

THE FIRST RITE IN THE CATECHUMENATE; AN ONRAMP TO THE CHURCH IN MISSION

[E]xult with joy in Christ. Borne on the wings of your every yearning, receive the gifts of heaven. For now the saving warmth of the eternal font invites you. Now your Mother adopts you to make you her child. You are to be born not by the ordinary rules of childbirth—mothers groaning in the pains of labor and bringing you into the miseries of this world, weeping, sullied, and wrapped in sullied swaddling clothes—and but exulting in joy, children of heaven, children freed from sin, to be bountifully nourished, not in the foul-smelling cradles, but at the altar rails in the midst of sweet perfumes.¹

With those words, Zeno of Verona, in his “Invitation 1” from *Invitations to the Baptismal Font* invited candidates into the sacraments of initiation. Deeply influenced by Ambrose and the catechumenal process in Milan, Zeno who was perhaps of African origin and who was likely the eighth bishop of Verona, died in either 379 or 380 C.E. His words of invitation may have been delivered over 1625 years ago, yet his words echo the call to the uninitiated and unbaptized of the 21st century as much as it did to seekers in the 4th century. The fact that we can still relate to his words in our own time suggests that the Church of this age is in as much need of a process of preparation for those preparing for baptism as it was in the early centuries.²

The renewal movement to revive the Catechumenate in the modern Church took an enormous step in North America with the North American Conference of Catholic Bishops, in the USA’s release of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* for use beginning in July 1, 1988. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) produced a booklet of Rites under the title *Living Witnesses: The Adult Catechumenate* in 1992. The Episcopal Church USA included rites for the Catechumenate in its Book of

¹Thomas M. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: Italy, North Africa, and Egypt, Message of the Fathers of the Church 6*. (Collegeville, MN Liturgical Press, 1992) 55f., contains *Zenonis Veronensis Tractatus*, from CCL 22 (1971) B. Lofstedt editor 83, 123, 202 who used the text from BAP, Thomas Halton, translator (1967) 64-66.

² *Ibid.*, 55.

Occasional Services 1994 under the title “Preparation of Adults for Holy Baptism: the Catechumenate”³ Two years later, Dan Benedict would produce sources for the United Methodist Church along with rites in a resource entitled *Come To the Waters; Baptism and Our Ministry of Welcoming Seekers and Making Disciples*.⁴ In developing this resource, Dan Benedict relied heavily upon the *RCIA* as a model for the shape of the rites it contains. The ELCIC effort, ultimately served as a model for the ELCA in 1997 with the publication of three *Welcome to Christ* booklets including a book of *Lutheran Rites for the Catechumenate*.

Within the ELCA’s *Welcome to Christ – Lutheran Rites for the Catechumenate*, the “Rite of Welcome” is one of the most profound rites celebrated by congregations and participants in the catechumenal process. The same could well be said for the “Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens” in the *RCIA*, the “Admission of Catechumens” in the Episcopal rites, “A Service for the Welcome of Hearers” in the United Methodist resources offered by Dan Benedict, or the parallel rites that have been developed by other Protestant traditions. In a research project for her dissertation funded by the Lily Endowment, Jessicah Duckworth learned that of the ELCA congregations using the Catechumenal process for preparing adults for the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, over 85% responding to the survey indicated that the “Rite of Welcome” was one of the most profound parts of the process.⁵

³ General Convention of the Episcopal Church, 1994. *The Book of Occasional Services, 1994*. (Church Publishing, Inc.: New York, 1995), 117ff.

⁴ Daniel T. Benedict, Jr., *Come To the Waters; Baptism and Our Ministry of Welcoming Seekers and Making Disciples*. (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1996), 109ff.

⁵Jessicah Duckworth, Preparer of a Ph.D. Dissertation at Princeton University, not yet completed. Interview conducted by phone by author, 31 January, 2006, from home to office.

For the sake of practitioners of the catechumenate, this article is intended to see how the opening rite of the catechumenal process may be viewed as relevant and even necessary part of the Church in her ongoing mission. The matter becomes particularly relevant in light of the fact that amid budget constraints, many denominations are cutting or in some cases failing to allocate any funds to the development of catechumenal ministries within their own congregations and worshiping communities.

One such case may be seen within the ELCA, which a few years ago had allocated a small sum of financial resources for a Task Force on Catechumenate. This task force learned in November, 2005, the “Rite of Welcome” under the title “Welcome to Baptism” would be the only rite from among the *Welcome to Christ* (The ELCA’s Catechumenate) to be in the newly released *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. The rite as it now appears in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, of *ELW*, the new worship resource which has been available for congregations since October, 2006, contains only the signing of the forehead. No other reference is made in the new truncated rite, to others possible senses which might be signed, as part of the rite. Work has begun on a new *Occasional Services Book*, though it is not yet clear what other catechumenal rites will appear in this resource. Until such time, the complete “Rite of Welcome” from the *Welcome to Christ* materials or in the *Baptismal Rites; Renewing Worship*, remains available for use in congregations.⁶

Among traditions that are using a renewed catechumenate, the full rite from *Welcome to Christ* or the abbreviated form in the newly released *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* contains a uniqueness that sets it apart from all other contemporary

⁶Announcement made by The Rev. Barbara Berry-Bailey, from the ELCA Division for Congregational Ministries, at the ELCA, Announcement made at the Task Force on the Catechumenate meeting, 14 November 2005. St. Paul Lutheran Church, Orlando, Florida.

catechumenal rites. In the *RCIA*, for example, only after the candidate is presented to the congregation, offered the Gospel, affirmed by their sponsors and the assembly and then signed with the cross of Christ is the candidate considered a catechumen. The rite functions to incorporate an inquirer into the Mass and ritually recognize their movement from inquirer to catechumen.

