

## A Famine of the Word

*"I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me."*

Amos 4:6

Famine is an attention getter. Certainly those who are enduring famine have their attention focused on their next meal. Hunger pangs are difficult to ignore. Likewise, those who observe famine are moved by its emotional drama. Pictures of starving children with distended stomachs and begging eyes have long been used by fund raisers to rivet the attention of potential donors. Even artificial famine can focus the attention. Fasting, has been a valued tool in the spiritual discipline of focusing one's attention on the Word of God.

So the Divine imposition of famine ought to cause us to sit up and take notice. Why would God give famine to the people of Israel, as His prophet Amos claimed He had done? *"I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me," declares the Lord.*<sup>1</sup> He was trying to get their attention. He wanted them to return to Him. In this case, God was calling His people to return to Him from a place where they had rejected His Word. As dramatic as God's effort was it did not gain the desired effect. And so it was that one form of famine led to another. *"Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord God, 'when I will send a famine on the land— not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.'*<sup>2</sup>

The circumstances surrounding the prophecy of Amos bear a remarkable resemblance to those of twentieth century America. The nation was proud, and prosperous. Though the church was well-thought-of; the deceitfulness of riches, designer furniture, haute cuisine, pop music, addictive substances, and extreme makeovers, (Amos 6:4-6) lured the people away from faithfulness to the Word of God. It proved to be the ruin of Joseph. These same temptations are alive today. Does the numerical decline of the Church in the United States of America represent its ruin? We shall see how the Church has been working hard to curtail this decline. Perhaps the Church of twenty-first century America could learn something from the prophecy of Amos.

### Working to Save the Church

#### Phase one- Evangelism Explosion

Toward the end of the decade of the 1960's some churchmen began to take note of a significant change in the tenor of America's cultural bias. The heady days of the Church's iconic status were waning. As famines and wars moved further away, either physically or popularly, some of the shine came off the star of the Church's appeal. Growth of the Church, in numbers, began to tremble. "In the 1937 Gallup Poll, for example, 73% of Americans said they were church members. That number stayed in the 70% range in polls conducted in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. By the 1970s, however, the number began to slip below 70% ..." <sup>3</sup> Fewer people were coming to Church. Fewer people were becoming members of Churches, and more people felt comfortable admitting that they were outside of the Church. The freedoms and the riches of this nation offered what seemed an endless array of equally appealing attention grabbers.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Am 4:6

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Am 8:11

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/103459/questions-answers-about-americans-religion.aspx>

A few forward-thinking church-leaders began to worry. What would happen if the Church did not continue to grow at the pace of the general population? What if the Church did not grow at all? An early answer came in the form of a book that swept across denominational lines. Dr. James Kennedy's Evangelism Explosion sought to train Christians to share their faith so that the Church could recapture its growing ways.<sup>4</sup> The Evangelism Explosion program was a pretty simple outline-based witnessing tool. If the participant memorized the material, and supplied his personal testimony, he was considered to be qualified to lead someone to faith in Jesus Christ in a one stress-free home visit.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod was an anxious participant in the new-found taste for evangelism. Dr. Erwin Kolb, in a 1979 Concordia Theological Quarterly article states, "About fifty percent of the congregations of the Missouri Synod are using some type of "Kennedy" method, either the original material or an adaptation of it."<sup>5</sup> Dr. Kolb mentions one of those adaptations by the title, Dialog Evangelism.<sup>6</sup> This was produced by Dr. Leroy Biesenthal, LCMS Associate Evangelism Executive. Dr. Biesenthal scrubbed the Presbyterian leanings of Evangelism Explosion with Lutheran sensibilities. This was very beneficial to the LCMS because, according to Dr. Kolb, the LCMS was "...not sufficiently concerned about telling our neighbor about Jesus Christ or sharing the Gospel in our own community."<sup>7</sup>

#### Phase two- Church Growth

Although Dr. Donald McGavran started writing about Church Growth in the late 1950's his work did not reach the popular mind until the early 1970's. Now commonly called the father of the Church Growth movement, McGavran subjected the need for growth in the Church to study by scientific, methodological principles. He asked: What causes Church Growth? What are the barriers to Church Growth? and What methods of Church Growth are reproducible?<sup>8</sup>

Many other authors jumped into this new phase of combatting the perceived decline of the Church. Most of them, including LCMS participants,<sup>9</sup> followed the same protocol of studying congregations or church bodies that were growing numerically and attempting to isolate principles contributing to the growth that could be duplicated elsewhere. Classes covering the Church Growth programs were included as course offerings by at least one LCMS seminary. There was a great deal of optimism in this movement. "Your Church Can Grow"<sup>10</sup> was the affirming message of the day.

