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Introduction

As a historian with a graduate degree in classics and a long-standing interest in theology, both patristic and Lutheran, I am often intrigued by the historical development of theological language or terminology. The history of the usage of particular biblical proof texts and the development in the meaning of theological confessional terms have played important parts in my academic and published work.¹

Along these lines, a white paper titled "Accountability and Faithfulness in Reaching the Lost" by Robert D. Newton has come to my attention recently via a request that I consider the content of the document in relation to historical Lutheran theology.² This paper raises the issue of accountability and faithfulness in proclaiming the gospel to the unchurched. According to the paper, the Missouri Synod does not identify mission to the unchurched as its highest priority as it should. This topic has contemporary interest as it is part of a challenge to the revitalization effort that is a key element of the *Ablaze!* initiative currently being promoted within the Synod.

First, it is appropriate to respond to this paper publicly because it has been presented in a public forum. Secondly President Newton appears to be one of the ongoing theological apologists for the *Ablaze!* initiative and thus has placed his work in general into the position of receiving critical evaluation. And finally, in his paper, President Newton explicitly invites a fraternal conversation on the topics he addresses.

Summary

First it should be granted that President Newton has raised a legitimate issue for discussion. And he points to real concerns in relation to the history, status, direction, culture, and theology of the Missouri Synod in relation to reaching the lost. And these can and should be discussed openly and

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² Robert D. Newton is District President of the California, Nevada, Hawaii District of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. The paper was presented by him in Nashville, TN in January 2008. The paper is currently distributed on the Mission Revitalization website at <http://www.missiontrainingcenter.com/revitalization/links.htm>

seriously. However, the paper itself in dealing with the two questions related to proclaiming the gospel to the unchurched, presents exegesis, language, and arguments that are significant innovations and diversions from the historical examples and norms of the Lutheran tradition and, to some degree, from the wider historical Christian tradition. As such they should be evaluated carefully.

This innovation in language and argument is not simply a neutral clarification or alternate description. On the contrary, it creates a theological model of “mission” by changing the scope of the fundamental term “gospel” and using this term as a label for something that is clearly considered “office” by Luther and the Confessions. This approach can not help but affect many other related doctrines such as the public office of the ministry, the means of grace, etc. although these topics are not addressed directly by President Newton’s paper. Beyond this, the new terminology used in the presentation of this model leads to additional statements that appear to border on careless and should not be accepted without careful scrutiny.

Finally, important issues of church polity are touched upon by President Newton’s argument in that he claims Synod should provide centralized oversight and accountability for mission to the lost because we provide accountability for those things we value most. These issues should be evaluated carefully within a proper description of the relationship between the Synod and its member congregations as established by the doctrine of the church.

Question 1 and Newton’s answer

The first question posed by Robert Newton is this: “Is the call for Christians to participate in Christ’s mission Law or Gospel?” His treatment of this question makes it clear that this question refers to the text in Matthew 28:18ff often called the Great Commission. President Newton’s argument and answer to the question follows this line of thought:

1. The “Great Commission”, God’s mission to save the world, the mission to carry out the evangelical mandate to save the world, belongs primarily to Christ. This mission is what we know as “the Gospel.” Christ is the Father’s missionary to save the world.
2. Christ’s mission consists of three parts: his suffering, his rising from the dead on the third day, and his proclaiming repentance for the forgiveness of sins to the world for which he died and rose.
3. The “Gospel” must include these three elements including His proclamation to the world of what His death and resurrection procured.
4. With our regeneration in the Gospel comes a personal invitation by our Lord Jesus Christ to participate with Him in completing his mission. We join Christ in His work of reconciliation

as we enter into Christ through baptism. We are co-partners with Him in His work of reconciling the whole world.

5. Our call to priesthood in Christ is “obedient participation with Him in the Commission His Father gave Him”. And thus he concludes the Great Commission is purest Gospel.

Ultimately the question of whether the passage is “law” or “gospel” and Newton’s answer to this question are less important than the way that he gets to his answer. His path to the answer involves several objectionable elements.