On the other hand, the ELCA's "Welcome of the Inquirers to the Catechumenate", (to use the full title of the rite) is split into two ritual actions. The first is the "Presentation of Inquirers". This takes place usually at the entrance to the worship space. At the end of this first ritual the former inquirer formally has become a catechumen. Following an invitation to come and worship, the new catechumens take a seat with the congregation. The liturgy then begins with the Gathering Rite (Opening hymn, Apostolic Greeting, Kyrie, Hymn of Praise, Prayer of the Day) and the Liturgy of the Word. The new catechumens and sponsors are then called forward to receive the sign of the cross. This "Presentation of Inquirers" marks the movement from the time of inquiry to the time of the catechumenate. Having the ritual of "Presentation of Inquirers" function in this way makes this rite unique. The signings, regardless of the number, in the ELCA's "Rite of Welcome", therefore, becomes a sign given to ones who are already catechumens. In the other comparable rites one is considered a catechumen or hearer only at the end of at least one of the signings with the cross. Such a distinction makes the ELCA's rite unique among contemporary rites.

Historical precedent may be found for both this unique shape of the rite as employed in the *Welcome to Christ* rites and for that used by most other contemporary catechumenal entry rites used by other traditions. There are also theological, liturgical as

well as sociological implications engendered by both the shape utilized by the ELCA on the one hand, and that used by most other denominations practicing the catechumenate on the other. These issues go far beyond the scope of this article, but these are areas which we hope may be presented in future workshops at future North American Association for the Catechumenate (NAAC) events.

What is relevant for our purposes here is that while the *Welcome to Christ* and its “Rite of Welcome” is unique among rites in use by other traditions, it like its parallels in other denominations, assumes deliberative work of evangelization and the fostering of relationships beforehand in a time of inquiry. Yet, all too often, that which is often referred to as evangelism (or as we will say here, “evangelization”), is a catch-all for the marketing of the Church. This “marketing of the Church” often goes under the category of “Church growth” strategies. Such an understanding is not what we are referring to here as evangelization. Sometimes “Church Growth strategies” are presented as mission strategies. So for, this reason, as we enter this discussion on the entry rites to the catechumenate, it is important first to understand what a faithful process of evangelization looks like.

What do we mean by Evangelization?

Present Reality and the Need for a Theology of Evangelization

There has been much discussion among church leaders, theologians, and Church observers in general, over the shift in paradigm from the age of Christendom to the present post-Christendom age. After an age, which many would suggest lasted for 1600 years until the late 20th century; many long held assumptions have clearly changed. The watershed that marked the new post-Christendom paradigm is difficult to identify. As

Kennon Callahan has pointed out, at present “we live in one of the rare, remarkable times of humankind when a number of paradigm shifts are happening at the same time. We are living in a time when the future has come in a distinctive, extraordinary new form, the new form that humankind has never seen before.”⁷

The present age is marked by far more diversity of belief than there was fifty years ago. Words such as “God,” “faith,” or “reason,” when used today, may well have an entirely different meaning than before.⁸ Often we are said to be living in a post-modern culture. One of the facets of such a present paradigm is that we are said to be living in a post-Christian culture. In an essay entitled “What is A Post-Christian?” theologian Robert Jenson begins by clarifying what it means to be living as post-moderns in the Church.

First, to be “post”-something is to be that something no longer, but not yet to be anything else either, and so to be determined precisely by what one is no longer. Second, the something one is no longer is a communal something and only so an individual something. Thus to be post-Christian is to belong to a community — a polity or civil society — which used to be Christian and whose habits of thought and policies of action are determined by that very fact. One can therefore be a post-Christian without knowing anything about Christianity — and many in the West’s great cities are now in just that condition.⁹

Several factors mark the post Christian era or post-Christendom. Some of these include: 1) In the advance of science and technology, there is an increase in secularization which makes God no longer relevant to many. 2) Europe and America are increasingly becoming de-Christianized. 3) No longer can the world be divided into Christian and non-Christian lands divided by the world’s oceans. 4) Given the

⁷ Kennon L. Callahan, *The Future That Has Come; New Possibilities for Reaching and Growing the Grass Roots* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Company, 2002), 3f.

⁸ John P. Bowen, *Evangelism for “Normal” People; Good News for Those Looking for A Fresh Approach* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002) 12.

