

EVANGELISM AS A WAY OF LIFE

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Church growth has to do with the way the church survives from generation to generation. If there is no evangelism, there will be no earthly manifestation of the church. If we find no evangelism, we realize that there will be no salvation. There can therefore be no doubt but that there is a great need for evangelism. The only real question for our consideration is the one that makes inquiry into the specifics of this fulfilling this need. Just what must happen for evangelism to thrive in the Lord's church?

HAVE WE SEEN WHAT THE BIBLE REVEALS?

When we see the various ways that evangelism is promoted and defined among us, we ought to ask ourselves why the New Testament does not address evangelism the way we commonly do? Where, for instance, do we find the rhetoric of today in the New Covenant record? Where are all the verses urging us to remember to take the gospel to our friends and neighbors? Where are all the "deathbed" stories? And where do we find that inspiration's favorite inquiry is, "If you died tonight would you be lost?" Odd, don't think, that such things, and many more modern areas of emphasis, are conspicuous by their absence in the Bible? What will we discover when we take a fresh look at Scripture?

We need to take another look at the Bible and see what is actually there. Surely we would agree God's word is the very place we would expect to find the plan for evangelism. It is in Scripture that we will learn what we need to do in church growth.

When we leave behind our preconceived notions about evangelism and take a close look at the inspired truths of the Bible, we see a picture of evangelism that is both personal and practical. We discover that the most basic needs in evangelism are not for more programs, better methods, bigger and fancier campaigns, or an increasing reliance on mass media. The main need, the most central component of evangelism, is found in our daily living out the tenants of Jesus. It is the daily practice of biblical Christianity that the Scripture emphasizes.

God's goal for the church has always been that Christians would be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29). It is therefore no

coincidence that the Bible gives us “the knowledge of the Son of God to a mature man, the measure and stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). We have, consequently, “the mind of Christ” revealed in the New Testament (I Cor. 2:16).

The “mind of Christ” is, however, not intended to be something that is found only on the printed page. We are to have Christ’s mind in us (Phil. 2:5). Paul’s prayer for brethren was that they would have Christ dwelling in their hearts by faith (Eph. 3:16-17; cf. Rom. 10:17). Paul intended that every Christian would be a living epistle (II Cor. 3:1-4)!

The “process” of this transformation is most significant. We learn in our studies that it is a daily walk with Christ that changes us from the inside out. As we look to the Lord as the model or pattern for our change, we become transformed. “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (II Cor. 3:18; cf. Rom. 12:1-2). In this process, we are to “in humility receive the word implanted,” and “prove [y] ourselves doers of the word and not merely hearers” (Jas. 1:21-22).

Paul could well relate to this process of transformation for he was a zealous participant: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Gal. 2:20). Paul practiced what he preached, but we must also realize that the preaching of this process of transformation was not a lesser concern—it was central to Paul’s message.

In Colossians 1:24-29 we find the Apostle relating the plan he used when he worked with newly formed congregations. We are more accustomed to thinking of Paul as a congregation starter. However, we need to see the rest of the story—how Paul worked to bring congregations to maturity. This methodology is vital to understanding our need for evangelism.

In Colossians, Paul pointed out that Christ “in” a Christian was a believer’s hope of glory (Col. 1:27). Paul saw his ministry to the saved as being one of presenting them “complete in Christ” (Col. 1:28). It was for that very purpose that Paul would “labor and strive” (Col. 1:29). This work or labor of developing Christ in a Christian was what Paul engaged in after he planted a church (cf. Acts 20:17-35).

This plan that Paul pursued with such diligence is reflected in his striking remarks to the churches of Galatia. The brethren in Galatia were being led astray by Judaizing teachers who sought to take them into a legalistic, Old Testament oriented manifestation of Christianity. Paul knew that their only real hope was in bringing them to maturity in

Christ. His words still ring with passion, "My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). Paul well understood that if the Christian life was to be lived successfully, people had to be brought to maturity. The maturing process would not only provide great preventive medicine against false teachers and false doctrine; it would equip the saints for their work of service (Eph. 4:12).

It is with the positive aspects of Christianity that we find the Bible's central teaching about evangelism. As we "grow up in all things unto Him who is the head, even Christ" (Eph. 4:15), one of those "things" is evangelism. As we become more like Jesus, we become better able to relate to the lost in Jesus' own way.

In taking another look at the way of Christ concerning evangelism, we must be careful to understand the seriousness of reviving this vital pattern of evangelism. We would be most remiss if we saw the value of the pattern for becoming a Christian, organizing the church, and worshipping God, but did not esteem God's pattern for evangelism. Even as Moses was instructed by God to "make all things according to the pattern" (Heb. 8:5), so we must give "much greater attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it" (Heb. 2:1). There is a great need for the church to return to God's pattern for evangelism.

