

## EVANGELIZING THE COMMUNITY

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*As the church strives to fulfill the Great Commission of taking the gospel to the world, it must not fail its mission to the local community. For the church to effectively evangelize the community, it must be reminded of its mission, it must re-examine its message, it must have the right motives for evangelism, and it must use appropriate methods for evangelism. The Great Commission is all encompassing, beginning with our communities and extending to the ends of the earth. Failure at the home front is not an option.*

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The world's population is rapidly approaching seven billion inhabitants. The church's mandate is to reach these seven billion people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Most of these billions live outside the perimeter of the American church, and thus the church has been keenly focused on missions and reaching cross-culturally to the regions beyond. Personal and financial resources are devoted in great measure to foreign missions, and rightfully so.

Yet in the midst of the clarion call to world evangelization, there remains the continual challenge to reach the communities in which the mother church is located. The Great Commission as found in Acts 1:8 states: "And you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." The implication here is that evangelism should start with the people next door, with our communities. But with its emphasis upon "the remotest part of the earth" the church in the Western world is in danger of neglecting its own "Jerusalem." This is evident by the stagnation or decline of the Western church.

Even in America, the evangelical church has not kept pace with the growing population. There remains a desperate need for the church to be about the business of evangelizing its own community, communities which in many instances are changing demographically. Our communities are changing, growing older, and becoming ethnically diverse and pluralistic in religious outlook. In a seemingly post-Christian world, the church is becoming increasingly isolated and irrelevant. Time tested methods and practices of doing church no longer work. Yet the greater danger is the general apathy that has engulfed the average church in its mandate to evangelize the community.

The fact remains that the average church in America is not growing.

Most have reached a plateau or are in decline. The root cause for this decline is not always easy to identify. What becomes evident, however, is that many churches do not involve themselves in evangelism. Some churches have reacted against the idea of evangelism as the ongoing work of the church. Any discussion on church growth provokes a reaction from many leaders as a misguided emphasis on “nickels and noses” as the measure of church life. The reaction is so profound that many pride themselves in doing no evangelism, in making no effort at church growth with the result that the churches are languishing if not on the verge of death. Gary McIntosh reminds us of the true definition of church growth: “Originally the term church growth was coined to reference the results that could be expected from faithful disciple making. A congregation that wins people to Christ, assimilates the new converts in the local body, and then teaches them all that Christ commanded can expect to see church growth—numerical and spiritual”<sup>1</sup>

Every pastor and church leader should be concerned about the growth of the church on the home front, without neglecting our obligation to the lost in the other parts of the world. We need to pay close attention to the state of the church at home and its goal to reach its community for Christ. Even Charles Spurgeon criticized those in his day who made no effort to examine the loss of growth in their own assemblies. Spurgeon said,

I am not among those who decry statistics, nor do I consider that they are productive of all manner of evil; for they do much good if they are accurate, and if men use them lawfully. It is a good thing for people to see the nakedness of the land through statistics of decrease, that they may be driven on their knees before the Lord to seek prosperity; and, on the other hand, if it is by no means an evil thing for workers to be encouraged by having some account of results set before them. I should be very sorry if the practice of adding up, and deducting, and giving in the net result were to be abandoned, for it must be right to know our numerical condition.<sup>2</sup>

The evangelical church is also plagued by approaches to evangelism which prove ineffective in reaching our communities. There is a need to examine the methods that we use to see if they still are useful in evangelism, or if the church needs to alter or acquire different and more effective means of evangelism. Some churches call for decisions, but do not make disciples. Others target large audiences in an effort to have large numbers but they do not produce real believers. Then there is the perverted practice in America, being

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<sup>1</sup> Gary McIntosh, *Biblical Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 17.

transported to other parts of the world, of simply attracting the believers from other churches with well-produced worship services and programs. Transferring Christians from one church to another is not church growth.

In order for the church to effectively evangelize the community, it must be reminded of its mission, it must re-examine its message, it must have the right motives for evangelism, and it must use appropriate methods for evangelism. The Great Commission is all encompassing, beginning with our communities and extending to the ends of the earth. Failure at the home front is not an option.

### **The Mission of the Church: The Priority of Evangelizing the Community**

We can rightly say that *the mission of the church is to preach the gospel of Christ to all peoples in the power of the Holy Spirit beginning with our local communities and extending to the ends of the earth* (see Acts 1:8).

#### A Singular Mission: Preach the Gospel

It is well understood by now that missions is not the supreme purpose of the church; promoting the glory of God is the church's overarching purpose. Evangelism exists because worshipers do not. Hence we are given the command to go out and make disciples of all the nations. That is by means of the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16). The apostles taught the early church that the proclamation of the gospel was the main mission; all else was secondary (Acts 6:1–4).