⁹ Robert W. Jenson “What is A Post-Christian?” in *The Strange New World of the Gospel; Re-Evangelizing in the Modern World*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, 21-31. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 21.

subjugation and exploitation of non-Caucasian peoples, western Christians, latent with guilt over past misdeeds are often unable or unwilling to offer aid to non-Christian peoples in other parts of the world. 5) In a world in which the rich become richer and the poor poorer, rich Christians, in the midst of the disparity, are often reluctant to share their wealth. 6) After centuries of western theology and western ecclesiastic ways being infused into the newer churches of the developing world, now the “newer churches” are increasingly hostile to having the church of the developed world dictate policy.¹⁰

Never before has this tension between the church in the developed world or northern hemisphere nations and the church of the developing world or southern hemisphere, been manifested with the visibility than is the case with the Anglican Community. Within the Lutheran Federation, which has traditionally been a federation of communions, there has been a mutual recognition which has moved its 140 members to view itself as a common Lutheran world communion. At the same time disagreements have resulted in tensions within the Anglican Communion. The section on the “Care of Dissenting Groups” within the *Windsor Report* is an attempt to calm the waters and prevent the Anglican Communion from becoming a “world federation of communions.”¹¹

Some might see these tensions as dangerous for the Church. Yet, as a result of these tensions or perhaps in spite of them, there are noticeable changes with respect to the composition of congregations in the northern hemisphere. David Barrett reported in 1982 in *The World Christian Encyclopedia* that in Europe and North America, an average of

¹⁰ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission; Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991) 3f.

¹¹ Anglican Communion Office, *The Lambeth Commission on Communion: The Windsor Report, 2004* (London: The Anglican Consultative Council, 2004) 58ff.

53,000 persons are leaving the Christian Church, Sunday in and Sunday out. This is not 53,000 persons leaving from one congregation or even one denomination for another. This is 53,000 persons leaving the Christian Church every week.¹²

Such a statistic, if it is to be believed, is evidenced in a study of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, which reports the dramatic drop in the number of persons who claim to belong to Protestant denominations in the United States. More startling yet, in this study, “Protestant” includes all post-Reformation groups including the rapidly growing Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints or Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. From 1993 to 2002 this number dropped from 65 to 52 percent. During the same period the number of persons considering themselves Roman Catholic held steady at 25 percent. At the same time persons who indicated they belonged to other groups including Eastern faiths, Islam, Orthodox Christians and Native American faith groups increased from three to seven percent.¹³

For moment let us consider the case of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Within the ELCA since its inception from three predecessor Church bodies in 1988, there has been a dramatic statistical decline in baptized membership over its seventeen year history. In 1987 the Rev. Lowell G. Almen, ELCA Church Secretary, reported the baptized membership of the new church body to be at 5.2 million. By 2005, just prior to the ELCA’s Bi-annual Churchwide Assembly, that same statistic for the preceding year was reported to by Pastor Almen to have fallen to 4.9 million.¹⁴

¹² Bosch, 3.

¹³J. Paul Rajashekar, “Navigating Difficult Questions” in *The Evangelizing Church; A Lutheran Contribution*, ed. Richard Bliese and Craig Van Gelder, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 93 and footnote on 164.

¹⁴<http://www.elca.org/news/table.html> ELCA News Service, July 29, 2005.

Such statistics among Protestant church bodies in North America would seem to be more the norm than the exception. Such shifts from Christendom to post-Christendom may seem to some as a cause for alarm. However, such changes in the culture in which we do ministry require that we evaluate our theology of evangelization; otherwise, we may see our evangelization efforts purely for the purposes of halting present trends. In fact, the editors and authors of *The Evangelizing Church; A Lutheran Contribution* share similar concerns. The term Evangelism is often associated with “outreach programs or specialized activities for which the church is responsible.” So, for the same reason, here we shall use the term evangelization as what the community is to do as well as be.¹⁵

Rather than doing such *emergency evangelization*, the purpose of our endeavor should be understood from the beginning as an extension of what it is to be a faithful Church living out her mission. Such an endeavor of faithfully proclaiming Christ in our world may look quite different than that of our grandparent’s generation. Robert Jenson reminds us of the task at hand in the given situation. “We need to face ...[a] fact often spoken of but rarely acted upon: that the West is now a mission field. We can no longer count on the culture doing half our work for us.”¹⁶ But if we are to understand the theology of evangelization, we must first appreciate the difference between evangelization and mission and how evangelization fits into the large theology of mission. However, to appreciate a theology of mission, we must digress yet one more step, and understand a theology of what God’s mission or the *missio dei* is apart from the Church’s mission. It is to that endeavor we first turn.

The *Missio Dei*

¹⁵Richard, Bliese, “A Lutheran Confession” in *The Evangelizing Church; A Lutheran Contribution*, ed. Richard Bliese and Craig Van Gelder, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 9.

¹⁶ Jenson, 29.

In Exodus 15 we hear the story of the defeat of the Pharaoh, his horsemen, his chariots and all of the chariot riders in the Sea of Reeds or *Yam Suph*. In the sight of so great a victory in which the God of the Israelites has defeated the god of the Egyptians, Pharaoh, Moses and the people sing a song to the Lord in thanksgiving for the victory. Afterward, Miriam, the prophetess and the sister of Aaron, takes a timbrel and with the women sings in Exodus 15:21b what serves in the text as an antiphon to the “Song of Moses”, The women sing: “Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.” This liturgical antiphon sung by the Israelites in antiquity, likely precedes the J Source making it likely the oldest verse in the Hebrew Scriptures.¹⁷

Through this ancient antiphon, announcing the victory of God at *Yam Suph*, we hear the ancient Israelites reveal the earliest formulation of the *Missio Dei*. This victory is not a victory exclusively for the sake of God achieving victory over Pharaoh. Instead the victory at *Yam Suph* is intended that God might call a people together out of bondage, that he might make a covenant with them. As God proclaims, in the beginning of the Decalogue, as contained in both the Sinai Covenant of Exodus 20 and Moses exhortation of Deuteronomy 5: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” The God of Israel has accomplished so great a victory, called a people out of Egypt in order that as Moses, the mouth piece of Yahweh tells Pharaoh in Exodus 5, so “they will celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.” Now through plagues, the sign of the Passover, the victory at the sea, and the Sinai Covenant, the Israelites witness the accomplishment of the *missio dei*. The *missio dei* is not just that

¹⁷ Martin Noth, *Exodus; A Commentary*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press) trans. J.S. Bowden from the German *Das zweite Buch Mose, Exodus*, 1962), 121.