Response 1a: It is important to note that Robert Newton’s presentation makes use of the word “gospel” in a very non-conventional way. He defines “gospel” such that it means the “mission” given to Christ by the Father, rather than the traditional Lutheran definition which says the gospel is the external word of proclamation by which the work of Christ and the promises of God are communicated to the world and through which God works faith via his Spirit.

In his paper, President Newton claims that “Christ’s mission from his Father, (what we know as the Gospel), is comprised of not two (Christ’s death and resurrection), but three parts, ... (1) His suffering, (2) His rising from the dead on the third day, and (3) His proclaiming repentance to the forgiveness of sins to the world for which He died and rose.”³ Now one might not complain too much if he had kept to the idea that Christ’s “mission” consisted of these three parts. But to equate Christ’s mission with the “gospel”, as opposed to the gospel being the proclamation of Christ’s work and God’s promises attached to it, is problematic. This is a significant alteration of the semantic meaning of the term “gospel”. Again, one might consider it simply a bit of harmless rhetoric and pass it by except that to change the meaning of the term “gospel” affects many fundamental teachings that relate to it. And further, this is not simply a side comment in Newton’s paper. It is critical to his argument, without which his conclusion to this section fails.

As is well known the term “gospel” comes from the New Testament term εὐαγγέλιον, meaning “good news” or “glad tidings.” The word occurs on the order of 75 times in the New Testament. The Christian gospel is “preached”, “spoken”, and “proclaimed”.⁴ Paul “testifies” to and “argues for the

³ p. 3-4. Emphasis mine.

⁴ Mt 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; 26:13; Mk 1:14; 13:10; 14:9; 16:15; 1 Cor. 15:1; Gal. 1:11; 2:2, 1 Th. 2:2-9.

gospel”⁵. It can be “listened to”⁶ and “believed”⁷. It can be “hindered”.⁸ The New Testament mentions the gospel “of the kingdom”⁹, “of Jesus Christ”¹⁰, the “gospel of God”¹¹, “my gospel”¹², and “the word of the Gospel.”¹³

But the gospel is never said to have been “given” to Christ by the Father.¹⁴ Nor is the “gospel” ever equated with Christ’s mission, his being sent or called, nor is the gospel itself said to be fulfilled or completed by Christ.

Lutheran theology makes regular use of the definition of the gospel as “external word”. Luther describes the gospel in the Smalcald Articles thus:

We will now return to the Gospel, which gives us counsel and aid against sin in more ways than one ... First through the spoken Word (mündliche Wort, *verbum vocale*) by which the forgiveness of sins is preached in the whole world; ... Secondly through Baptism. Thirdly through the holy Sacrament of the Altar. Fourthly, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren.¹⁵

Here Luther speaks of gospel as including word and sacrament, verbal and visible word, which are means through which God announces his grace and works in us. This pattern of speaking is not compatible with equating the terms “Christ’s Mission”, “Great Commission”, and “Gospel”. The Augsburg Confession, the Schwabach Articles, and the Marburg Articles all speak in the same fashion¹⁶ on this topic and set the pattern for the Lutheran teachers that followed them.

⁵ Acts 20:24.

⁶ Rom 10:16.

⁷ Mk 1:15; 1 Th. 2:4.

⁸ 1 Cor 9:12.

⁹ Mt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14.

¹⁰ Rom 1:9; 15:19; 1 Cor 9:12; 2 Cor 2:12; 9:13; Gal 1:7; 1 Th. 3:2.

¹¹ Mk 1:14; 2 Cor. 11:7; 1 Th. 2:2; 2:8-9; 1 Tim 1:11.

¹² Rom. 16:25.

¹³ Acts 15:7

¹⁴ Or anyone else for that matter. It was “received” by the Corinthians through Paul’s preaching. 1 Cor 15:1; 2 Cor. 11:4.

¹⁵ SA III, 4.1.