THE CHRIST-CENTERED EVANGELISTIC PLAN

The New Testament pattern for evangelism is what the church needs. This pattern centers in personal Christ-likeness. All through out the record of the New Testament the church is constantly and passionately admonished to live in a manner compatible to the nature of Christ. That is what walking in the light and fellowship are all about. "If we walk in the light as He, Himself is in the light; we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son, cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

Consider the wisdom of this plan. Who could do a better job with God's work than a person who sought to live like Jesus? Is there a better plan than that? Of course not! There could be no better way of conducting the Father's business. Whether the service to God would involve benevolence, edification or evangelism, the best way to conduct the business of God is to do it as Christ would do it. Jesus' entire earthly mission was followed by a singular devotion to the will of the Father (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10). We cannot do better than to follow His example.

As we come to see the significance of the Christ-centered New Testament plan, we come to see certain well-known techniques in a broader light. For instance, consider the Bible's teachings on Christ as the head of the church (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:19; I Cor. 11:3). We realize that this means that there is only one head and thus only one church. This is devastating to modern denominationalism, but there is more to this teaching than just what it rules out. There is much that is ruled in.

By studying the headship of Christ as it relates to the need for the church to practice biblical evangelism, we readily think of a number of applications. One example is how a body cannot function unless it receives instructions from the head. Likewise, the church cannot carry out God's will unless it understands the thinking of the head, Christ. Without a strong connection to Jesus, the church is capable of only spasmodic movements that cannot accomplish God's purpose.

Remember the slogan for the United Negro College Fund, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste"? That memorable phrase has an application to our subject. The church has been given the mind of Christ (I Cor. 2:16) and it is to take up that mind in each Christian (Phil. 2:5). What a waste it would be if Christians looked to themselves and their own devices in evangelism, rather than to the thinking of Christ.

Another thing in this evangelistic rethinking of ours concerns Christ as the Master Teacher. We readily acknowledge that Jesus is the master teacher, the greatest teacher that ever lived. Are we, however, really using what we know about this in our evangelistic efforts? To what extent are our evangelistic patterns compatible with the practices of Jesus? Do we traditionally begin with a look at the Christ, or with a look to something manmade?

When we think of personal evangelism, a number of things come to mind that are associated with commonly used methods. These would include: The *Open Bible Study* of Ivan Stewart, the *Fishers of Men* approach, and the film strips/video method developed by Jule Miller. All of these have good things about them and many have been converted through them, but what do we first learn from Jesus about methods? Would not we expect to learn something very important about approaches by looking to Jesus before we searched elsewhere? All profitable methods are legitimate only to the extent that they honor the methods of Jesus.

What we do learn from Jesus is that He did not have any one-size-fits-all method. While He was always seeking to get people to arrive at the same place, Heaven, His methods were as numerous as the people, circumstances and situations He faced. The truth never

changed, but the way Jesus addressed the many conditions He encountered was forever changing. Is that not one of the main reasons we call Him the “Master Teacher”?

I realize that Jesus’ approach requires maturity and growth before a Christian would be able to go at personal evangelism in such a flexible way. I also know that the various program methods available can be helpful in getting us to a more confident, mature, flexible approach. However, I even more significantly know that we rarely give priority to the flexible teaching example of Christ. We speak of Christianity being a lifestyle, yet rarely see the obvious connection with evangelism being a lifestyle. We might go as far as to say that Christianity is God’s plan for evangelism.

Methods can sometimes get us in a rut. A thing that might help us to grow can, at times, actually become a crutch. Studies have shown that the most effective means of study is one person sitting across the table from another with an open Bible between them. Good, old fashioned Bible studies that use the Bible as the “equipment” most closely approximate the pattern of the New Testament. This approach takes more effort, but it offers a higher quality return on the investment. Let us learn from Jesus, the Master Teacher, about how we can be more flexible and personable in our teaching of others.

ACTS OR EPISTLES?

When it comes to learning about evangelism, we all know that the book to go to is Acts, right? I do not think so. I really do not think that Acts is where most Christians will learn the daily evangelism we are asking for in this study. Let us think about this together. Acts primarily deals with preachers preaching to crowds who are unbelievers, many of whom have never heard about Jesus. Few Christians will preach to crowds who do not know about Jesus. Few Christians are preachers. Not even many preachers commonly preach to crowds of unbelievers. As great as the book of Acts is, it does not major on the local congregations outreach into its community.

Additionally, Acts centers on the response of faith that adds a person to the church (Acts 2:47, etc.). Christians can use Acts to marvel at the early growth of the church, to show people how baptism is part of the response of faith in becoming a Christian, and to be encouraged at how God opens doors for the gospel. Christians, however, already know what to do to be saved—they have already done it. What we do not primarily learn from Acts, we do learn from the Epistles. In the Epistles we see how to live before a lost world.

It is the Epistles that develop the Christ-like emphasis we have been developing in this lesson. In the Epistles we learn of the daily walk of faith that is the expression most applicable to the average Christian. It is the character of life that both equips the "person on the pew," and presents opportunities for them to speak a good word for Jesus.

The verse that most readily presents this idea, and therefore the verse I believe most perfectly represents the evangelism emphasis of the Epistles is I Peter 3:15. This verse reads, "But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence."

