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Evangelism: Replacing Custom with Christian Character

Evangelism. Even the thought tightens the muscles in the throat and neck! Talk about raising theological blood pressure. Few subjects can compare to evangelism—for producing reactions ranging from terror to triumph.

In some respects, maybe this is appropriate. But if there is to be a pressure, let's make it a biblical pressure. Then, at least, we are working with the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, rather than at cross-purposes with Him, and the best purposes of the Kingdom.

The starting point of this matter is the following: evangelism is not something we do, but something we are! The confusion comes with the mix and match of passages that are used in various circles to apply to believers' lives in indiscriminate manner. The result: too often we translate Christian obligation into a doing rather than a being kind of behavior.

CHRISTIAN CUSTOM: ERROR GROWN OLD

As early as the third century, it was said that *custom without truth is error grown old*.¹ Christian custom is somewhat like the old

family horse on the farm: it once served a purpose—to the best of our memory. But now its just there—and we are not sure whether we should shoe it, or shoot it.

But custom without truth should be shot—carefully. The reason why we do things is as important as the things we do! This has been apparent for some time:

There is not a little in our modern Church order and practice that has no Scriptural warrant. Yet, because it has long been the custom, it is accepted without question as an essential part of divine order.²

What exactly is evangelism, or who is it that are the evangelists? Is evangelism part of the *status quo*, the conservative, the bourgeois, the dull?³ Is there anything good about “the good news”?

Answers to these questions, as well as reasons why we bow to custom and tradition rather than the Scriptures, comes from first identifying the obstacles to true evangelism for the church, and then, identifying the normative patterns for the saints.

OBSTACLE ONE: A CHRISTIAN WALK WITHOUT THE WORK

The Christian life, or walk, is full of fear and faith. It involves everything we are as well as everything we own. It requires candor in relation to personal sin, and confession in relation to fellowship—with God, and with each other (cf. 1 John 1:5-10; Matt 5:21-26).

Coupled with this bittersweet mix is the reality of the obligations that come with being partakers of the divine (2 Pet 1:3-11). It is an obligation to right living, and to being representative ambassadors to the unsaved—to whom we will either smell sweet like life itself, or stink like the grave and death (2 Cor 2:14-16).

Herein is the classic conflict when considering the subject of evangelism: we are jointly concerned about ourselves—our walk,

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and others—that is, their need for Christ. How can we maintain the enthusiastic balance for both ourselves, and the world? How can we be part of a church that is concerned both for its growth and maturity, and for needs outside the holy huddle?

The answer begins with the Christian life of the individual leaders and believers in the assembly. As we have seen, justification by faith begins our spiritual pilgrimage, and this “not of works.” But upon conversion, the work begins. The warfare between the Spirit and the flesh is constant, and the desire and obligation to the Kingdom is opposed by the invisible powers that “struggle not against flesh and blood” (cf. Gal 5:17; Eph 6:10-12).

In this light, if we cannot produce it, we cannot export it! What is not available as a resource is equally unavailable to share with others. For the church, God’s intent is for a mutual ministry of “one another” relationships that hold up the Word as the standard, and each other as co-laborers in God’s field. If, either individually or corporately, it is *not* working at home, then it would naturally follow that it would *not* supernaturally follow!

This, then, is the first reason we do not share our faith. It is because we are not experiencing the realities of fellowship with God, and dealing honestly with our sin. The result is that as reality fades on the vertical plane, it follows similarly in horizontal relationships.

As long as Christians, and churches, misunderstand the spiritual life, then the battle gets the best of them. The Scripture talks about the spiritual life as a series of hard choices—as work as well as a walk (cf. Jam 1:2-18; Heb 6:9-12).

It is the sober-minded, courageous decision to believe God at His Word, and trust Him for results that may or may not have “good” results—in the physical and visible sense. If a saint refuses to do battle at that level—the level of the Word of God, and the intent of the Spirit of God to produce obedience to Him, and service for others—then this walk without the work will never issue in good works—including the work of evangelism.

Conversely, understanding the nature of our walk, and the work

of that walk, will provide the building blocks for a congregation committed to exporting what is produced.

OBSTACLE TWO: A CHURCH FLOCK THAT FORGETS THE FOCUS

This leads directly to a second reason the church lays dormant in matters of evangelism. All too typically, we have our vision blurred about the purpose of the church as it gathers.