¹⁶ AC 4. Schwabach Articles 6 and 7. Marburg Articles 8: “In the eighth point, that the Holy Spirit, to speak of the normal order of things, gives no one such faith or his gifts, without preaching or the oral word or the Gospel of Christ going before, rather through and with such oral word he works and gives faith where and to whom he wills (Rom. 10)”.

It is not clear if President Newton himself invented this new definition of “gospel” or whether he took it from somewhere else.¹⁷ But it is clear that as it stands in this paper, it lacks precedent in the biblical texts or normative texts of Lutheranism. I think this is understood well enough within our circles that it does not require further comment.

In summary, it appears that President Newton has made such a substantial change to the meaning of the word “gospel” because he wants to make use of the word gospel to support his theological model of mission. If he can succeed at equating “Christ’s mission” and “gospel”, he seems to think, his overall argument that Matthew 28 is “gospel” is won.

Response 1b: It is important to note that Robert Newton’s presentation makes use of the term “Great Commission” in a non-conventional way such that it no longer refers primarily to the specific words that Christ speaks in Matthew 28:18ff but instead refers primarily to the mission given by the Father to Christ to save the world.

The term “Great Commission” is not a biblical term or a term that is closely tied to confessional language within the Christian or Lutheran tradition. It is simply a designation of a particular biblical text, namely Matthew 28:18ff. Thus to alter the definition of this term is less important than redefining “gospel.” If you want to call Christ’s mission given by his Father the “Great Commission” that is probably not that big of a deal but then it should openly be stated that the common historical meaning is no longer what is being used.

As an aside, when President Newton refers to a debate regarding Matthew 28 he is referring to a modern debate about that text (the Great Commission) as to whether Christ is talking primarily to pastors (the apostles) or lay people. And his answer is “neither”. He justifies this answer by redefining “Great Commission” to mean something else besides Christ’s words, namely the mission given by the Father to Christ to save the world. But the way he then proceeds from this redefinition ultimately leads him to the answer his question by saying Christ was speaking to all Christians (even if he does not explicitly say it) because he views Matt 28 as indicating that as believers all are invited to participate with Christ in his mission.¹⁸

In actuality, the debate regarding this text is little more or different than the ancient debate regarding the keys of the kingdom and whether they were given to the apostles, the church, or the bishop of Rome. I will say more about this later as well, but suffice it to say here, I disagree with the

¹⁷ His paper does not cite any sources so one could assume that he created this definition himself.

¹⁸ See an article on this topic by President Newton where the same argument is given in somewhat greater detail, “The Great Commission: Given To Whom??”, *Issues in Education* Winter 2007-2008: 24-31.

“neither” approach and prefer the answer that the keys were given not the bishop of Rome but to the entire church which includes especially all the public ministers of the church.

Response 1c: In the traditional Lutheran presentation, Matthew 28 is associated with other biblical texts which demonstrate that the gospel, which is God’s word of salvation to the world and the authority and responsibility to teach it, belong to the church and the public ministry within the church. That is, Matthew 28, or the “Great Commission” as it is commonly called, is about establishing “office”, “vocation”, “mission”, or “calling” in regard to teaching and preaching the word of the gospel.

President Newton’s presentation portrays Matt 28:19 as a call to participate in the mission of Christ to save the world, which he has defined as the gospel. In this way, he derives his answer that Matthew 28:19 is “purest gospel.”¹⁹ For President Newton the model of Christ’s mission and our participation in it is the overarching model against which he interprets biblical texts to answer his posed question.²⁰

But traditional Lutheran theology worked with a different model for interpreting passages like Matt 28, that is, the model of “office” (*Amt, officum*) and “vocation” (*Beruf, vocatio*). Unfortunately, unlike the word “gospel”, the traditional usage of these words are not always well understood among us. Here I can only present the results of a deeper investigation into this topic.²¹

At the beginning of his 1535 Commentary on Galatians, Luther gives us a very nice summary of office and vocation that puts the topic of vocation into the appropriate theological context even as he is discussing the distinction between law and gospel:

When I have this righteousness (of the Gospel) within me, I descend from heaven like the rain that makes the earth fertile. That is, I come forth into another kingdom, and I perform good works whenever the opportunity arises. If I am a minister of the Word, I preach, I comfort the saddened, I administer the sacraments. If I am a father, I rule my household and family, I train my children in piety and honesty. If I am a magistrate, I perform the office which I have received by divine command.²²

¹⁹ p. 10.

