

## Pillar VII

*Advance the Gospel throughout our city and around the world.*

Generally, Christians think of evangelism and missions as two different things. Evangelism is usually thought of as witnessing to people in our own communities while missions is thought of as going to another country or culture to proclaim the message of Christ. This is a dichotomy that need not be. Nothing in the word evangelism requires that it be defined in terms of locale. The word “evangelism” comes from the Greek word “euangelion” which means to declare the good news. Evangelism is quite literally the act of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus. It is the work of advancing the gospel both near and far. As sure as a commitment to advance the gospel locally will feed a passion to advance it globally so to will a commitment to advance the gospel globally feed a passion to advance it locally.

Evangelism, probably more than any other Christian responsibility, fills the hearts of most believers with fear and trembling. Pictures come to mind of cold calling at stranger’s front doors in order to ask them whether or not they are sure they will go to heaven when they die. In fact, the church has been so given to the same kinds of evangelism programs in the past that it has left the majority of Christians out in the cold and feeling guilty. Growing up in the average evangelical church could give one the idea that there is really on one way to effectively witness and it happens on Monday evenings at 7:00 during visitation.

Now, there is nothing wrong with those evangelism programs that began to spring up in the 70’s and 80’s. Indeed, many Christians learned to effectively articulate the gospel through such efforts and God only knows how many came to faith in Christ. We ought to be thankful for faithful for men like D. James Kennedy who helped light a fire for evangelism through his “Evangelism Explosion.” But let us be very careful to not trust in a program or to so narrowly define how evangelism is done that we discourage those who have a great deal to offer to the work of proclaiming the gospel but may have been marginalized because they did not fit will into existing programs.

To better understand the work of proclaiming the gospel let us first examine some false notions of evangelism that often lead to discouragement. In his very helpful book Nine Marks of a Healthy Church Mark Dever identifies five common misconceptions of evangelism.<sup>1</sup>

- **Evangelism is not imposition.**

The Gospel is not merely one opinion among many other viable opinions. The Gospel is God’s truth, the indispensable message of His only begotten Son dying on a cross to pay the penalty for the sins of God’s people and rising triumphantly from the grave. The Gospel withers all other truth claims. When Christians evangelize they are making known God’s truth regarding sin and salvation. This is a far cry from the imposition of “personal” beliefs. Christians cannot make anyone believe. We can only witness to the truth. Whether or not anyone responds is left ultimately in the all wise and powerful hands of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Dever, Mark, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000) pp. 116ff.

*What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.* - I Corinthians 3:5-7

- **Evangelism is not personal testimony.**

It is certainly encouraging to hear about the many good things that God does in the lives of His people. But a personal testimony does not necessarily contain a clear explanation of the Good News. I have heard many testimonies that explain a person's coming to faith in Christ but do not make clear who Jesus is and the significance of the cross and resurrection. While Christians can be warmed by such personal stories it is also true that the Gospel has not been made clear and therefore evangelism has not happened.

- **Evangelism is not social action or political involvement.**

The church surely ought to speak up regarding many of the social ills that infect our culture. However, the supreme need of humanity is to know Jesus and the church's most important message is the gospel. Evangelism must not be equated with crusades for public morals or benevolence for the poor. This is not to say that many causes are not important. Indeed, Christians ought to lend their efforts to such efforts as ending abortion and caring for the needy. However, apart from the clear proclamation of the Gospel the church is reduced to nothing more than another social services organization.

- **Evangelism is not apologetics.**

The word "apologetics" is derived from the Greek word "apologia" which means "to give an answer." Apologetics then is the process of answering people's questions of or objections to the Christian faith. Just like our personal testimony, apologetics can often accompany evangelism but it is not the same thing. Christians ought to be able to defend, for instance, the virgin birth of Christ and His resurrection. In this way apologetics, properly done with grace and clarity, may be an important part of defending the faith. But while apologetics is responding to an agenda that someone else sets, evangelism is following the agenda of Christ.

- **Evangelism is not the results of evangelism.**

This misunderstanding is very dangerous because it can and often does lead to manipulation. This is so because if we confuse evangelism with the fruit of evangelism then we may conclude that it is within our power to convert others to Christ. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Charles Finney was notorious for pioneering a whole host of new evangelistic methods like the "altar call" in order to increase the number of "conversions" during evangelistic crusades. Finney made clear his belief that such things as conversion to Christ and revival were not the work of God but the work of man. Therefore, new "excitements" were introduced to the church's corporate worship in order to increase results.

When the results of evangelism are equated with evangelism then man will inevitably manipulate the process in order to gain results. Confusing results with evangelism leads evangelists and preachers to go beyond a simple commitment to faithfully proclaim the gospel. The norm becomes lengthy "altar calls" with emotional appeals like "Jesus walked to the cross for you, can't you even walk down this aisle for Him?"

With a better understanding of what Gospel proclamation is not we know turn our attention to what it is. For the purpose of limiting what evangelism consists of we will continue by using the term “Gospel Proclamation.”

*Gospel proclamation is intentional.*

The church cannot wait with fingers crossed hoping that sinners will join them for Sunday morning services. Rather, Christians are planted by God in particular neighborhoods, work places, community groups, and schools for the purpose of Gospel proclamation; so too with churches. God places congregations in particular cities and neighborhoods that they might make the Gospel known to the surrounding community. Since the Gospel is a specific message it has to be communicated clearly. This will be done as churches and individual Christians strategize on both local and global levels. Metro East must strive for a culture that sees Gospel proclamation as a task deserving of our brightest ideas and most concentrated labors.

*Gospel proclamation is supremely confident in God’s sovereignty.*

The Gospel is still the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes. Christians need not lean on the latest fads to make the Gospel more acceptable. Various approaches that diminish the unpleasant news that all mankind is born in sin and hopelessly separated from God must not be abandoned for a more “positive” message. To do so weakens the message to the extent that it ceases to be the true Gospel. Tinkering with the Good News happens when confidence in God’s sovereign prerogative to use His message to bring sinners salvation falters. A winsome confidence in the full message of the Gospel is born in a supreme confidence in God’s power to change a life by His chosen means. Scripture tells us clearly that God’s chosen means to bring sinners to repentance and faith is, and ever remains, the Gospel of Jesus Christ clearly and faithfully proclaimed.

*Gospel proclamation is varied in approach.*

The Gospel is a message that must be received in faith. That means someone must speak in order to make the message plain. The happens in a number of different approaches. The Gospel must be preached from pulpits, taught in Bible studies and small groups, and explained over lunch or in living rooms. As many different opportunities as the Lord gives us to speak are the number of approaches available to proclaim the Gospel.

*Gospel proclamation is confirmed by a life characterized by Gospel distinctive.*

As we have said, the Gospel is a message. It is not an ethic or a lifestyle but it most surely produces a particular lifestyle and distinctive ethics. For instance, those who have come to know first hand the mercy of Christ’s work on the cross will themselves be merciful people. Those who have come to taste of the forgiveness of God purchased upon the cross will themselves become a forgiving people. How much more effective we will be in our Gospel proclamation if we give witness to its central truths by how we live. The good news of God’s mercy and forgiveness in Christ is made all the more coherent when it is proclaimed by those whose lives have truly been changed.