through not only the office of the ministry but also the entire body of Christ as they are sent forth by God’s blessing into their various vocations to “proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.”

The means of evangelism affect the implicit theology held by a congregation. When the understanding of sin is weakened then both the understandings of repentance and justification by grace alone are compromised. One could name various “isms” to illustrate this point classically – Pelagianism, Calvinism, Arminianism, Antinomianism, Pietism, Finney’s revivalism, Gospel Reductionism. In general experientialism looks to vacillating waves of spiritual episodes or apparent successes in sanctified acts as evidential for good standing with God.

The Emergent Church points toward the even more vague notion of relational establishment of a faith experience. Friendships and group experience become the means of grace. No real repentance is needed nor any doctrinally formed preaching. It becomes more about stories and describing the life already lived in spiritual terms. It becomes about mutual activism that is alleged to be for revealing the kingdom of Christ in this world. And yet we are reminded by Luther, it is not by our own reason or strength that we are Christians nor that the kingdom comes among us and that we are brought into Christ’s story. We are formed not by the world but by the Lord who speaks into our ears the unchanging truth. Our eyes are fixed upon Jesus the author and finisher of our faith. The Third Article of the Creed in the Catechism gives us our Reformation *sola gratia* and *sola fide* for evangelism and missions so that we may say “*soli Deo gloria.*”

Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. A little bit of yeast is terribly transformative. Such things are not simply matters of style but are adulterations to the pure means of making disciples. Even the Great Apostolic Commission of Matthew 28 is clear to mandate sound and thorough catechesis and pastoral stewardship of the mysteries in declaring that “all things” given by Jesus are to be taught. And in the purely preached Word and the rightly administered sacraments, in those marks of the Church, the Lord is with us always to the very end of the age. Look! He is there as He said. In those means He is doing what He promised to do. The Lord gathers His flock by His voice. We have not made Him our Savior but rather He rescued us and is rescuing us. The called to faith are continuing to call out to the world as in their vocations they are the Lord’s fishing net (not rod, reel and bait). By grace alone through faith alone we are continually equipped for this in the Divine Service. For “Divine Service” is simply “grace alone” said in a liturgical way. As He gathers us we continue steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, the breaking of the bread and the prayers. And the gathered are sent out again in the weekly rhythm as Body of Christ in the world. The monergism of the Third Article is comfort and rest to the believer and the light burden of joy even in missions. We confess with our mouths what we have received, but the results are the Lord’s.