The Church Growth movement could arguably be said to have lasted to the twenty-first century. But the decade of the 1990's was not kind.

During the 20th century prior to 1990, the popularity of Christianity had been stable in the U.S. About 87% of adults identified themselves as Christians. The country then experienced a major change. Significant numbers of American adults began to disaffiliate themselves from

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<sup>4</sup> The Evangelism Explosion continues to this day. Information can be found at the following website: <http://evangelismexplosion.org/about-us/>. The fourth edition of the book, 1996 can still be purchased at Amazon.com.

<sup>5</sup> Kolb, Erwin J. Concordia Theological Quarterly. "The State of Evangelism in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod" Vol. 43, # 4 October 1979. p. 315.

<sup>6</sup> Printed by The Board for Evangelism The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

<sup>7</sup> Kolb. p. 311.

<sup>8</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald\\_McGavran](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_McGavran)

<sup>9</sup> Notably Waldo Werning, Vision and Strategy for Church Growth. Baker Book House 1977.

<sup>10</sup> Wagner, C. Peter. Your Church Can Grow. Regal Books. 1976

Christianity and from other organized religions. By 2008, the percentage of Christians had reached 76% and is believed to be continuing its decline.<sup>11</sup>

The difference between these numbers and those quoted earlier can be explained by the fact that the Gallup poll was tracking church membership whereas these numbers reflect self-identification as Christians. A recent American Religious Identification Survey supports the position that Church has been in decline since the 1990's. "The number of Christians has declined 12% since 1990, and is now 76%, the lowest percentage in American history."<sup>12</sup>

### Phase three- Emerging Missional

The failure of the Church Growth movement to stem the tide of numerical losses common to every confession of Christian faith in the U.S. spawned a new movement. Although it is dangerous to characterize a movement without the benefit of an historical perspective, for the purposes of this paper, this latest will be referred to as the emerging, missional movement. By the dawning of the twenty-first century it became clear that the loss of status for the Christian Church of the United States was complete. The term "post-church era" began to appear, to convey the reality that the Church no longer held "insider" status in this culture. As a result the Church was encouraged to think of the United States of America, as mission territory. Individual Christians were told that they had to think missionally.

The emerging, missional movement gently chastised the Church Growth movement for building its foundation on an "attractational" method.<sup>13</sup> The missional approach, based on the post-church identification of this culture, was to be one of sending.<sup>14</sup> The emerging element of this movement stems from the desire for it to be a grass-roots movement, and the consequent view that the pastoral office is the major obstacle to the growth of the Church.<sup>15</sup> When working on the mission field an urgency to get the work done apparently precludes all normal procedures.

The LCMS has been touched by this movement as well. The Ablaze effort, adopted by the LCMS 2004 Synodical Convention, institutionalized (something emerging, missional proponents detest), a missional attitude. One of the resolves of resolution 1-02 of that convention read as follows:

That each congregation, ministry, and school within our Synod, being led by the Holy Spirit through a determined study of the Scriptures and prayer, not only understands itself as a mission outpost to all the unchurched "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8) but also sees that its own community is a mission field today."<sup>16</sup>

Despite the missional attitude conveyed in this resolution the Synod continued to cling to the Church Growth methodology by scientifically tracking data on how many conversations about Jesus had transpired through the efforts of members of its congregations.

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<sup>11</sup> [http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr\\_prac2.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_prac2.htm)

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2009/09/25/bruce-feiler-christians-americans-gone/>

<sup>13</sup> Hirsch, Alan. The Forgotten Ways. Brazo Press, Grand Rapids, Michigan. 2006. p. 110

<sup>14</sup> Hirsch. p. 62.

<sup>15</sup> Hirsch. p. 152 especially footnote 8.

<sup>16</sup> Convention Proceedings 2004 62 Regular Convention, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. p. 120.

