

The Church and Evangelism

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There is a desire in the heart of every child of God for every other person on the face of the earth to come into Christ, that we all may enjoy the riches of God's love together. This is true because it is the heart of God Himself. *"The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance"* (2 Peter 3:9). Paul was so concerned about the lost that he said he wished that he himself were accursed, if it would result in the salvation of his brethren in Israel. Every man may have a different grace in fulfilling the burden, but to the degree we have allowed God's love to possess our hearts, every Christian will have the same burden. It is impossible that a person who is abiding in Christ would not have a burden for the lost.

So the question before us is not whether we are concerned about the lost, but how this burden is to be fulfilled. Some have allowed this burden to become the entire focus of their lives to the exclusion of everything else. The heart of God and His overall plan are revealed in the high priestly prayer of our Lord Jesus, recorded for us in John 17. The goal revealed there is that we may become one with God and thus one with each other for all eternity. To enter into this plan, sinners must be converted and brought into Jesus. But this is not the end, but rather the beginning of knowing God. Considering the overall plan of God, we see that God's goal is not only that sinners would be saved, but that all may *know* Him together.

Simply put, our goal must be God himself, not evangelism. If our focus is God and we are experiencing Him, it is impossible that we will not be properly concerned about the lost. However, if our focus is evangelism, it is possible that we will try to carry out the burden in our own wisdom and strength and miss God himself. To say it another way, evangelism is always found in the plan of God, but God may not always be found in a plan for evangelism.

The Purpose of God in the Church

If we consider the ultimate purpose of God, I believe we can see that God wants to bring us into eternal fellowship with Himself. How that works out in eternity may be dim to us at the moment, for we can only see "in a mirror dimly," but it is very clear that at this time, this fellowship has its fullest expression in the church. It is there that we together experience the depth of God's love. Not only that, but in the church God has made every provision for building up each member to a place of maturity. All of the grace gifts of God contribute towards this goal in the structure of the church. The gifts of the Holy Spirit also function primarily in the church, expressing the presence of God in reality. The focal point of God's working in our time is His people gathering in His presence, meeting with God and having spiritual intercourse with Him together.

For a person to enter into fellowship with God with other members of the body of Christ, he must first repent from sin and then be made alive unto God by the Spirit. Only living stones may be built into this house. This is a personal dealing between an individual and God. The church is not a place for unregenerate men and women. Paul makes it clear in I Cor. 14:22-25 that an unbeliever may visit and be touched as he senses the presence of God. But the church is the bride of Christ, and the focus of the gathering of the church is not sinners, but God.

We find no place in scripture, either by teaching or by example, to justify the common practice of "inviting people to church" in the hope that they will come to salvation there. In fact, if we see more clearly the nature and purpose of the church, I believe we will do the opposite. To bring casually interested persons into the meeting of the church can actually dampen the Spirit and restrict what God wants to do. Light cannot have fellowship with darkness. This does not mean that one who is sincerely looking for God cannot come and meet God in the midst of the gathering, but this is quite different from inviting multitudes to "come to church" to be saved.

These practices often prevail because of an inadequate revelation of what the church is. The church is often seen as an organization to facilitate various functions. The focus is often on buildings and programs, with the belief that these give visibility and a testimony to the world. But nowhere in scripture do we find that God intended for a building to be the focus of our witness. The witness should be the lives of saints lived out in the world. *"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth"* (Acts 1:8). This requires a real and personal relationship with Jesus, and one of the main purposes of the church is to nourish this relationship in every member.

For various reasons, many gatherings find themselves with a core of committed believers (maybe 20%), with the remainder only "nominal Christians." (But of course there is no such thing as a "nominal Christian." We are either in Christ or not.) The reason the crowds are there may vary, but it is usually because something other than Christ has been used to draw them in. Some common reasons are music, social activities, a common culture or language, a gifted speaker, or a special cause (such as missions). These and other things appeal to the natural man, and when done in the context of Christianity, they can seem appealing and noteworthy. Because of this, the focus of the meetings is often toward the 80%, trying to bring them to a greater commitment, and the building up of the believers is too often neglected.

If we carefully consider the account of the early church and the teaching of the epistles, I daresay we will not find any of these things. The saints of early times gathered for one reason: they had come into a living relationship with Christ by the Spirit. Only Jesus was held before them, and those who did not want Jesus did not associate with the church. (In fact, even though the early believers were held in high esteem for their integrity and good works, unbelievers feared to join them.) The promise of the Lord himself is that where two or three are gathered together in His name, He will be in the midst of them. That puts no emphasis on numbers, and there is nothing to draw but God himself. This is the nature of the church, both then and now. Under the leading of the Spirit, there will be other types of meetings to reach out to the lost, but these are not gatherings of the church.