First Peter 3:15 shows that it is the responsibility of every Christian to be able to defend their hope in the Lord. The context of this verse shows that such a defense may be required in front of those who are hostile to Christianity (vv. 13-14 and 16). Most brethren today state that they just cannot teach others. Inspiration says we must acquire that ability and that our ability must be able to function in adverse circumstances. We need to give more attention to God and less time for excuses. We need to practice New Testament evangelism.

To reinforce the point about personal responsibility, let us have a look at Hebrews 5:11-14: "Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing." This passage pointedly reveals that Christians are to become able to teach within a certain reasonable amount of time. We are to progress from babes in Christ to mature, capable Christians (Eph. 4:14-15; I Pet. 2:1-2). No Christian is exempt, all are to "proclaim the excellencies" of God (I Pet. 2:9). But let us not forget another element of our key text, I Peter 3:21. The key of this key text is, "but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts."

It is the very process of our personal transformation into mature Christ-likeness that readies us and prepares us for evangelism in the biblical way. The Scriptures know of no shortcut. There is no method, or apparatus, or machinery that will ready us God's way. It is Christ that transforms us into useful servants as we are conformed to His image. We do not need to be browbeaten, put on a guilt trip, worked into an emotional frenzy, intimidated, frightened or any other such coercive activity to get us to behave like Jesus. If we have in fact come to be like Jesus, proper behavior will be present. It is the natural way of being our Christ-like selves that is the most powerful, personal ingredient in evangelism.

NATURALNESS AND PRACTICALITY

There are two books I have encountered that have put into words some of the biblical principles I have been discussing. One is a book by Rebecka Manly Pippert called Out of the Salt Shaker which emphasizes the naturalness of effective evangelism. The other is Living Proof by Jim Petersen that gives practical understandings to the application of biblical principles. Both books are written by people in denominations, so there are aspects of both that I cannot endorse. Nevertheless, I have found both to be helpful in offering practical suggestions for personal evangelism.

Concerning the “naturalness” of evangelism, Pippert rather humorously shows how many people feel that evangelism is not something friends do to friends. She speaks of the unnatural, contrived, and manipulative tactics that many use to evangelize. These things only make people look weird and unnatural, hardly an engaging combination of characteristics for doing the work of Jesus.

Petersen develops the practical side of things and comes up with a very helpful concept he refers to as “mini decisions.” Petersen may logically and biblically show that people who make a commitment to Christ are most usually people who have made several smaller steps in that direction before they make the last big step. His list of “mini decisions” are instructive:

1. He's okay.
2. I'd like to get to know him better. I feel comfortable with him.
3. He accepts me.
4. I'm going to find out why he's so different.
5. It seems that he gets his outlook on things from the Bible.
6. He's a Christian, but he's okay.
7. Being a Christian sure has its advantages.
8. I like his friends. I envy their confidence.
9. It might be interesting to look at the Bible someday.

And then there are more mini-decisions:

Once the non-Christian has begun to examine the Bible with us, we can expect a new series of mini-decisions to occur. We might expect him to say, for example:

1. The Bible isn't impossible to understand after all!
2. The Bible says some important things.
3. What the Bible says about life fits my experience.
4. Jesus seems to be the key. I wonder who He really was.
5. Jesus is God.
6. I need to do what He says.

7. I will believe in him.

These steps well illustrate how daily decisions lead others toward Bible studies and beyond. By looking back at Jesus and His ministry I believe we will be able to see people going through a variety of individual steps on the way to making a final step of commitment. I believe we can also see in the Parable of the Sower that people's hearts are at different places of development and that most are not ready the first time they hear the gospel to do something about it.

Petersen also develops another useful way of describing a very biblical aspect of evangelism. He shows how evangelists like Paul would go about preaching the gospel and establishing congregations. He likens those congregations to "beachheads." From those "beachheads" Christians would be brought to maturity and then would move out into the surrounding world to win victories for Jesus. The victories would come through the vehicle of their consecrated lives as they demonstrate the sanctification of Christ in their hearts (cf. Acts 8:4).

One last author, a brother in Christ, Flavil Yeakly, has contributed much to the practical application of Bible principles to evangelism. His statistical work has well illustrated a variety of important biblical teachings. Among them:

1. People feel most comfortable and respond most favorably and lastingly to a friendly Bible study where the Bible is the only tool.
2. Manipulative methods lead to resentment and dropouts.
3. Mere transmission of facts leads to little or nothing.
4. A study between friends accomplishes more in the long run than any other approach.
5. Growing churches emphasize the personal, friendship aspects of evangelistic methods.
6. Stagnant churches do little besides give out information in an impersonal manner.
7. Some of the churches that seem to be growing really aren't because they have high dropout rates due to their use of manipulative methods.

CONCLUSION

Brethren, the need for evangelism is great, but evangelism needs to be understood by first listening to God. The slower, less sensational way of the New Testament is to be chosen over a supposed quick fix that comes from mere men. We of all people, who

stand for a pattern theology, we should make every effort to get back to the Bible to learn the old way of evangelism.

“Thus says the Lord, ‘Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it’” (Jer. 6:16a).