## Has All the Work Worked?

The question, analyzing the past fifty years of the work of the Church might be stated this way: Has the work of these three efforts on behalf of the Church caused a mass movement of the people of this nation to return to the Lord? The statistics previously quoted demonstrate that the Christian Church in the United States of America continues to decline in membership and attendance to this day. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod posts numbers that reflect the national trend. It might be possible to ameliorate this harsh assessment with the question: What would have happened had the Church not made a determined effort to work against the decline? Such counter-factual arguments may give valuable pause, but they create few substantive answers. The cold hard truth is that, statistically speaking, the Evangelistic, Church Growth, and Emerging Missional movements have had little impact on the attendance and membership numbers of the Church.

However, the impact of these efforts may be measured in another way. Since the middle of the last century the Church in the United States has been compelling itself to work harder, and has suffered much under the tyranny of urgency. The Evangelistic effort said, the Church is only one generation away from ceasing to exist, therefore we must work harder at telling people about Jesus.<sup>17</sup> The Church Growth effort said, “We, who are Christians, face a supremely important fact, namely that it is now possible, as it has never been before and may not be again, to give this world of people such a glimpse of the radiant personality of Christ that...they will gladly declare, ‘Jesus is our Lord and Savior...’”<sup>18</sup> This might be called the urgency of potentiality. The conclusion of this movement is that the Church must work harder and smarter to bring people to Jesus. The Emerging Missional effort says, that time is short and hell is hot. The urgency of fear drives the Church to conclude that if we do not organize and work missionally we may be responsible for some people ending up in hell.

The fifty year siege of being goaded to work harder has had, if you can imagine, worse effects than burdening the people of God under the law, and turning the mission of God into an anthropocentric effort. (“This is what Ablaze means...making God’s mission our mission.”<sup>19</sup>) Numerical goals have brought a great deal of pressure to bear on local Pastors. Pressure to produce can create unintended side-effects, the worst of these being the willingness to compromise the Word of God in favor of filling the pews. Rare is the Pastor who has not heard something to the effect of: do not offend anyone, do not preach on controversial topics, tell them what they want to hear, or most commonly, why can’t we be like Faith Chapel, which is growing like crazy. Sin, death, resurrection, the cross, hell, and even Jesus can become pariahs to the congregation that really wants to grow. This possibility may explain more regarding the decline in numbers than our hard work does.

A word of caution is in order. This analysis should not be construed as an excuse for rebellion and laziness. The Church does have a command to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to all the world. This is a task that Christians are to take up in the joy of sins forgiven through faith in Jesus, within their God-given vocations. Proclaiming the name of Jesus is a passionate mission, not at all in the sense of emotional zeal, but in the sense that it will produce suffering in the life of the witness. (Matthew 10:22) The Church desperately needs a simple, coherent, biblical exposition of what it means to be in

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<sup>17</sup> The author spent a good deal of time during his college years knocking on doors, using the “Dialog Evangelism” method. He was reminded on many occasions of the need to save the next generation for the Church.

<sup>18</sup> McGavran, Donald. How Churches Grow. Friendship Press, New York. 1966. p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Prophetically recorded in minutes of the 2007 LCMS Convention. Convention Proceedings 2007 63<sup>rd</sup> Regular Convention. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. p. 23.

mission. That is fodder for another paper. What this presentation purports to do is to offer an alternative explanation for the decline in numbers of the Church in the United States as opposed to the charge that the Church has just not worked hard enough. If this explanation happens to be true the current trends in missiology may require adjustment.

### **A Famine of the Word**

The traditional explanation for the decline in numbers of the Christian Church in the western world is that it is a result of the fact that Christians do not care, are maintenance minded and are not working hard enough. Another valid and potentially explosive explanation does exist. Perhaps God, in His eternal wisdom, is removing His Word from us because we have refused to preach it in its truth and purity. It happened in Amos' day.

#### God Removed His Word from Israel

Amos begins his sermon by bringing judgment against the neighbors of Israel, but he soon turns his attention to the people of God. Part of the judgment against Judah is that "they rejected the law of the Lord". (2:4) The judgment of Israel is more explicit, "But you...commanded the prophets saying, 'You shall not prophesy.'" (2:12) In fact, we are given an explicit account of that particular incident in the life of Amos. When Amos confronted Jereboam the King of Israel for his faithlessness, Amaziah, the priest of Bethel is sent to defy Amos. "And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."<sup>20</sup> The Lord uses five different tools, (famine, drought, blight, pestilence, overthrow), to draw their attention back to His Word. (4:6-11) The nation was not interested. They did not want to hear His Word.

Now the devastating, yet poetic justice of the Lord is leveled against that rebellious nation. Since they do not want to hear His Word they will receive their desire with a lethal conclusiveness.

"Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord God, "when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it."<sup>21</sup>

No more dreadful words could be spoken over a people. But what is most difficult to understand, or perhaps accept, is that the entire nation is affected. Even those who have been faithful suffer as a result of God having removed His Word from the people. "Thus says the Lord: 'As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who dwell in Samaria be rescued, with the corner of a couch and part of a bed.'"<sup>22</sup>

#### Will He Remove it from America?

If ever there were a prideful, rebellious nation, the United States of America would fit the description. This nation thinks of, and promotes itself as the number one super-power, as the most powerful and prosperous nation in the world. It has little need for the power of God when it has enough nuclear weapons to frighten all the other nations. Beyond the pride, the present secular culture allows

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<sup>20</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Am 7:12-13

<sup>21</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Am 8:11-12

<sup>22</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Am 3:12

and applauds the mockery of the Christian faith- witness any evening situation comedy with a Christian character. Another poignant example is the presence on the best-sellers list of the rabid atheistic work, The God Delusion. In that work Richard Dawkins likens raising children in the faith to child abuse.<sup>23</sup> The recent death of Dawkin's comrade in atheistic arms, Christopher Hitchens, wrought an effusive eulogy on National Public Radio.<sup>24</sup>

Not only does the world attack the Word of God, but even Christian preachers, across a wide spectrum of the Church, have abandoned clear teachings of the Word of God. The Church, in the visible sense, seems determined to bring a curse upon itself and the nation. It is doubtful that you need convincing, yet, perhaps a few of the most egregious examples may be used to drive home the point.

Ample prospects for the charge of false doctrine exist within the body of Roman Catholic teaching. One will suffice. Upon this example alone, may rest the charge that the Papacy, which has placed its imprimatur on the teaching, is the anti-Christ, for it strikes at the very heart of the Gospel. The teaching, which denies salvation through faith in Christ, is from Vatican II, Lumen Gentium, and is quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church has declared:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life.<sup>25</sup>

Other confessions of faith are equally guilty of having rejected God's Word. Joel Osteen, who on any given weekend is likely the most listened to preacher in America, has publicly declared he does not preach about sin because people don't need to hear that negative message. What follows are portions of the transcript of an interview of Mr. Osteen on the Larry King radio program on June 20, 2005.

KING: But you're not fire and brimstone, right? You're not pound the decks and hell and damnation?

OSTEEN: No. That's not me. It's never been me. I've always been an encourager at heart. And when I took over from my father he came from the Southern Baptist background and back 40, 50 years ago there was a lot more of that. But, you know, I just -- I don't believe in that. I don't believe -- maybe it was for a time. But I don't have it in my heart to condemn people. I'm there to encourage them. I see myself more as a coach, as a motivator to help them experience the life God has for us.

KING: How about issues that the church has feelings about? Abortion? Same-sex marriages?

OSTEEN: Yeah. You know what, Larry? I don't go there. I just ...

KING: You have thoughts, though.

OSTEEN: I have thoughts. I just, you know, I don't think that a same-sex marriage is the way God intended it to be. I don't think abortion is the best. I think there are other, you know, a better way to live

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<sup>23</sup> Dawkins, Richard. The God Delusion. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. 2006. p. 311ff.

<sup>24</sup> Hitchens is the author of God is Not Great. He died 12/15/11. The eulogy was carried on "Weekend Edition" on 12/17/11.

<sup>25</sup> Flannery, Austin. ed. Documents of Vatican II. William B. Eerdmans Co. Grand Rapids. 1975. p. 367. cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church. Image Doubleday, New York. 1995. p. 244. (par. 847).

your life. But I'm not going to condemn those people. I tell them all the time our church is open for everybody.

KING: You don't call them sinners?

OSTEEN: I don't.

KING: Is that a word you don't use?

OSTEEN: I don't use it. I never thought about it. But I probably don't. But most people already know what they're doing wrong. When I get them to church I want to tell them that you can change. There can be a difference in your life. So I don't go down the road of condemning.

KING: What about atheists?

OSTEEN: You know what, I'm going to let someone -- I'm going to let God be the judge of who goes to heaven and hell. I just -- again, I present the truth, and I say it every week. You know, I believe it's a relationship with Jesus. But you know what? I'm not going to go around telling everybody else if they don't want to believe that that's going to be their choice. God's got to look at your own heart. God's got to look at your heart, and only God knows that. <sup>26</sup>

A wildly popular emerging-missional preacher, Rob Bell, recently published a book that made headlines across the nation, in which he claimed that God would not create a place like hell to punish unbelievers.