God is a God of liberation freeing an oppressed tribe of slaves. Rather, the overarching *missio dei* is that the Israelites might become a free people who would go into the wilderness to worship their God. Yet, the story of Israel is not just a story of freedom and covenant; it is a story of a disobedient people whom God chooses to reclaim again and again despite their unworthiness. As Robert Jenson has noted, “Genesis begins with the Exodus, and here we find that no sooner is the covenant established than it is broken, and this peoples’ brokenness determines the whole subsequent history of Israel.”¹⁸ Therefore we see the pre-Israel of Genesis through this retro-view.

Herein lies the hermeneutic for properly understanding Genesis 3. It is also the lens through which we interpret the Abrahamic Covenant of Genesis 12-17. God calls Abraham from Ur, promises that he will be the father of nations. Abraham is promised a son through his wife Sarah, though she is beyond child bearing years. God and God alone makes a covenant by going through the animal halves in an ancient ritual. Normally two contractual partners would have gone together through the animal parts to seal this covenant, through this ritual. Yet, God makes the contract binding upon himself while Abraham sleeps. Sarah bears a sign as God has promised named Isaac, (or he laughs), because despite the laughter of disbelief, God has the last laugh as the upholder of the covenant.

The prophets in the generations to come will have to remind Israel that the covenant God made with them extends through Abraham to the nations. In Chapter 25, the prophet speaks of the great eschatological banquet to which all of these nations, even

the enemies of Judah, will be invited:

¹⁸ Jenson, 24.

6 On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. ⁷And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. ⁸Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.

In the return from the exile made possible by the Edict of Cyrus, Isaiah 42 reminds the people of Judah:

⁶I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, ⁷to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

The covenant is not an exclusive covenant. It is a covenant embracing all of God's creation. The *missio dei* is that all of God's creation might be drawn to the light which is Israel, that all nations might see in her what it is to be a covenant people.

Within the Deutero-Pauline letters, we see exhibited an inclusivity in the *missio dei* that shows the New Testament's continuity with the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures in that all creation, not just people, will be welcomed into the final kingdom. The Apostle writes to the Colossian Christians in the First Chapter: "¹⁹For in him [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."

The Gospel writer of Matthew, as is the case with the other Gospel writers, tells the Gospel of Jesus Christ by reading the events of Jesus' life and ministry through the lens of the cross and resurrection. One thing that makes the first Gospel in the Canon unique is the way in which the gospel writer tells us about the ministry of John the

Baptist. John, as the herald and forerunner to the Christ, tells us that “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” However, we would be making a great mistake if we confused the *Basileia Tou Theou* (Kingdom of God) with the *ekklesia* (Church). What Jesus comes to establish, particularly in Matthean theology, is the *Basileia*. The inbreaking of the kingdom, which is central to Jesus’ ministry and central to his own understanding of his mission, is, as David Bosch has said, the “starting point and context for mission.”¹⁹

While the *Basileia* is not the same thing as the *ekklesia*, it does incorporate the *Basileia*. This distinction has not always been made clear in the minds of some. However, this understanding is pivotal in our overall focus on the theology of evangelization. The in breaking of *Basileia* is accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit. It could be argued that this theology is the overarching theme for the writer of Luke and Acts. Among Luther, Calvin and later Wesley, it was presupposed that the work of the Holy Spirit works exclusively within the *ekklesia*. Martin’s Luther’s explanation of the third article of the Creed is indicative of this. In the “Large Catechism” Luther explains: “the Holy Spirit continues his work without ceasing until the Last Day, and for this purpose he has appointed a community on earth, through which he speaks and does all his work.”²⁰

If the Church is to bear faithful witness this activity of the *Missio Dei* as God’s Kingdom is breaking into the world, then we should carefully discern what the *Missio Ekklesia* is.

The *Missio Ekklesia*

¹⁹ Bosch, 31f.

²⁰ Robert Kolb, T. J. Wengert, & C. P. Arand., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 439.