²⁰ The philosophers or systematic theologians among us might say he has turned “mission” into his material principle for interpreting the scriptures.

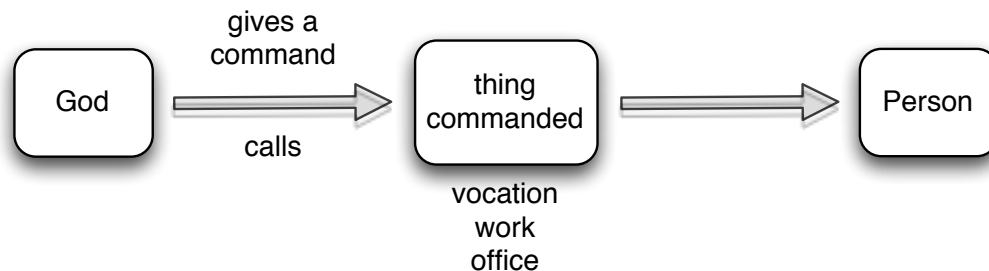
²¹ I have written on this topic previously. See “Office and Offices, Some Basic Lutheran Philology”, *Logia* 6,3 (1997): 5-11.

²² LW 26:11-12.

Luther and the Confessions return to this way of speaking about vocation again and again.²³ Vocation is not about justification. It is about Christian life after justification. Thus it is not gospel in the narrow sense, which concerns only justification. So Luther can say that the most general vocation or calling of all, which pertains to all believers, is to love your neighbor as yourself, that is, to follow the Ten Commandments.

Everyone should do what is commanded him and not do whatever is not commanded to him. And if everyone pays attention to his call he will have his hands full doing what is commanded so that he may not trouble himself with that which is not commanded to him. And if there are no other commands, still the Ten Commandments concern all men so that if he obeys these wherever they should be obeyed he will have enough to do.²⁴

As it turns out, if some attention is paid to the many German and Latin passages like the above which speak of vocation, the pattern of language that emerges in Luther and the Confessions is:



1. God calls (berufen) by giving a command to do something. This something can be general like “to love your neighbor.” Or it can be very specific such as the call to Abraham to sacrifice his son.
2. The thing God commands, the thing to be done, is referred to by many German and Latin words (Amt, *vocatio*, Werk, Tun).²⁵ “Vocation” is about the best we can do in English.

²³ For example, in discussing Matt. 19:21 where the rich young man is told to sell everything he has and give to the poor in order to be perfect, Melancthon writes in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession: “Perfection in this matter is found in what Christ says: Follow me! And herein is the perfection of every Christian in that he follows Christ each according to his call. But the calls are different. ... Therefore, although that disciple was called to sell everything, his call does not concern others, just as David’s call to be king does not concern everyone and Abraham’s call to offer his son does not concern others. So the calls are different but the obedience should be the same and herein is perfection: that I am obedient in my call and not that I should undertake a foreign call for which I do not have a command or precept of God.” AAC XXVII (XIII), 49-50.

²⁴ “Auslegungen über den Evangelisten Johannes”, St. L. VIII, 874.

²⁵ Most unfortunately English does not have a nice general word in frequent use that corresponds to “Amt” which is the most frequent word used in German. “Office” can be used according to the dictionary. But the narrow political meaning of the word in most people’s minds makes it very hard to use. “Work” (Werk) or “deed” (Tun) could be used but they are really so general they lose context. So we will have to live with “vocation”.