#### A Supreme Mission: Commanded by Our Lord

Evangelism in many circles is seen as an optional task, only to be done if one has spare time and money. Some read the Great Commission as a “Great Suggestion” uttered by our Lord. Examine the average pastor's daily schedule and you will notice quickly that very little of his time is devoted to doing personal evangelism or in leading his church in some evangelistic effort. Not only is this pathetic in light of his church's decline, but also it is stark disobedience to a command uttered by our Lord in more than one instance. John Seamands reminds us,

Missions constitute the primary work of the Church, the work for which the Church was commissioned by the Lord. The missionary movement is not simply a desirable thing for the Church to carry forward, but it is its chief and most important undertaking. It is the

reason for the existence of the Church and should be made a controlling purpose in the life of the members.<sup>3</sup>

We dare not be disobedient to the commission.

#### An All-Encompassing Mission: Everyone Is to Do It

There are some who see the Great Commission as an apostolic commission, that is, something to be carried out exclusively by the apostles of the first century. Others teach that evangelism should be done by those who have the “gift of evangelism,” which they say is usually around ten percent of the church membership. Still others insist that we ought never make anyone feel guilty about evangelism and that only those who have a natural disposition to share should do so. All this flies in the face of Scripture, which insists that the command is given to the church, and thus implies that every believer should be involved in evangelism of some sort. In his book, *The Heart of Evangelism*, Jerram Barrs asserts, “From this brief study of a few passages in Acts it is clear that the apostles and the whole church understood that the command to reach out with the gospel was not for the apostles only but was for the entire church of that day. It was also a command not only for that day, but for everyday in the life of the generations of believers to come.”<sup>4</sup>

#### A God-Empowered Mission: In the Power of the Spirit

The opening chapter of Acts reveals a number of foundational principles for the church. First, the church was to focus on its establishment rather than the Lord’s restoration of the kingdom. It was also told to wait for the special endowment of the Spirit of God before embarking on the greatest task of all time. Such a Great Commission requires great empowerment. Evangelism is not a human effort; it is a divine activity and hence demands divine empowerment. Effective evangelism can only be done when it is done in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit empowers. The Spirit leads. The Spirit draws. The Spirit regenerates. And the Spirit places into the church. Hence, the average believer is more than capable of becoming an effective witness to his community.

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<sup>3</sup> John T. Seamands, *The Supreme Task of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 47.

<sup>4</sup> Jerram Barrs, *The Heart of Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2001), 37.

### An Extensive Mission: To the Ends of the Earth (to Every Creature)

A soft drink company has the goal of placing a bottle of its drink in the hands of every human being on this planet. The church also has the same goal—that every human being hear the gospel at least once in his or her lifetime. The same goes for the people of our community. The church is there to be a witness to every resident of that community. We are not authorized to market the church to a particular niche in society, or to be exclusive in our witnessing. We are to see that every citizen in our community hears the gospel and is provided with an opportunity to place faith in the saving message. Our motto needs to be—if it looks human, evangelize it.

### The Message of the Church

The lack of effective evangelism in the local church can often be traced to the anemic message preached by the average congregation. The gospel that is preached by these churches does not contain enough redemptive content to save a soul from eternal damnation. The true message of salvation is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe, as related to us in Rom 1:16–17. Spurgeon reminds us: “To try to win a soul for Christ by keeping that soul in ignorance of any truth, is contrary to the mind of the Spirit; and to endeavour to save men by mere claptrap, or excitement, or oratorical display, is as foolish as to hope to hold an angel with bird-lime, or lure a star with music. The best attraction is the gospel in its purity. The weapon with which the Lord conquers men is the truth as it is in Jesus.”<sup>5</sup>

John MacArthur asserts,

But the gospel is not a message that can be capsulated, abridged, and shrink-wrapped, then offered as a generic remedy for every kind of sinner. Ignorant sinners need to be instructed about who God is and why He has the right to demand their obedience. Self-righteous sinners need to have their sin exposed by the demands of God’s law. Careless sinners need to be confronted with the reality of God’s impending judgment. Fearful sinners need to hear that God in His mercy has provided a way of deliverance. All sinners must understand how utterly holy God is. They must comprehend the basic truths of Christ’s sacrificial death and the triumph of His resurrection. They need to be confronted with God’s demand that they turn from their sin to embrace Christ as Lord and Savior.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> John MacArthur, *Evangelism: How to Share the Gospel Faithfully* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 152.

Among the key elements of the message of the church which needs to be proclaimed to its community are the following:

The Gospel Is about the Uniqueness of Christ (Acts 2:22–36)

The gospel is about declaring the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ, who is both Creator and Savior of the world. He died for sins, and was raised from the dead, is also ascended to the right hand of the Father, and will return again to judge both the living and the dead.