The Scripture uses the term translated “building” or “building up” with careful precision in the New Testament. This term has nothing to do with numerical growth, but rather speaks of maturity and good works—of matters of Christian character and community.⁴ The only buildings known in the New Testament, to which the concern is building, are buildings of flesh and blood—of believers “as living stones” (1 Pet 2:5). Further, the Scripture uses the word translated “equip”, “prepare” or “put in order” as a service for the saints—provided by godly leaders, and by the Great Shepherd Himself (cf. Heb 13:17-21).

Putting together these two concepts—in the same passage—we see the remarkable standard for the church which understands the proper relationship of leaders and believers:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up (Eph 4:11-12).

The purpose for the church as it comes together as the people of God is for the building up of the saints—for the preparing, or putting in order in a way that maintains a proper relationship to the Head, and to His Body.

If this is true, then the natural—dare we say spontaneous—result will be exports—or evangelism.

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Then how have we come to the custom, or tradition, of seeing the Sunday meeting as a time for evangelism? Consider the following observations as suggestions: “in a church crowd this large there must be some unbelievers!” Or: “where could this person better hear a clear gospel presentation than at church!” In this context, our pastors become prophets become preachers become evangelists. As a result, the believers are explicitly or implicitly encouraged to bring unbelieving acquaintances to the meeting (to church!) so that the preacher can get them saved.⁵

Even with the best of motivations for the unsaved, this results in trying to do two things well, and ending up doing neither the best. The purpose for the church when gathering together is confused, and the natural contexts for developing relationships with the unbeliever is ignored, or de-emphasized.

Another way to see the proper emphasis is to look at what the book of Acts calls *favor-evangelism* in the life of the early church:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer....They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:42, 46b-47).

While there is some discussion as to who “all the people” are in this context, it is safe to say that the relationships of these believers—both younger, and older in the Lord—was of such an enthusiastic nature—again, with God, and with each other—that the gospel, and evangelism, and salvation, expanded in concentric circles into regions in and around Jerusalem.

Just as a rock thrown into a pond causes an expanding ripple in on the surface of the water, so the enthusiasm and devotion of these believers as they gathered together caused an expanding *favor*

kind of an evangelism in their neighborhoods and communities. As the realities of grace, and the need for seeing everything that we are and have as belonging to God more than to us, then this kind of a supernatural perspective began to reach into the homes and lives of those who were not part of the Kingdom.

This kind of a vision does both things well: it understands the reason for the church as it gathers, and it accepts the believers' responsibility for evangelism as we scatter into areas where everyone lives and works. It maintains a focus that guards against a nearsightedness—which ignores the needs of the world, or a blindness—which is unaware.

OBSTACLE THREE: A CHRISTIAN TALK THAT TRAINS BY TECHNIQUE

For a moment, we will tread strongly on holy ground—in this regard. Since the late 1800's, the evangelical tradition in America—called for many years *fundamentalism*—was born and bred in the incubator and hot house of revivals, prophecy conferences, and strong pulpiteers.⁶ All, to-a-point, were good, and served evangelicalism well as we faced the hamstringing effects of Liberalism, and the School of Higher Criticism.

But, again without careful discrimination, we have assumed that because some good came out of former activity or custom, ipso facto, it becomes valid today. But it has already been observed that if we cannot join custom or tradition with truth, then it becomes error grown old.

When we talk about church evangelism today, we think of evangelistic programs, or campaigns. But the pattern of the New Testament church evidences evangelistic campaigns as conspicuous by their absence!⁷ Evangelistic campaigns or programs rely on the pastor as promoter, and force the believers into unnatural contexts where issues of acquaintance, relationship and friendship are ignored—or worse, feigned—for the goal of *getting folks saved*.

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Something like slick used car salesmen, we take pretend surveys, or ask leading questions, or manipulate home visits—all for the goal, and hence justification, of *getting folks saved*.

We can do better as a Church. The attendant problems with this perspective are an overemphasis on church leaders, an unrealistic responsibility for the individual believers in the assembly, and the spending of great amounts of time and money on suspect ethical behavior and minimal results.⁸

A further problem that develops when we talk of technique has to do with understanding our place in relation to God. When you attend classes or conferences on evangelism, a growing part of these meetings deals with cultural strategy. That is, in the mode of Paul's statement: "I have become all things to all men" (cf. 1 Cor 9:15-23), we take the rightful emphasis off of "become all things" and place it too much on "I". In other words, we need to also remember—what is too often (again) assumed, ignored, and in some cases denied—that the apostle also wrote that some plant, and others water, but *God gives the growth* (cf. 1 Cor 3:5-9). A responsibility is ours, but the ultimate work—and our confidence—is with the Master of the field.