3. A person receives that command as their personal “office” or “vocation”²⁶

So how does this apply to Matthew 28? The traditional Lutheran presentation would call the mandate to spread the gospel a matter of vocation, or office. Christ gave the gospel and the keys to the entire church not the bishop of Rome.²⁷ The church here includes the ministers (pastors, apostles) of the church.²⁸ And the keys are used by the church in two distinct ways, privately by every Christian, and publicly via the public ministers appointed to govern the church through the word.

In the private setting of daily life, the office of love or the vocation to love our neighbor, should move every Christian to be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.”²⁹ Luther ties this to vocation when he says that it is God’s command that one should listen to a brother offering a word of the gospel during trials of conscience.³⁰ Or again in the home, according to vocation father and mother become the bishop and bishopess of their house teaching their children God’s word.

The same language of vocation applies to the public setting where the word is proclaimed in the church by public ministers: pastors, apostles, etc. To be a pastor is to be called by God, that is to

²⁶ This language is very common and actually quite clear. But the terms become so theologically overloaded by constant debate that they often lose precision and come mean many other things. Such lack of clarity in thought and language is not new among us English speaking Lutherans. Already the early Missouri Synod struggled to point out the simple meaning of a word like “office.” Walther was very aware of a disagreement even among German Lutherans of the word “Amt.” In 1861 Walther reproduced an article from the *Erlanger Zeitschrift* entitled “Bemerkungen über das Amt.” This article is said to be “wertvolles” (valuable) by Walther in his introduction to the article. In it the author basically studies the word “Amt” and its usage. He concludes: “I hope that these comments on language will convince the kind reader or strengthen him in his conviction that great caution is necessary in coming to conclusions concerning the doctrine of the Lutheran church on the ministry as found in the Confessions when looking at individual texts of our Lutheran symbols in which the words “Amt (office),” “Predigtamt (preaching office),” and “Schlüsselamt (office of the keys)” etc. are found. And, I will add, (I hope it will convince him) that the **presumption** must be that where the word “office” occurs in such texts that this is being used in the **simple** sense of a “commissioned work” (aufgetragenen Thuns) without any other **additional meanings** because this alone is the **essential** idea of office” Emphasis by Walther. *Lehre und Wehre* 7 (1861): 295-6.

In another place, Walther writes, “To the apostles and the Reformers and “office” is not different from but rather the same as “a function arranged by God.” (“von Gott egordneter Function). “Theologische Axiome” *Lehre und Wehre* 9 (1863): 270.

²⁷ SA “Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope” 24. “For just as the promise of the Gospel belongs certainly and immediately to the entire church, so the keys belong immediately to the entire Church, because the keys are nothing else than the office whereby this promise is communicated to everyone who desires it.” And Luther: “the keys are an office and power given by Christ to the Church for binding and loosing sin.” SA III, 7, 1.

²⁸ See my article, “Lutheran and Patristic Doctrine-The Keys as *ecclesiae datae* and *potestas episcoporum*”, *Concordia Journal* 26,2 (2000): 115-137.

²⁹ 1 Pet. 3:15. It is in this setting that Luther speaks of the Gospel being spoken in the “mutual consolation of the brethren.” SA III, 4, 1.

³⁰ WA 40^{II}, 570.

receive the command to preach the Gospel in the midst of the church. This is the public office of the ministry. “Those who are to lead the churches should preach the gospel, forgive sins, and administer the sacraments. ... Now everyone, ... must confess that all those who lead the church have this same command.”³¹

So Matthew 28 is a command given to the church and the apostles within it to make disciples through teaching the gospel. The thing to be done, teaching the gospel and making disciples, is the vocation given. The church carries out that vocation privately via the testimony of every Christian and also publicly through her public ministers. And so Luther and the Confessions often group Matthew 28 together with other texts referring to Christ’s mandate to the apostles as public ministers of the gospel.³² But the vocation itself is not gospel. It is commanded work. And so vocation lies in the realm of the law. But that most certainly does not make it bad or unimportant.