The Gospel Is about the Universal Perdition of Mankind (Acts 2:40)

The gospel is about declaring the universal need for salvation that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23), that man is so utterly ruined and that no one is excluded from the sentence of condemnation.

The Gospel Is about the Atoning Work of Christ for Mankind (Acts 4:12; 10:43)

It is about the vicarious death of Christ for mankind, the only payment of the sins of the world through the atoning work of Christ. There is no other means by which mankind can be saved from sin apart from the death of Christ. Christ is the only way of salvation (John 14:6).

The Gospel Is about the Eternal Consequences of Sin (Acts 17:30–31)

It declares man to be guilty of eternal damnation due to man's sin, and if man chooses to reject the provision made in Christ for sin, there is no hope for man, but a certain expectation of judgment and eternal damnation. MacArthur warns: “Hell is physical pain, loneliness, darkness that accentuates fear, regret, separation from God, and the absence of a second chance. God sends us as His ambassadors to beg people to be reconciled to Him. Do not be misled; the reality of hell is essential to preaching the gospel message.”<sup>7</sup>

The Gospel Is about Repentance and Faith in Christ (Acts 2:38; 20:21)

It demands that man repent from sin, and trust in Christ's atoning work for the salvation from sin and damnation. Repentance means to turn from sin and to turn to Christ in saving faith. A gospel that does not demand change and produces no transformation is no gospel at all.

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<sup>7</sup> MacArthur, *Evangelism*, 116.

The Gospel Is about a Clear Call to Union with Christ and with His Church (Acts 2:38–42)

It expects man to place his faith in Christ and thus be brought into union with the living Christ, and to express that faith through the waters of baptism and visible union with the visible church, the Body of Christ. This is why effective evangelism results in church growth, both numerical and spiritual growth.

The evangelical church in America needs to re-examine its message in light of its effectiveness in reaching the community for Christ. It may have abandoned its biblical message for a set of programs or rituals that ensure a crowd but do not really produce a church; it attracts seekers but does not produce converts to Christ.

### **The Motives for Evangelizing the Community**

Whenever the church is awakened to the need to evangelize its community, it must be careful that it is engaging the task with the right motives. In some cases the church is awakened to its need because it needs more money, or there is a need to fund larger buildings or programs. Sometimes even the social needs of the community become the driving reason for evangelism. As noble as this can be, it should not be the main motive for reaching our community for Christ. Impure motives or less than lofty motives will soon affect our zeal for the lost. Our declining churches should point us to the lack of effectiveness in reaching our communities, but they should not point us to a self-promoting attitude in evangelism. What should our motives be?

Evangelism is to be done out of a love for Christ (2 Cor 5:14ff). Our great love for Christ is the greatest motivation for obedience. We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). Often, guilt becomes the great motivator in evangelism, which proves to be short lived. But if love for Christ becomes our great motive for evangelism, then zeal for Christ should never wane. The early church was moved by the great love of Christ. Michael Green writes,

There can be little doubt that the main motive for evangelism was a theological one. These men did not spread their message because it was advisable for them to do so, nor because it was the socially responsible thing to do. They did not do it primarily for humanitarian or agathistic utilitarian reasons. They did it because of the overwhelming experience of the love of God which they had received through Jesus Christ. The discovery that the ultimate force in the universe was love, and that this love had stopped to the very nadir of self-abasement for human good, had an effect on those who believed it which nothing could remove.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 236.

Other reasons for evangelism include a deep compassion for the lost (2 Cor 5:11ff and Acts 20:19, 31). The idea that people are lost and on their way to destruction should prompt us to share the good news of salvation to our neighbors. Both our Lord and the apostle Paul wept over the souls of men. We should do no less. In addition, we should evangelize because of the truth of the gospel. We preach a message of eternal truth (Acts 4:19–20; 1 John 1:1–4). It is the veracity of the message that impels us to preach it. The apostle Paul also reminds us that we are under obligation to evangelize (1 Cor 9:16–17; Acts 26:15–23). The preaching of the gospel is a stewardship entrusted to us. We dare not be poor stewards of this grand design for the souls of mankind.

If these are the grand motives that prompt the church to evangelize its community, then we can expect God to bless these efforts, as He did in the early church. Armed with the correct motives, our zeal for the lost should never wane. Lesser motives are used for more temporal goals; the loftier motives produce eternal results.

### **The Methods for Evangelizing the Community**

Although the message never changes, methods do. Indeed, in an ever-changing world, the church needs to remain vigilant and creative in its efforts to reach the hearts of people with the gospel. The church is always in search of proven methods that result in effective evangelism. A close examination of the New Testament will reveal some proven methods used then that are still being used today to reach our communities for Christ. Then there are new methods which have arisen in our modern technological age and which have had some success. Let's examine some of these.

