

Barriers to Evangelism

M. W. Bassford, 2009

Introduction.

As we saw last week, there are many and serious problems with being a non-evangelistic church. Nonetheless, most churches of Christ in today's America are not evangelistic. Their Bibles present the truth just as plainly as mine does. Their preachers probably preach several sermons on evangelism every year. They may even occasionally have big evangelistic workshops. Despite all of these things, however, most Christians are not involved in saving the lost.

If we were to back one of these Christians into a corner and ask him why he does not actively teach outsiders, I would imagine that that Christian would give us one of a familiar litany of excuses. We would hear about how he wasn't gifted with the ability to evangelize. We would hear that he doesn't know what to say. We would hear that his friends and co-workers wouldn't be interested in the gospel. All of the excuses would get back to a central point. They would all be saying, "My failure to teach others the word is someone else's fault." It could be God's fault, for creating us incompetent. It could be the preacher's fault, for keeping us ignorant. It could even be the fault of the lost, for not being inviting enough. These would be the things that many brethren would cite as roadblocks that keep them from evangelizing.

In reality, though, those roadblocks aren't the problem. Moses made exactly the same excuses when God wanted him to go to Pharaoh, and they weren't the problem then, either. Moses' problem was that he just plain didn't want to do God's will. The same is true for us today. If we are determined to teach others, neither our lack of ability nor unfavorable circumstances are going to stop us. However, if we don't want to do the work, any old excuse will do. The true roadblocks are not external and beyond our control. They are internal, and they are things that God expects us to overcome. Only as we fight and win those battles will we be effective. Let's look, then, at the true barriers to evangelism.

Apathy and Fear.

The first of these barriers in the Christian heart is **APATHY**. This one comes in two main flavors, and we see the first described in Revelation 2:4. The Ephesians here present a very interesting case study. On the one hand, they were doing all kinds of good works. On the other hand, though, they weren't doing those works for any higher reason than going through the motions. They didn't love God anymore. They didn't care about serving Him. All that remained to them was the shell of genuine Christianity. It was good enough for them, but not good enough for God.

Sadly, there are a lot of Christians today who are in the same spiritual condition. They show up for services out of habit, they mechanically sing the same old songs, but they don't love the Lord, and they have no interest in excelling as disciples of Christ. Little by little, the devil has stolen away their zeal for God, until the fire has gone out completely. It's no surprise that these Christians aren't interested in evangelism. Evangelism takes a great deal of effort, it takes a great deal of time, but most of all, it takes a great deal of love for God. Without that love, we're never going to invest ourselves in the way that evangelism demands. We're going to be the same apathetic Christians we were, stuck in the same rut.

Likewise, apathy toward other people will prevent us from evangelizing. We see an example of this in the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-31. Ultimately, the priest didn't help the wounded traveler because he didn't care enough to bother. The other guy's problems were no skin off his nose. That's a trap of indifference that we can easily fall into with respect to the lost all around us. We chat with them at work, we hang out with them after school, but we don't do anything to help them. We intellectually acknowledge that yes, they're going to hell if they don't change, but that's their problem and it's not our problem. Like the priest, we are presented with the spectacle of a wounded and bleeding soul that will die without assistance, but like the priest, we choose to pass by on the other side. That's apathy.

The other big mental roadblock to evangelism is **FEAR**. Here, we can identify three different types of fear that keep us from the Lord's work. The first is fear of failure. We see it described in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:24-25. Unlike the other two slaves, the one-talent slave allowed his fear of losing his talent to keep him from doing anything with it. In the same way, many Christians never even make the attempt to reach out to a sinner because they are convinced that they will mess it up if they do. In their heads, they have this incredibly detailed scenario of the disaster that will ensue if they ever mention Jesus to anybody, and so, rather than putting themselves and God through all that misery and embarrassment, they hide the gospel like it was a state secret. They are defeated by the fear of their own failure.

Other Christians will allow themselves to be deterred by fear of other people. This also is not a new problem. We see mention of some rulers who feared to confess Jesus in John 12:42-43. They believed in Him, but they hid the fact so that the Pharisees wouldn't throw them out of the synagogue. Likewise, we sometimes conceal the gospel to avoid negative consequences from those we believe will disapprove. It could be that we think our friends will laugh at us and not be our friends anymore if we tell them about our faith. It could be that we think our employer will get on our case,

punish us, or even fire us if we mention Christ in the workplace. Regardless of who the man we fear is, the ugly truth is the same. Just like those first-century rulers, we are more concerned about the praise of men than the praise of God.