President Newtons’ presentation is obviously very different from this traditional pattern of Lutheran teaching. And this seems to be because of the interest to derive the Christian mission of bringing the gospel to the unchurched from Christ’s own mission to save the world. It is likely that something in this direction could have been achieved while keeping more in line with the pattern of Lutheran doctrine. Instead this paper has presented an argument that labels an element of the law, vocation, as “purest Gospel” and thus has mixed the concepts in an unfortunate way.³³

Response 1d: In the course of his argument, Robert Newton unnecessarily makes use of unusual theological terminology

An additional couple of things should be pointed out from the paper under consideration. In the course of his argument that we participate in Christ’s mission given to him by the Father, President Newton derives some ideas from it that border on careless or worse. He states that God chose us to “join Him in his work of reconciliation.” This is intended to reflect the idea of partnership in Christ’s mission. But the “work of reconciliation” in its fundamental sense was completed in Christ’s death on the cross. This is always the case in the New Testament.³⁴ Paul does state that he has received the

³¹ SA “Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope” 60-61.

³² So for example, SA “Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope” 31.

³³ Sometimes it seems that in our midst law has become equated with “negative” and gospel with “positive” and in order for anything to be viewed as useful it has to be labeled “gospel.” It definitely qualifies as unfortunate that the important distinction between law and gospel has degraded into that.

³⁴ Thus the aorist participle indicating a completed action in 2 Cor. 5:18: “who through Christ reconciled us to himself”. Again the aorist in Col. 1:20-22: “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. ... he has now reconciled you in his body of flesh through his death, in order to present you holy and blameless.” Again the aorist passive in Rom. 5:10: “while we were yet enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.”

“ministry of reconciliation” and appeals to the Corinthians to be reconciled to God, that is, believe the message and receive the benefits of Christ’s work of reconciliation.³⁵ However, to call the preaching of the word, “work of reconciliation” is very unclear and I am unaware of a precedent for such language. President Newton senses the danger and clarifies that

to be sure, we did not die for the sins of the world. Only our Lord Jesus Christ did that. We did not rise from the dead as vindication of that sacrifice. Only our Lord did that. However, we are invited, that is, called by grace to join Him in proclaiming reconciliation through repentance to the forgiveness of sins to all nations.³⁶

But obviously such a clarification would not be necessary except for the weakness present in the innovation in terminology. Beyond this, in the last sentence the phrase “reconciliation through repentance” is yet another odd construction. Where in scripture is reconciliation and repentance tied together? Justification, to be sure, is connected with repentance and faith. But reconciliation is not.

Next, on page 8, President Newton makes reference to a passage where he says Luther referred to Adam and Eve as co-creators with God³⁷ and that similarly we are “co-re-creators” because of our sharing in his mission of saving the world. This term could probably be understood correctly in regard to preaching and the faith that is created by the Spirit through it. But this really does not fit with the normal biblical themes of the old creation groaning and awaiting its final redemption at the second appearance of our Lord. It seems unnecessarily confusing.

Summary: Careless use and cavalier redefinition of theological terms in common use can contribute unnecessarily to conflict in the church and is therefore contrary to the Christian obligation to promote unity in the church and follow the sound pattern of teaching we have received.

Few would deny that new times can bring new questions and in response new answers and theological language into the vocabulary and even the confession of the church.³⁸ In addition, such questions and controversies can yield new insight and corresponding new explanation for the meaning of biblical texts within the teaching of the church. The Reformation and the Lutheran Confessions are examples of such. But to give new definition for such a fundamental term in Christian theology as “gospel” or even simply a familiar terms such as “Great Commission” is an action that certainly should not be undertaken without necessity and careful thought. Much of theology and the controversy in

³⁵ 2 Cor. 5:18-20.

³⁶ p. 6.

³⁷ The only reference provided is “Genesis 1”. I was unable to identify a precise passage that this refers to.

³⁸ One of the most famous examples in the history of the church is the introduction of the word *homoousios* / ὁμοούσιος into the Nicene Creed when the term had a very limited use within the church beforehand.

theological matters has to do with words and their meanings and their use to communicate divine matters. It is possible for two people to use the same words and mean different things. And it is possible for two people to use different words and mean the same thing. Precision, clarity, and understanding are precious gifts and unfortunately all too rare. They are also necessary for unity among those who are concerned about agreement in faith. And experience teaches how rare and difficult agreement in things of faith is to come by.