In the book of Acts, following the activities of the Jewish harvest festival of Pentecost and the reception of the gospel and the baptism of new believers, the author of Luke Acts tells us in 2:42 that “They [the community of believers] devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” This might well be considered the mission statement of the Church. Certainly this is similar to what Justin Martyr describes the church of around 150 AD to be like when in the *First Apology of Justin Martyr* after discussing the baptismal entry of the believer and before revealing to the Emperor how the gifts are shared with the poor he says:

Having ended the prayers, we salute one another with a kiss. There is then brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of wine mixed with water; and he taking them, gives praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and offers thanks at considerable length for our being counted worthy to receive these things at His hands. And when he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all the people present express their assent by saying Amen. This word Amen answers in the Hebrew language to *ge/noito* [so be it]. And when the president has given thanks, and all the people have expressed their assent, those who are called by us deacons give to each of those present to partake of the bread and wine mixed with water over which the thanksgiving was pronounced, and to those who are absent they carry away a portion.²¹

Among the Confessional documents of the Lutheran Church is the “Augsburg Confession”. In the Latin text of that document it speaks of the ministry of the church in Article V saying:

“ so that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and sacraments as through the instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who affects faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel,...²²

²¹ Apology of Justin Martyr at <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/stj29002.htm>.

²² Kolb, 41.

This may seem remarkably similar to those of the Reformed traditions who have been shaped by “The Heidelberg Catechism”. In that Catechism “Part II: Deliverance: God the Holy Spirit” speaks of the “holy catholic church” in a similar vein:

Lord's Day 21 Q & A 54

Q. What do you believe concerning "the holy catholic church"?

A. I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And of this community I am and always will be a living member.²³

Among Episcopalians in the United States the Catechism in the *Book of Common Prayer* in its explanation of the “Church” poses it this way. “Q. Why is the Church described as holy? A. The Church is holy, because the Holy Spirit dwells in it, consecrates its members, and guides them to do God's work.”²⁴ Among Canadian Anglicans the words are quite similar in the catechisms understanding of the Church. “*Question.* Why is it called Holy? *Answer.* Because the Holy Spirit dwells in it, sanctifying all its members and endowing them with gifts of grace.”²⁵

In the United Methodist Church’s *Book of Discipline* which contains the “Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church”, a predecessor Church body to the largest Methodist denomination in the United States, “Article 5—The Church” states:

We believe the Christian Church is the community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. We believe it is one, holy, apostolic and catholic. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by men divinely

²³ The Office of the General Assembly, *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part I Book of Confessions*, (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Distribution Services, 2002)., 37.

²⁴The Episcopal Church USA, *Book of Common Prayer, 1979*, (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation and the Seabury Press, 1979) 854.

²⁵ General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, *The Canadian Book of Common Prayer* (Toronto, Ontario: The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 1962) 544.

called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world.²⁶

In the Presbyterian Church USA now using the *New Presbyterian Catechism, The Study Catechism: Confirmation Version*, in “Question Four” reflects the theology of Calvin and Geneva reform.

Question 4. How do you live in the communion of the Holy Spirit? By the Holy Spirit, I am made one with the Lord Jesus Christ. I am baptized into Christ's body, the church. As a member of this community, I trust in God's Word, share in the Lord's Supper, and turn to God in prayer. As I grow in grace and knowledge, I am led to do the good works that God intends for my life.”²⁷

While there is considerable ecumenical convergence and agreement that it is the Holy Spirit that guides the Church's mission, yet, even so, we find ourselves, as we have said above, in a radically different context unknown to our grandparents. The church is, as it were, a gathering of resident aliens in a post-modern world. Yet, we are called, as was the Church at the time to of the writing of I Peter, to fulfill our mission in such a milieu. For the sake of this *missio ecclesia*, God has called the Church into being through the work of the Holy Spirit. In an environment in which the Christian community found itself to be “resident aliens”, the author of I Peter reminds his community living around

²⁶ United Methodist Publishing House, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House 2004)147f.

²⁷ 210th General Assembly (1998), *The Study Catechism: Full Version with Biblical References* Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, downloaded <http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/confession/studycatechism.htm> (downloaded September 18, 2007).

65 AD that it is God who has called them into being as a community.²⁸ As I Peter says in Chapter 2:

⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

But lest this community become smug and see her existence in exclusivist terms, the Apostle Paul would remind us as he did the Roman Christians in Romans 9-11, that we have not supplanted Israel as God's Covenant People. To the contrary, we have been grafted into the olive tree of Israel as part of God's design that he might reveal himself to be faithful. This is an important factor as we look at the primary text used today as the model for Evangelization.

Toward a Theology of Evangelization

In an effort to better develop a theology of Evangelization we have looked at our present reality followed by a theology of the *missio dei* and the *missio ecclesiae*. This is an important endeavor that we first discover the meaning of mission. J. Paul Rajashekar pointed out "Mission and evangel[ization]ism cannot therefore be anything but dialogical. The aim of teaching mission and evangel[ization]ism in theological training is not to win people for Christianity but to think theologically and respond appropriately in different situations of mission and ministry...."²⁹

²⁸ William J. Dalton, S.J. "The First Epistle of Peter" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, S.J., Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm., 903-908. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 903.

²⁹J. Paul Rajashekar's in "Theological education in a pluralistic context: an overall assessment" in the book *Ministerial Formation and A Multi-faith Mission Milieu: Implications of Interfaith Dialogue for Theological Education*, as quoted by Norman E. Thomas, ed. *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity; A Readers Companion to David Bosch's Transforming Mission*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 300.