A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torture and punishment in hell, with no chance for anything better. It's been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject is, in essence to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus's message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear. <sup>27</sup>

But Mr. Bell is not just questioning the existence of a physical place of punishment. His underlying theme is that which ties all three of these examples together. What he, and the other two are questioning is the necessity of Jesus. Perhaps there are other means of salvation. <sup>28</sup> The common message of these three readily accessible, and widely followed, teachings is that the Word of God incarnate is not necessary, nor even welcome. There are other, more pleasing means of salvation. Amariah has made his twenty-first century appearance bearing the same message, "You shall not prophesy." These confessions tell the true prophet to go somewhere else with God's Word.

Can we possibly imagine that such rebellion, that such obstinate rejection of the Word of God, that such preference for the words of men could escape the attention of the Holy Speaker of the Word? Can we expect Him to turn a deaf ear to the challenge, "O seer, go flee away..."? Should we be surprised or resentful if God in His Divine judgment would chose to remove His Word from our midst? And if He did impose that awful sentence, could we not expect the faithful remnant to become smaller? What if only a piece of an ear remains? Will not the holy people of God remain in the palm of His nail-printed hand?

We ought not be surprised that God would use the presence or absence of His Word as a tool of proclaiming the Gospel. Jesus tells Nicodemus,

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<sup>26</sup> Osteen, Joel. On Larry King Live. June 20, 2005. Available at: <http://www.av1611.org/osteen.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Bell, Rob. *Love Wins*. Harper Collins, New York. 2011. p. viii.

<sup>28</sup> Bell. p. 1ff.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."<sup>29</sup>

The Spirit of God is free to blow the Word about like the wind.

Luther finds support for this understanding in a reference, in John 3, to the twists and turns of the Jordan River.

All this, however, is mystical and allegorical speech. Holy Scripture is also, as it were, a winding and deep body of water. Not all can understand it; but at times it withholds its use and comprehension from the reader and withdraws from him. Occasionally it passes by quickly, like a shower of rain which is hard to keep in one spot. Today God's Word and Holy Scripture are found in one place, tomorrow in another.<sup>30</sup>

Article V of the Augsburg clearly teaches, on this basis, that the Spirit of God uses the Word and sacraments at His will.

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this.<sup>31</sup>

#### How Shall We Respond?

It is possible that the Word of God has moved on, like a passing shower. Were that true we might expect the remnant to be like a piece of an ear. The Church cannot grow where the Word of God is absent. Where the Word of God is scarce, as in a famine, life will be scarce. Even the remnant, though it remains faithful, suffers with the nation so cursed by God. Yet, all is not lost. After 9 2/3 chapters of judgment God finally speaks some good news through the mouth of Amos.

"In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name," declares the Lord who does this.<sup>32</sup>

We know this prophecy to have been fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus. God has raised up the booth of David. In Jesus alone there is life and salvation. God saves all those who are called by His name, through faith in Jesus. As it was in the day of Amos so it is in our day. We can be confident that God will preserve His Church.

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<sup>29</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Jn 3:6-8

<sup>30</sup> Luther, Martin: Pelikan, Jaroslav Jan (Hrsg.) ; Oswald, Hilton C. (Hrsg.) ; Lehmann, Helmut T. (Hrsg.): *Luther's Works, Vol. 22 : Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 1-4*. Saint Louis : Concordia Publishing House, 1999, c1957 (Luther's Works 22), S. 22:vii-415

<sup>31</sup> Tappert, Theodore G.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 2000, c1959, S. 31. Emphasis added.

<sup>32</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Am 9:11-12



## Conclusions

However, if the scenario portrayed in this paper is true, if the scarcity of God's Word is actually the correct explanation, or at least part of the explanation for the decline of the Church in the United States, a few conclusions can be drawn.

1) God may foil all our hard work as a way of demonstrating that we are not in control. Our hard work is no guarantee of growth. The more we press ourselves to work harder the greater grows the danger that we think our work independent of God's work. We cannot make God's mission our mission. God is the sender. He converts souls, and thus grows the Church. He uses us when and where He pleases to proclaim the truth of the Gospel. Although God sends His people in general, and the Office of the Ministry in particular, into the world with the Gospel, one distinction is helpful. Christ's mission is to save. Our mission is to proclaim.