Brethren, let us be convinced of these truths. If they do not seem clear, let us search the scriptures again with open hearts and minds and allow God to show us the true nature of the church. Only as we see this by revelation, being willing to accept the truth laid out for us by God in the scriptures, will we be able to deal properly with the subject of evangelism.

The Responsibility of Every Member

If we consider the overall plan of God, I believe we can say that God's method in all things (not just evangelism) is to use men filled with the Holy Spirit. Whether in the church or outside the church, we see solid teaching in the epistles and examples in the book of Acts to back up this sweeping statement. By contrast, God's method is *not* man's organization or human planning. No new ideas or methods for attracting souls to Christ are needed. Search the scriptures from Genesis to Revelation, and all we see is the power of God at work through men who willingly yielded to His control and allowed God to use them as He saw fit. Is there any evidence that God has ever changed his plan?

We can divide the working of God through men into two main categories, namely 1) His working through every believer, and 2) His working through men who are called and given a special gift. Both are necessary and important, and God does not emphasize one against another. The function is different, but the provision for both is God, and the goal of the working of God through both is the same. That goal is to spread abroad the fragrance of Christ at all times and in every place to draw men to Himself.

Consider the well-known scripture that we have already quoted. *"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth"* (Acts 1:8). This was spoken to the disciples as Jesus was departing this earth. Notice the focus: "You shall be witnesses *to Me*." As His disciples, our lives are to give a witness to the nature and character of God. Men should be able to look at us and see Jesus. If we are abiding in Christ and living His life, this will be true. God will be able to send people our way to show them Himself, many times without our knowledge. The ability to reveal Christ comes from the indwelling God. This focuses our attention on abiding in Christ by the Spirit. We may not think of this as "evangelism," but this is one of the main ways that souls are reached.

The word "evangelism" often implies large meetings, a program of witnessing, and various other methods. Living the life of God every day before the world may seem too common or too slow. May I encourage us to reconsider this area? More people may be watching our lives than we think. If our lives do not give forth the fragrance of Jesus, why would anybody want the Jesus we talk about? If what people see does not make them hungry for what we have, why would they ask questions? And if they are not asking questions, how can we give them answers?

It goes without saying that we cannot save souls. I would even question the term "soul winning" the way it is commonly used today. Only Jesus can save a soul, and He does that by a miracle working of grace which we understand only in a limited way. The Holy Spirit is the one who convicts the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment (see John 16:8-11). Our place is to give witness to the reality of God through our lives, to speak words as the Holy Spirit opens doors and directs us, and to leave men and women to deal with God. We cannot deal with God for them, and if we try to do the work of the Holy Spirit, we hinder what God wants to do. If we try to go beyond the role God has given us, it is easy for people to become attached to us rather than to Jesus, even to the point where we take the place of God in their lives. This is a trap we must avoid at all costs.

This ministry that is given to every member is demanding, because it means we must be moving in union with God at all times. This is not a small matter. Soul-winning programs, music ministries, and social functions that attract people are easier, because we can do them without God. We can be "involved" and feel we are really "doing something" for God. In himself, man is very capable, but submitting to the discipline of God and never moving separate from Him is something that many of us know too little about. Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing." Do we believe that? Have we let

God show us what it means?

We want to go on and consider the ministry of the evangelist, who specifically goes out to take the gospel to the world. But as we do, let us never diminish this witness that God wants to bring through every member. The members of our family, our neighbors, and the people we work with may never have a better witness to the reality of God than what they see in us. It is wonderful that God has involved us in a very real way, and yet at the same time it is a tremendous responsibility. Let each of us take this responsibility seriously. Let the gospel of Christ be fully proclaimed through our lives. Someone has said: "Preach the gospel. If necessary, use words." As we walk in the Spirit, the character of God will be fully expressed to each one who comes in contact with us, and we will give forth the fragrance of the life of God at all times. Let us always be ready to give an answer for the hope that lies within. As we are fully taken up with our love relationship with Jesus, God will surely send others our way to pick the fruit and be drawn to Him.