David Bosch echoed these sentiments when he outlined eighteen convictions of what he referred to as “evangelism”. These are: 1) mission is “wider than evangelism”, 2) “evangelism should not be equated with mission”, 3) “evangelism maybe viewed as an essential dimension of the total activity of the church”, 4) “evangelism involves witnessing to what God has done, is doing, and will do”, 5) “evangelism does aim at a response”, 6) “evangelism is always invitation”, 7) “the one who evangelizes is a witness, not a judge”, 8) “even though we ought to be modest about the character and effectiveness of our witness, evangelism remains an indispensable ministry” 9) “evangelism is only possible when the community that evangelizes – the church –is a radiant manifestation of the Christian faith and exhibits an attractive lifestyle”, 10) “evangelism offers people salvation as a present gift and with it an assurance of eternal bliss”, 11) “evangelism is not proselytism”, 12) “evangelism is not the same as church extension”, 13) “to distinguish between evangelism and membership recruitment is not to suggest, though, that they are disconnected”, 14) “in evangelization, ‘only people can be addressed and only people can respond’”, 15) “authentic evangelism is always contextual”, 16) “because of this, evangelism cannot be divorced from the preaching and practicing of justice”, 17) “evangelism is not a mechanism to hasten the return of Christ, as some would suggest”, 18) “evangelism is not only verbal proclamation”.³⁰

In the post-Christendom age of the 21st century, when more and more adults do not even know the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ, the church is called, as never before, to fulfill its work as articulated in what we often refer to as the “Great Commission” (Matthew 28:16-20).

Matthew 28:16-20

³⁰ Bosch, 411ff.

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Part of what makes interpretation of this text a challenge is the overwhelming baggage we bring to it. If we are to fairly access this familiar text and its meaning, it is important to reevaluate our assumptions. To aid us in this, we look to Michel de Certeau who was a French Jesuit and scholar whose work combined psychoanalysis, philosophy, and the social sciences. He spoke of how a given historical event could be recaptured from its context of history and then be restructured to convey a new meaning from another perspective. This might be done as another person present at the original event recaptures or tells the story from another perspective than the one remembered by other observers or participants. One who is a later observer or historian might be said to recapture the event as he or she retells the story at another time in history.³¹

Following de Certeau’s methodology, we might confess to a recapturing and restructuring of Biblical texts, as various commentators from the ancient Church to the present day to have exegeted texts. The degree to which there was the intentional recapturing and restructuring of these texts and their meanings varied, depending whether one was using the text homiletically, in apologetics, or dialectically. This is especially true of Matthew 28, which in the last two centuries has been cited as the text for a model of mission and evangelism.

³¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997),5f.

Many have assumed, in contradiction to what we have suggested based on David Bosch's reflections discussed above, that mission and evangelism are terms which are synonymous. This has been exacerbated in modern times by often speaking of Matthew 28:16-20 as a paradigm of the mission of the Church. Yet, this understanding is a relatively recent reality. In fact, none of the Lutheran, English or Geneva reformers ever spoke of our text in question as the "Great Commission". Perhaps, even more startling, given all of the present day theological discussion of the imperatives of the "Great Commission", did these reformers nor the theologians of the Church in Rome ever refer to the text as a paradigm of the mission of the Church. Throughout the Middle Ages, the paradigm of the Church's Mission in Roman Catholicism had been taken from the "Parable of the Great Dinner" in Luke 14:23 where Jesus tells us: "Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.'"³²

Amid the efforts to reform the Church of Rome, it would be fair to say that an accurate Biblical model for mission among the early Lutheran reformers might well be Romans 1:16 in which the Apostle Paul writes: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."³³ One might well make the case that among those of the Reformed traditions, the early 16th century model for mission was Romans 1:16 as well. Much of the reason for this was that the Geneva, German, and Scandinavian reformers sought to reform the Church, not create a new entity. Their urgency to free up the gospel for the sake of those who might hear its saving and life giving word, it might be argued, was for them the

³² Bosch, 236.

³³ Ibid., 240.

focus of the Church's mission. One must also remember that in the early 16th century European exploration of the America and the West Indies was an altogether new reality, and limited primarily to the endeavors solely of the Portuguese and Spanish crowns. Thus, in the early sixteenth century, an intentional policy proclaiming the Gospel to those in the New World, who were yet to hear that Word, was limited to two Iberian nations, who were definitely within the fold of the Holy See of Rome.

As much as most Protestants of the 19th and 20th centuries made of the mission of the Church to be articulated in the "Great Commission", it was not the reformers of Germany, Switzerland, or the United Kingdom, of the preceding centuries who gave it much attention. When Matthew 28 was quoted by most of the reformers, it was most often to articulate canonically, confessionally, homiletically, and most certainly polemically, that the churches of the reformation baptized, and did so in the Triune name, as was commanded by Christ. It fell to the obscure Dutch Reformer, Adrian Saravia, to give Matthew 28:16-20 the famous title by which we often refer to it. As a young contemporary of John Calvin, Saravia in 1590 argued that the "Great Commission was an essential activity of the Church and that only if it was carried out would the promise of Jesus in Matthew 28:20, to be with us "always, to the end of the age" be continued. The tract in which he made this bold assertion was rejected by none other than Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor in Geneva. Ironically, Saravia argued that the "Great Commission" was only validated by maintaining a church polity in which there were bishops in "apostolic succession." His insistence on the need for bishops in "apostolic succession" certainly won him few friends in Geneva, and ultimately became the prevailing concern over the "Great Commission's" imperative to make disciples. Some

years later Adrian Saravia left the Netherlands for England whereupon he joined the Anglican Church.³⁴