2) The Word of God is a precious gift. We may take it for granted. We easily assume that the way it has been is the way that it will be. We may assume that those who call themselves Christians know and proclaim the Word of God. The prospect of God's action to make the Word scarce reminds us that this precious gift is not our own possession. Neither can we simply assume its presence in any given confession. The presence of the Word of God is demonstrated in the truth and purity of its teaching.

3) Holding fast the confession of faith without wavering, (Hebrews 10:23) is part of being sent. Holding up proclaiming the Word as more important than proclaiming the Word truly, or vice versa, is nonsense. In fact, seeking to separate the two is without scriptural support. If the failure to proclaim the Word in its truth and purity may result in its removal, as it did in the day of Amos, we should conclude that guarding the pure proclamation of the Word is part of being sent into the world. Establishing special interest groups along the lines of this contrived division only serves to harm the confession further.

4) The remnant suffers as it holds fast the confession. As people rejected God's Word, so they rejected him whom God used to proclaim it. Amaziah did not think of Amos as one who was faithfully proclaiming God's Word. He saw him as an impediment to the growth of his institution. He sought to rid the kingdom of Amos and to make Amos' following smaller. If we are truly in such an epoch, it will be so in our day. Those who cling to the Word of God may anticipate not growth but decline, and not ease but persecution. This conclusion carries with it a grave danger. Upon hearing this, we poor sinners may further conclude that smallness is a sign of God's favor and that opposition is a symbol of correctness of doctrine. The thesis of this presentation supports neither corollary. The remnant will continue to be used by God toward proper growth. Likewise, the only sign of correct doctrine is that is in accordance with the Word of God.

5) The prophetic office is necessary to the proclamation of the Gospel. Amaziah was a priest. He was part of the institution of the Church. Yet God used Amos, the prophet, to proclaim the Word and call the people to return to Him. The office of the public ministry is the prophetic office. This is the significance of Article V of the Augsburg Confession. Using the means established by God, the Word and the Sacraments, this office proclaims the truth and calls the world to repentance.

6) Numbers are no guarantee of faithfulness or of God's blessing. Amaziah's following was larger than that of Amos. The three examples of false doctrine cited above each experience large

numbers of adherents. If, in God's poetic justice, the faithless are given precisely what they ask for, ("Go away seer.") we might expect them to be confirmed in their rebellion. Thus the numbers in their following is not an accurate criteria to judge whether they are being blessed or cursed. The only accurate plumb line of judgment is faithfulness to the Word of God.

7) Methods that are not dependent on God's Word are suspect. The abundance or the scarcity of the Word of God as used by the Spirit of God is the final arbiter of the growth of the Church. Therefore, any methodology that claims the power to grow the Church is to be suspect. It may be conceded that the Church can use various worldly methods to learn how better to communicate the Word, but such methods should never be invested with the power of growth. God gives growth. (I Corinthians 3:6).

8) With respect to the growth of the Church or the conversion of souls, setting goals other than those set by God is presumptuous and dangerous. All three growth movements, discussed above, being heavily influenced by corporate business principles, laud the establishment of local goals as a means of encouraging the Church to work harder. However, the goals that God sets for His mission are not local, they are universal: make disciples of all nations, (Mt. 28) proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation, (Mk 16) forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed to all nations (Lk 24). Setting goals, regarding the growth of the Church, that are smaller than this seems, on the one hand silly, and on the other presumptuous. God calls us to faithfully proclaim His truth in our vocations. He does not call us to convert or grow. The establishing of preconceived results may tempt us to justify our means in accordance with the ends we have established. This methodology will inevitably lead to a rejection of God's Word because it cannot be forced to perform according to our standards.

### **The Abundant Word**

God may remove His Word from one locality or another for the sake of the purity of its proclamation. This is His prerogative. Still He promises that His Word will be present in abundance for the salvation of souls. Amos reminds us of this abundance in Christ Jesus our Lord.

"Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord, "when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it."<sup>33</sup>

This, dear brothers is where you come in. In the joy of a faithful confession you liberally sow the seed of His Word knowing that it will not return void. As His prophets, you speak the truth in love, believing that it will do the work God sends it to do. When all around is famine and death, your lips drip with sweet wine.

S.D.G.  
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Quad/Dual Pastoral Conferences  
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<sup>33</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Am 9:13