The Ministry of Evangelism

In Ephesians 4:11 we are told that evangelists are one of the gifts that God has given to the church. The ministry of the evangelist is to proclaim the good news of Jesus to the multitudes. This ministry is given to men according to God's choosing, and they are responsible to God for the exercise of this gift. Of the five ministries mentioned in this passage, this is the only ministry that is primarily outside of the church. The other ministries function primarily within the church for the establishment and upbuilding of the saints.

All of the ministries mentioned in Ephesians 4:11 are gifts of Christ to the church for specific purposes. All answer directly to Christ for the fulfillment of their ministry. So the evangelist cannot look to the church or to other ministries for his direction. He has been given grace by God, and God will call him, prepare him, and provide for him as he carries out his God-given ministry. He should be a member of an assembly in good standing, and meet the requirements of ministry as outlined by Paul in I Timothy 3:8-13. His ministry may be fulfilled in one locality, or in conjunction with an apostolic ministry, or carried out in various localities where churches already exist.

The fact that the evangelist answers to Christ for the fulfillment of his ministry does not mean that he moves independently of the church or other ministries. All ministries should move in harmony with other God-given ministry and submit to recognized oversight in a gathering where such exists. Where it does not exist, there still will be a submission to other brothers and to the church as a whole. Obviously, for an evangelist's ministry to be effective, the fruit of the ministry (new believers) must be channeled into the local gathering. Where a church does not exist, the evangelist should be aware of the limitations of his ministry, looking to the Lord to provide help in establishing new believers in a local gathering so that the fruit is not lost.

Even though the evangelist is depending on God for all provision to carry out his responsibility, the church does not stand idly by and observe. The church should be girding him up in prayer, being sensitive to the Holy Spirit in the matter of giving, and available as a channel of help as God would direct. Suppose the evangelist senses the Lord leading him to go into an area for a series of outreach meetings. I believe he would want the witness of mature brothers regarding this leading. The witness could be given before the church, so that every member could begin to pray earnestly for the movement of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men. The church is not directing the outreach, but the members of the local body are very much involved in support.

Notice that the church does not exercise authority over the evangelist or direct the work. There is a difference between lending support and directing. If the church tries to direct such a ministry, it places a burden on the assembly that God has not intended. As mentioned, the evangelist should seek the witness of the local leadership and submit himself to their counsel, but he does not look to the elders or to the church to direct the ministry. God has given the evangelist the grace to carry out his calling solely under the authority of Christ.

In 2 Timothy 4:5, Paul exhorts Timothy to "do the work of an evangelist." While this may not have been Timothy's primary calling, he had the grace to perform the function to some degree. I believe we could say the same about all the other ministries mentioned in Ephesians 4:11. While there may be varying grace, any of these ministries could be used by God in some degree to proclaim the good news to the lost. In doing so, the Holy Spirit will likely lead in methods similar to those of the evangelist. For example, suppose a brother has a burden to reach out in his neighborhood with a Bible study. If this burden is from God, God will show him how to carry it out. He should want the witness of mature brothers in the assembly, especially the oversight. Other members should support in prayer and help as the Lord would direct. But the brother who has the burden will be responsible for the outreach, and will not expect the church as a whole to bear that burden.

If we understand that God's method of evangelism is "men filled with the Holy Spirit," it places a great responsibility upon the church as a whole. We are commanded to pray the "*Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest*" (Matt. 9:38). Prayer is a great ministry and responsibility of the church. If we do not have men who are prepared and burdened to take the message to the lost, we cannot bypass God's order and try to come up with another method. We need to go before God and ask for such men. God will hear our cry and send the help we need, either by raising men up within the body or by sending men from other localities. Either way, God knows what we need, and He will not fail us in any way.

The Power of An Endless Life

When it comes to evangelism, so often the question is "How do we begin?" The common approach by many in this day is to have a group meeting, come up with some ideas, choose the ones that seem best, organize, and begin some form of systematic proclamation of the gospel. It seems so right, and the motives are pure. How would we dare to question such an approach? In this area as in all areas, the natural mind is one of our worst enemies. It was true for Israel, it was true in the time of Jesus, and it is still true today. If there is one truth we need to be convinced of, it is this: we must not find our own way in any matter, including that of evangelism. We *can* find our own way, for the natural man is very capable, but if we do, we will not have God's blessing. If we want to know the grace of God and see results that last for eternity, we must take our direction from God.