Beyond the history of the interpretation of the text there is much which textual exegesis can offer us. In the Greek text, of the four verbs, “go”, “make”, “baptizing”, and “teaching”, only the verb “make” is in the aorist imperfect. The other three verbs, significantly enough, are present active participles. As a result, the acts of going, baptizing, and teaching hinge on the command to “disciple”. This “commission” must be understood not just within all that Jesus taught, but within the entire covenant made first with Israel. Another matter that is important to appreciating this text is that of Emmanuel. In Isaiah, Emanuel, i.e. God with us, is the son of the king. In Matthew’s Gospel Emmanuel, becomes a symbol of Christ the Son of God, whose presence among us assures that the Church continues to be guided in its ongoing intentional activity of going, baptizing and teaching. Yet as the title has been restructured and captured as the old meaning of the name from Isaiah has now taken on a more expansive meaning. Now it is Christ who is continually with his Church, compelling it to see its ongoing work as a continual ministry of discipling by teaching and initiating through baptism.

Such a meaning to this text re-informs and recaptures our understanding of Christian initiation. This recaptured meaning of the so called “Great Commission” re-envisions what is often seen as a program and restructures it as an essential mission of what an initiating Church is called to be and do. In such a mission as Jesus calls his followers to make disciples, the church is challenged as never before to invite and build up in the faith those who are unchurched or, as yet, unbaptized. The catechuminate,

³⁴ Bosch, 247f.

(from the Greek meaning "sounding in the ear") is a vehicle which the church is, once again, exploring as a way of being faithful to this mission of discipling.³⁵

At this juncture it is important to remember that the Holy Spirit does not call a Church into being and send it out to serve apart from the whole of salvation history. To do otherwise excludes the Church from the engrafting with Israel of which Paul spoke in Romans 9-11. But the question is why should the Church evangelize, or as many prefer to call it, do the work of evangelization. Karl Barth in his *magnum opus*, *Church Dogmatics* expounded on the way in which God the Father fulfils His Lordship over all creation. In Barth's exposition, he spoke of the Father's activity of empowering the activity of evangelization.

But again, if we are to see how necessary this matter is, we have to consider the significance acquired by creaturely existence within the divine covenant of grace. For there is more to be said than that within this covenant the creature can be only the object of the divine activity, nor is this the positive side of the matter. For in so far as the creature is the object of the divine activity and the recipient of the grace of God, it becomes *ipso facto*, not the means of this grace, for grace works directly or not at all, but its witness and herald and proclaimer. Thus even in the utter humility of its spiritual existence it acquires an active function within the history of the covenant. It has a mission to fulfill, or a commission to execute, a mission or commission to its fellow-creatures. Abraham becomes the father of Isaac and Jacob and therefore the forefather of Jesus Christ. Israel becomes a light of the gentiles. The prophets are not prophets to themselves but to their people. Jesus Christ had to become a man to represent as man all other men. The Biblical miracles, and later baptism and the Lord's Supper, are signs of the work and revelation of God. The church is either a missionary church or it is no church at all. And Christians are either the messengers of God (with or without words) to both Jew and Gentile or alas they are not Christians at all.³⁶

³⁵ELCA, *Welcome to Christ - A Lutheran Introduction to the Catechumenate*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Fortress, 1997) 7.

³⁶Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3 "The Doctrine of Creation"*. (New York: T.T. Clark, 2002, paperback reprint of first edition, 1960), 64f.

While Barth sounds a note of anti-sacramentalism in this quote from his *Church Dogmatics*, what we should not fail to recognize is that for Barth, we as creatures living under the care and rule of the Father's Lordship are revealed as faithful followers of the Crucified by our serving as messengers of God. Indeed serving as evangelists is an essential activity of our calling as Christians. When we consider such an essential activity by God's people within a Sacramental and ecclesial theology, we recognize that through the Church's ministry of Word and Sacrament, God has called, gathered and enlightened the whole Christian assembly, empowering her for the ministry of evangelization. Either the Church bears the mark of that activity or as in Barth's words: "alas [we] are not Christians at all."

We are therefore, compelled by the one who called us to walk with and share the gospel which is that which builds up persons in the faith. This walking with persons as guided by the Holy Spirit is what is modeled in the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8. The story of the Ethiopian Eunuch has sometimes been cited as not supporting a lengthy catechumenate, since the eunuch was baptized in a short span of time after meeting Phillip. However, what should not escape our notice is the catechumenal process that is at work in this text. The eunuch is riding in his chariot returning home from worshipping in Jerusalem. As a eunuch, he was not permitted to become a proselyte to Judaism, yet this "God fearer" is drawn to the Hebrew Scriptures. As the eunuch sits in his chariot reading from the prophet Isaiah, the Spirit compels Phillip to go over to him. Phillip asks the Ethiopian "God fearer" a question. "Do you understand what you are reading?" The eunuch then asks an essential question of any inquirer into the Christian faith: "How can I unless someone guides me?" He then invites the deacon into

the chariot with him and they together look at Isaiah 53:7-8. Then the eunuch asks Phillip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself, or about someone else?”