To play in cavalier fashion with words and theological terms that are regularly used among the faithful to speak to one another about their faith, whether these are biblical words or extra-biblical words that are used to refer to biblical ideas, is to take lightly the unity of the church and the Christian obligation to be eager to promote the unity of the Spirit and the Christian bond of peace. And that causes me and many others, who consider this a high priority matter, sadness. ³⁹

Question 2 and Newton's answer

The second question posed by Robert Newton is this: "Is accounting for whether or not a given pastor and congregation are actually reaching the lost Law or Gospel?" President Newman's argument and answer to the question follows this line of thought:

1. "Accountability structures" are not Law or Gospel. It is faithful stewardship of the Gospel.
2. Accounting is an essential practice in business. The mission of God is the business of the kingdom coming.
3. We cannot account for how many come to faith in Jesus Christ. However, we can account for where and to whom we preach the Gospel.
4. The bottom line is we account for what we value.

There are several different issues all wrapped up in this argument deserving of at least some comment. First, if we were to discuss how one would account for or measure the message preached to the lost then the only acknowledged way to measure the message would be to judge the message on the basis of the the scriptures and the orthodox confessions. But testing the message itself does not appear to be what President Newton has in mind.

If we were to discuss pure externals like the number of addresses visited, the number of people involved, the amount of money spent, the time spent in bringing the gospel to the lost, then indeed it

³⁹ See President Newton's reference to his personal sadness at the theological confusion in our midst regarding the "priority of Christ's Commission for the church today.", p. 2. Compare to Eph. 4:1-3: "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

is quite possible that an accounting of these things could be recorded and given. Many congregations receive similar reports from their pastors in normal congregational meetings: how many sermons were preached this quarter, how many hospital visits were made, how many baptisms were performed, how many funerals, how much under or over budget was the pastor in performance of his office, and so on. This is pretty basic stuff.

If “accounting” were limited to such things then the idea of accounting for externals in and of itself would not be so objectionable. However, serious thought has to be given to another aspect of what is being suggested here. Without saying so explicitly, President Newton’s comments assume that the Synod has the right or obligation to demand such an accounting from the congregation as part of a synodical program. He presumes that the Synod should set goals, establish the “structures of accountability”, and tell the congregation and pastor when and how they should do better. Synod will hold the local congregation accountable, according to President Newton’s model.

This turns the matter into an important issue of church polity, that is, it raises the question of how these assertions relate to the doctrine of the church. The Missouri Synod has always made it clear that to belong to synod is a matter of choice. It is not divinely mandated. The church, indeed every individual congregation, has all the rights and authority of the keys of the kingdom given to it and it has no inherent need for a higher central human authority.

It is certainly possible that congregations of synod would ask the synod to oversee outreach in some way, perhaps collect statistics, report on such matters, provide materials or other help, etc. They could ask synod to provide some type of oversight if that were deemed useful. But synod can never claim or demand by divine right any authority over the congregations in such matters. Centralization of power and oversight and setting of rules and similar things is always a path to be cautious about.

In this regard, President Newton’s argument by comparison to synodical oversight of doctrinal matters is an unconvincing argument. The very nature of the Missouri Synod is a group of Christians of common confession in faith and practice. Oversight of doctrine is not simply a matter of what we value, as if in contrast anything that synod does not oversee is not valued in comparison. Oversight of doctrine is a matter of giving congregations a guarantee that those they are in fellowship with are teaching and confessing the same gospel. So doctrinal oversight is closely associated with the expression of common fellowship in the marks of the church, the word and sacraments. So it is a fallacious argument to describe this simply as “accounting for what we value” and on that basis arguing that synod should oversee and provide accountability for whatever we value most, which Newton argues should be bringing the gospel to the lost.