#### **New Testament Methods**

A causal reading of the Book of Acts reveals various means by which the early church sought to evangelize its world. Most of these had some success in producing disciples and can be modified in some way to become effective tools today.

##### *Temple Evangelism*

The Book of Acts reveals that the early disciples preached the gospel in the temple where many religious people were gathered, and they did so with much success (Acts 5:42). They also made use of the synagogues and places of prayer (Acts 13:14; 16:13). The implication is that wherever people are gathered to address God is a place to start preaching the gospel. Although the church worship time is primarily an hour devoted to believers, in the modern era it is also the time when many unbelievers go to church. Hence, it is only natural to use the worship services and Sunday gatherings to preach the gospel to the

unbelievers. Even the New Testament church was careful to acknowledge the unbeliever in their midst (see 1 Cor 14:23–24).

### *House to House*

Acts 5:42 relates how the early Christians preached the gospel in the homes. This could either refer to house meetings, or door-to-door evangelism. In any case, it involved believers purposely targeting the homes of people as a means of presenting Christ to the lost (Acts 20:20 and compare with 10:24ff.). Although door-to-door evangelism is sometimes impossible to do in our segregated and gated communities, the use of homes as a means of sharing Christ is very promising. Evangelistic home Bible studies are a great evangelistic tool among people who know one another. In addition, we must never abandon the door-to-door approach as a last resort. Every merchant knows that this is also their last resort in selling their products and services.

### *Public Preaching*

According to Acts 20:20 and the opening chapters of Acts, we see the early Christians engaged in what we call “open air” preaching. People accustomed to a public exchange of ideas can be clearly addressed in open air preaching. Many today yearn for the days of Whitefield and Wesley when the open air approach was used effectively. Such days may be in the past for many communities, but the church must be prepared to avail itself of this approach if the occasion arises.

### *Personal Evangelism*

There is no doubt that much evangelism in the early church was done one to one (Acts 7:1; 8:26ff; 11:19–21). The classic case of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch provides a glimpse into the personal work of the early evangelists. People in our churches need to be taught the art of personal evangelism. Many believers cannot evangelize because they have not been taught to do so. Churches need to establish evangelism classes to teach believers how to evangelize their neighbors.

### *Public Forums*

The encounter of Paul with the Athenians provides a glimpse into the great opening that public forums provide for the preaching of the gospel (Acts 17:22ff). Most communities have public places where speeches can be made, where ideas can be shared, where presentations can be made to the public. Churches need to learn how to address their communities through these public forums.

### *Jails and Schools*

The early Christians made use of imprisonments as an avenue for sharing the gospel (Acts 16:23ff; 28:30–31). In short, a Christian who preaches in prison has a captive audience. The church today often makes good use of

prison ministries, of going to prisons for the sake of presenting the gospel. Many prisons welcome this type of activity. Also, the public schools can become places for sharing the faith (Acts 19:9–10). The church at Ephesus made good use of school buildings for the spread of the gospel. Our secular universities are great forums for this type of interchange of ideas. Many schools allow for the use of their facilities for religious purposes and can be put to good use for gospel preaching.

The early church also made use of the printed page for evangelistic purposes (see John 20:30–31; Acts 1:1), along with banquets (Mathew 9:10ff). As with Christ, the early church used benevolent activities to create receptive hearts to the gospel (cp. Acts 3:1ff). Hence, any effort to alleviate the hurts of the community can be used as an opportunity for the spread of the Gospel.

### Contemporary Methods

The danger when reviewing the methods used in the New Testament is that we may read the contents as being prescriptive rather than descriptive. The New Testament shows us what the early church used with great success. It suggests that we can do the same. However, it does not limit us to those methods alone. We have freedom to use other means by which we can present the gospel to our world today. Some means exist today which were not even dreamed of in the early church. The church has a plethora of modern means of technology such as films, CDs, television, radio, telephone, the internet and all its forms of e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, etc. Some make good use of the Christian school movement, coffee houses, sports evangelism, and even Christian counseling centers.

The church must always stay fluid in its approach to evangelism. It must never compromise the message to make the church acceptable in the community. The message never changes, but methods do. Our approach to evangelism should be to find a way for our community to hear the glorious gospel of our Savior. If our methods fail in helping us communicate the gospel, we must look for other more effective means.

### Conclusion

The church's mandate to evangelism begins in "Jerusalem," that is, in the city in which the church is located. We must seek to win our community to Christ by whatever means and methods are at our disposal. Disobedience is not an option. Let us consider further, for the sake of these souls, that failure is also not an option.