What Phillip and this treasurer to the queen of the Ethiopians have begun is a simplified catechumenal process. The inquirer asks a question to which a guide and mentor responds. In this story in Acts 8, Phillip begins to interpret Isaiah 53 in light of Jesus of Nazareth. The discourse of questions and answers as recorded in Acts, though brief, culminates in the Ethiopian’s request to be baptized. Though the Catechumenal process described by Luke here is brief, it entails the relational, question and discernment of the catechumenal process between mentor and inquirer. When is the catechumen baptized? How long does it take? The process lasts as long as it takes. It continues to be guided by the inquirer or the catechumen. Only when the catechumen is ready to proceed in the process, does the mentor proceed with the inquirer or candidate.

It is important to remember in this story what proceeds directs, and follows the actions of Phillip, the deacon, and the Ethiopian who has asked “what is to prevent me from being baptized.” It is none other than the Holy Spirit. The Spirit guides the catechumenate regardless of the length of the process. The catechumenate, as used in the ancient church, which is enjoying a revival in the post-Christendom church, seeks faithfully to follow the model of both the “Great Commission” and Acts 8.

Providing a process of the catechumenate is more than just preparing and forming persons for Baptism into the Church. A better, and might we aid more Scripturally accurate way of speaking of this process it to use the term “building up” or “up building”, when referring to that which takes place in the lives of catechumens and

affirmers as they together encounter the Word of God. Charles Campbell points out that the term *oikodomein* / *oikodomē* or “building up” “is an important image in the Biblical idiom; it is part of the peculiar speech the church needs to learn to speak. Because of its communal, messianic, eschatological and apocalyptic dimensions, *oikodomein* is not translated very well into the more domesticated term ‘formation’”.³⁷

Therefore the process which begins with the catechumenal entry rites, formally marks the beginning of a process of building up persons in the body of Christ. Thus this term is a more theologically appropriate one to describe that which takes place in the catechumenate, rather than the often used, term “formation”. Yet, the catechumenate is a process of initiating persons into the Kingdom of God. As William J. Abraham reminds us, this initiation does not take place in an intellectual vacuum. “It requires ultimately a uniquely Trinitarian conception of God, one that seeks to hold to the mystery of God’s action in Christ and through the Holy Spirit without wandering into a shallow obscurantism.”³⁸ To be Trinitarian in our approach to evangelization is to take seriously initiation of persons into the life within the both the *missio dei*, and the *missio ecclesia*.

The Catechumenal process and the rites of welcome used in our Church bodies particularly are predicated on a sound understanding of evangelism. Any notion that to engage in catechumenal process without the initial work of evangelization and a sound theology of evangelization, invites persons into the realm of empty meaningless ritual. If one were to envision the metaphor of a modern roadway, a well surveyed route through varieties of terrain might represent the *missio dei*, The *missio ecclesiae* could be

³⁷Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus; New Directions For Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 222.

³⁸William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 162.

compared to the roadbed, The catechumenate could be compared to the paved surface, with the entry ramps compared into a welcoming rite, and the entry points from other roads of travel in the post modern world marked with the signage and traffic signals of evangelization. The mission of the Church must rest in the well surveyed way of God's Mission. The catechumenate in turn would quickly disintegrate without the foundation of a good road bed built of the good foundation of faithfulness to its calling. The rites which mark the beginning of the catechumenal process become the access points and onramps into the catechumenal process. Getting to the onramps is not impossible without the signs of Evangelization marking the way, but it is certainly more difficult. What might be called gimmicky evangelism methods, are confused by the world littered with so many other signs and billboards marking other ways. The Church has and can continue to function without the catechumenate, but riding on the roadbed becomes rough and even hazardous, for those coming to the church for the first time. It could even be said that the Church at times has not followed the well surveyed route of the *missio dei*. But with each piece in its place, the way becomes a smoother transition for the inquirer from the variety of routes into the route of catechumenate leading to baptism and baptismal living.

The catechumenate is unique in itself in many ways. It is unique in that, as we have just said it presumes evangelization as an integral part of the process. It is unique also in that it is not a program in the church. Many practitioners of the catechumenate constantly remind themselves and others less familiar with it, that catechumenal ministry is always a process, never a program. Unlike many "faddy", "glitzy", "shrink wrapped" programs offered by many parts of the church, the catechumenate must be seen as firmly

fixed within the *missio ecclesiae* and the *missio dei*. It is driven not by the needs of a congregation that seeks new members, but is driven by the needs of seekers in need of discipleship. It is guided, as indeed is the whole Church, as the reformers so eloquently stated, by the work and sustenance of the Holy Spirit. The rites which punctuate the periods within the process are celebrated only when candidates are ready. For those who are driven by goals and objectives of a congregation for numbers, this aspect makes the process particularly a challenge. The process takes time. These unique characteristics of the process known as the catechumenate are to be found in catechumenal ministries of many denominations now using the process.

Among all the rites of the catechumenate, one of the most profound for catechumens, sponsors, and the worshiping community is the first rite, which marks the formal recognition that one has entered into the process. The reasons for this profundity are likely as numerous as the participants themselves. For the sake of those who would come as seekers, and for the sake of the mission of whole Church, congregations considering the use and implementation of this onramp ramp into the catechumenal process how this process and this rite in particular, fits into the Church's evangelization endeavors, is worthy of careful reflection. Upon such reflection, this rite and the process itself clearly would prove to be is worthy of careful reflection of an integral of evangelization efforts which are a part of the Church's mission, within God's overall missional activity.

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