Finally, we can be kept from teaching others by a still more nebulous fear, the fear of change. We see the story of a group of men who feared change in John 11:47-48. To the Jewish council, it was a matter of complete indifference whether Jesus actually was the Son of God or not. What mattered to them was whether Jesus would cause enough change to endanger their cozy little position as the rulers of their people. They concluded that Jesus was going to bring the Romans down on them, and that was intolerable, so they decided to kill Jesus rather than face the change He brought.

There are plenty of brethren today who are just as wedded to the status quo as the Sanhedrin was. They like their cozy little church filled with the same friends they've known for years, without anybody in it who is going to cause trouble or raise a fuss, and consciously or not, they realize that if they start bringing in sinners, the church is going to change. They won't know everybody anymore. There are going to be people with different backgrounds and different opinions from theirs. There will probably even be new Christians who backslide in spectacular ways. Evangelism is going to take their cozy little reality and knock it flying, so they don't want anything to do with evangelism. They fear change too much.

Symptoms and Consequences.

When apathy and fear rule our hearts, several **SYMPTOMS** of this will appear in our behavior and our churches. The first of these is the idea that we can please God by practicing **LIFESTYLE EVANGELISM**. This is the idea that we are fulfilling God's command to evangelize if we just live good moral lives and wait for outsiders to ask us about the gospel. In reality, of course, no one ever actually does ask. Lifestyle evangelism ends up not actually being an evangelistic device at all. It's a blame-shifting device in which if we don't teach anyone, it's their fault for not asking.

Similarly, apathy and fear can create a **FORTRESS MENTALITY** in the church. In this view, the church is nothing more than a fallout shelter that protects us from the world. We carry out our religious duty by coming to the fallout shelter three times a week, and never, ever having any contact with anyone who might corrupt us. The problem is that the church isn't supposed to be a fallout shelter hidden in the depths of the earth. We're supposed to be a city set on a hill. We're supposed to let our light shine, and if all we're doing is hiding, we're keeping our light under a bushel.

The third symptom of these ungodly attitudes is a **PROGRAM MENTALITY**. We have this mentality when we believe that we can fulfill our evangelistic responsibilities by writing a check on Sunday morning. Our contribution pays for various programs, which could be anything from a phone message system to some snazzy correspondence courses on the Internet, and, because our church is involved in doing those things, that means that we're active in saving the lost. The problem is that that's not what we see first-century Christians doing. They didn't just chip in when the plate was passed. They invested themselves personally in teaching. If we want to follow them, we have to do the same.

If we allow apathy and fear to keep us from evangelism, we'll see several serious **CONSEQUENCES** in the church and in our lives. The first of these is that the gospel will not be preached. Paul emphasizes this with his rhetorical question in Romans 10:14. The gospel is communicated in one way and one way only: from the lips of a Christian to the heart of a sinner. The sad reality of all those other approaches, of everything from lifestyle evangelism to Dial-A-Bible-Study, is that they don't work. I have never in my life met a Christian who was converted and stayed faithful without having been taught by a brother. If we want the gospel to be heard in our community, we have to do the talking.

Second, if our church is not evangelistic, it will die. Look at the warning Jesus gives the Ephesians about their apathy in Revelation 2:5. Jesus wasn't saying here that He was going to zap the church in Ephesus. He was saying that if they continued down their current path, soon they would be as dead outwardly as they were inwardly. That's the way it is for us. If we want the Lord's church in Joliet to remain faithful and to prosper, the only way to reach that goal is through dedicated and successful evangelism. Just look at how much the evangelistic efforts from the past work to our benefit right now. It's obvious even in our church leadership. Of our eight deacons, three of those men weren't even Christians fifteen years ago. Where would we be as a church without a Jeff Andrews, or a Pete Eskra, or a Matt Sterba? Where would we be without all the other Christian men and Christian women here who were not raised in the church? Evangelism is our lifeblood, brethren. Without it, we cannot hope to maintain the Lord's work in this place.

Third, though, if we allow ourselves to be defeated by our internal barriers to evangelism, we ourselves will pay the penalty. Consider what the master says to the fearful slave in Matthew 25:26, 30. Let's be clear, brethren, on what God does and does not expect. He doesn't expect us to be brilliant seekers of the lost who put the apostle Paul to shame. He doesn't expect us to know just what to say in every situation so that we maximize every opportunity. However, He does expect us to make the effort. If we try our best to save the lost and klutz things up, even if we sin in so doing, God can and will forgive that. However, God will not forgive us if we allow our fear to paralyze us and we do nothing. If we flatly refuse to evangelize, whatever our reasons, how is that any different from flatly refusing to go to church or flatly refusing to love our brother or flatly refusing to obey any of God's commands? Evangelism is not optional, brethren. If we obey God in seeking the lost, we will be rewarded, but if we willfully disobey, we will be punished.