For evangelistic programs and campaigns, leaders take on too much responsibility, and believers in the assembly too little. With an emphasis on cultural strategy or technique, the result can be that we take more credit than the work justifies. In both cases, for the church, there is a better—in the sense of normative—idea.

CHRISTIAN CHARACTER: EVANGELISM BY LIFE AND WORD

Christian leadership is influence. But it influence by example, or leading through serving. It includes behavior that inspires confidence and courage. But what is the proper context for this fearless faith?

Remembering that evangelism is not what we do, but what

we are, we find that thinking in this area is confused by looking at the wrong ministry models in the New Testament. To be sure, God used evangelists and heralds to build His Church. Such was the case with Paul, and probably the case with Priscilla, Aquila, Apollos—and possibly Timothy. But citing these men and women alone as justification for current custom is, in our judgment, insufficient proof for ministry habits and practices.⁹

As we have noted, the early church expanded *favorably* (cf. Acts 2:42-47), and God used this context for adding converts to the church. The New Testament model—normative model—for the church was not the pulpit, the *survey* or special programs.¹⁰ Rather, it was the life, and lip, of each believer in the church:

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone (Col 4:5-6).

Here the Scriptures follow-up the Acts emphasis with what can be called normative evangelism. It is the sharing of the gospel by the way we live, and the things we say.

The first requirement is wisdom—that is, skillful living. This assumes a friendship or relationship with these outsiders. If we only see our neighbors as we drive past their homes, we have little or no opportunity to display a life of wisdom.¹¹

Therefore, a friendship relationship with the unbeliever is a basic requisite of New Testament evangelism. Rather than something akin to *hit-and-run*, this might be more of a *care-share-care* kind of a relationship. As relationships develop, there is a natural forum for dealing with the small and great realities of life. This is the broader dimensions of “making disciples” (cf. Matt 28:18-20) as it applies to loving my neighbor (cf. Luke 10:25-37; Gal 6:10) as either a believer or an un-believer.¹² Then, as God allows, as that friend of neighbor believes in Christ, there is a continuing context

for nurture and encouragement in the Faith.

General statistics suggest that 90% of all Christians do not have unbelievers they would consider as friends, and 95% of all Christians have never lead a person to a saving knowledge of Christ.¹³ It seems obvious to us that superficial relationships with unbelievers provide very limited opportunities for being wise in the way we act toward outsiders.

Currently, John and his family are involved in a 4-H horse club. One of the fathers in the club has talked John into fulfilling a long time life-goal: driving a pooper-scooper in the local country parade! Talk about going the extra mile. But, interestingly, the relationship has moved from common interests in daughters and family to work and recreation, and now to issues concerning the Church. And this father is asking the questions—John is simply trying to be a good friend, and provide accurate answers that match the interest and questions. Friendships provide natural contexts for depositing the supernatural!

Additionally, this text establishes that we need to do more than simply befriend the unbeliever who lives or works near us. We also need to provide gracious, “salted” conversation which ultimately reflects good answers to questions *as they are asked* (cf. 1 Pet 3:15) by these unbelieving friends and neighbors. We need to know the basics concerning the Person and work of Christ, and be able to verbally communicate that in a way that is gracious and respectful (cf. Jam 3:9-13).

Therefore, it matters greatly both what we say, and how we say it. It is not enough to just live a life before the unbeliever. Equally, it is insufficient to simply speak the truth without an equal commitment to respect and wisdom in matters of relationships and friendships. The indispensable balance is for a godly commitment and blend of lip and life—of the oral and moral—in a way that makes the most of each relationship as an opportunity to open a door to the gospel.

Use it or lose it—as the saying goes.

**EVANGELISM: SPONTANEOUS,
AND SUPERNATURAL**

When confused, nothing clears the fog faster than the basics. Vince Lombardi, the late great coach from Green Bay, was fond of saying:

Ok, we go back to the basics this morning. Gentlemen, this is a football!

Talk about the basics! But, similarly, maybe when we talk about evangelism, we should say: “Gentlemen, this is a church!”

Custom has replaced truth to that degree. While one might decide to consider a broad range of evangelism theory and strategy as an *exception* to the rule, the *rule* of evangelism is a relational favor that develops common ground of interest and concern from which we have opportunity to live and speak (in that order!) of our Savior and Lord.

This is, first and foremost, what believers are to think when they consider the subject of evangelism. If this is believed and lived in our churches, then those sad statistics will start to change, and folks will flinch less when the subject of evangelism is raised. Normative evangelism will happen spontaneously—because of the walk and talk of the flock. The Kingdom of God will expand as more hands go to the plow.

And maybe parades will not lack for sanctified scoopers.