If we search the scriptures with an open mind, I believe one thing will become evident. In the examples recorded for us, beginnings were often very simple and could even have passed unnoticed if those involved had not been sensitive. Consider one example from the life of Jesus. In John chapter 4, we have the account of Jesus speaking with the woman at the well. The account concludes: "*And many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, 'He told me all that I ever did.'* So when the Samaritans had come to Him, they urged Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. And many more believed because of His own word. Then they said to the woman, 'Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world'" (John 4:39-42).

This story began when Jesus asked a woman for a drink of water. Because of the perception of Jesus and the miracle-working power of the Holy Spirit, what started as a simple encounter became an open door for the gospel, resulting in many believing in Jesus. Now we may consider this to be a special event, and it is. But can we not expect the same in our lives if we are being led by the Spirit? What about this promise: *"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father"* (John 14:12).

So often we fall back into natural thinking without even realizing it. God never expected us to do the work of evangelism apart from His grace and the miraculous power of God. Before He went away, Jesus commanded the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they were endued with power from on high. Only then could they be witnesses unto Him, not in their own strength and wisdom but in the power of an endless life. Without ability from God, we will just ask a woman for a drink and go on our way, planning our next evangelistic campaign. With the ability of God, we will recognize the open door and walk through it, and "many will believe."

Consider an example from the life of Paul found in Acts 16. This account records the beginning of the church at Philippi. In the record we see divine direction, sensitivity by Paul to the leading of the Spirit, a simple sharing of the gospel to a group of women who were praying, and the Lord opening the heart of one woman to hear. We also see at work the gifts of the Spirit, persecution, the strength of God to rejoice in difficult situations, and an utter dependence on God to deliver, even in the darkness of a prison cell. Consider how quickly all this took place. Consider the reality Christ brought these believers into. It was a work of God from beginning to end. Is there any reason we should not expect the same today? Where did it all begin? Was it not as Paul looked to God to direct him and had a spiritual sensitivity to recognize when He gave the direction? Has God changed His ways today? Do we have so many more resources that we do not need this same divine direction? Or was that way only for Paul? I ask so that we may consider these things before God.

Why do we tend to think we should organize to get a crowd? Perhaps it is from the account of the day of Pentecost. But who organized the crowd on that day? Was it not God himself? The only thing men were doing was waiting on the Lord in prayer. God did the rest. When the time came for Peter to stand up, God had brought the crowd together with prepared hearts. Without that, Peter could have stood and we would never have heard about it, for nothing would have happened. This is not to say that men and women were not involved, for they were. But they were not planning and organizing to gather and keep a crowd. They were giving themselves to waiting on God under the command of Jesus. This is foolishness to man, but power to those who believe.

Consider an account from the life of Peter found in Acts 10: the salvation of the household of Cornelius. What was the evangelist doing? He was praying. What were the people doing? They were praying. God brought them together in His way, and when He did, a mighty work of the Spirit was done. We know these accounts very well, but have we considered their meaning in our lives? Are we willing to give ourselves to believing prayer? Do we serve the same miracle-working God, or does He need our help these days? God does not need our help, but He does need us to give ourselves to Him so that He can do His own work in and through us. This takes submission to Christ as Lord. It takes the discipline of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and a willingness to come to Him for His wisdom and direction, knowing that apart from Him we can do nothing. One act of God through us is worth more than a thousand acts of our own efforts trying to do something for Him. Are we available to God?

We cannot quote the entire book of Acts here, but I trust that these few examples will be enough to send us back to God on our knees for a fresh revelation of Himself and His ways. We want God. We

want, and God wants, fruit that is lasting. We do not want to stand empty-handed before God on the final judgment day. For these things to be accomplished, we must go God's way, and God's way is men filled with the Holy Spirit. The command is, "Be filled with the Holy Spirit." That is where we must begin and end. Let us not look for another way. There is no other way. Jesus is the way.

Brethren, these few words of encouragement are not the final answer on the question of evangelism. No two events recorded for us in scripture are exactly the same. God is very creative, and we are not ruling out any way God leads. But we are saying that it must be God who is leading, and when He does, the work will not be tainted with the ways and efforts of man. God will not share His glory with another. He is concerned about the lost far more than we are, but only He can save them. Our place is to be available to God. He will use us as He sees fit, and our beginning and continuing place is on our knees in prayer.

May God bring us to the end of ourselves, where we are cast utterly upon Him. May we know for sure that "apart from Him we can do nothing." Let us not look for the crowds, but for Jesus. His promise is, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst." Do we need more than Jesus? I think not. If we are two who are concerned about the lost, we have the beginning. God will not fail those who believe Him, so let us begin--and never stop!