

Evangelism and the Church

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Introduction.

To this point in our discussion of evangelism, we've been considering the topic from an individual, almost isolated, perspective. To an extent, this is the way that we need to consider the subject. We don't typically go and do evangelistic things as a group. Instead, what makes us evangelistic or not evangelistic are the personal choices that each one of us makes, typically in our interactions with outsiders when there isn't another Christian in sight. Likewise, the decision to obey the gospel is a very personal one, in which the only two people that matter are a sinner and his Lord.

However, even though those things are true, we can't consider evangelism in a vacuum. As the Scripture tells us, when a sinner is saved, he is added to the church, and if we're the ones doing the teaching, he is most likely going to be added to our local church too. That means that the way we think and speak about our local church and its members, and the way that we act together as a church, can have a profound impact on our evangelistic success. I've been associated with churches before where the services were so bad and the sermons were so boring that I was embarrassed to invite my friends. Likewise, I've been involved with churches that were so unwelcoming and so unfriendly that if someone from the community did obey the gospel, they'd be out the door in six weeks because nobody bothered to talk to them.

On the flip side of the coin, there are plenty of Christians out there who unwittingly sabotage their own evangelistic efforts by being sharply, consistently critical of the church and its members. They don't realize it, but as a result of their own words, if they offered their friends a choice between Christians and a tank full of piranhas, the friends would pick the piranhas every time. There are a host of different issues we can group together under this umbrella, but they are certainly things we need to pay attention to. This morning, then, let's consider evangelism and the church.

Outside the Assembly.

Within this topic, it seems most logical to begin by looking at the way that we represent the church outside of the assembly. As part of this, we need to remember to **BE POSITIVE** when we discuss the church and its members. Look at Paul's admonition in Romans 12:10. He tells us that we are always to prefer one another in honor. In other words, every action that we direct toward another Christian, every word that we speak about them, must show our respect for them and bring them honor in the eyes of others. If this is our attitude, it will naturally lead us to honor the entire body of the church as well. This is important as a general rule, but it's especially important in our dealings with those we wish to bring to the Lord. It's just common sense that if we want someone to join the church, we ought to present the church and its members in the best light possible, and we do that when we honor them and speak well of them.

Sadly, many Christians undermine their own work by doing the opposite. They constantly tell their friends in the world about how awful the preacher is, or how bad the singing is, or what a rotten job the elders do of leading, or how unloving and stuck-up the ordinary Christians are. Then, they try to teach those friends about Jesus and persuade them to join the church. How well do you think that goes, brethren? People in the world aren't stupid. If we make it clear that our church experience is miserable, they are certainly not going to flock to join us in our misery. In reality, every negative word that we speak about Christians or the church is a nail in the coffin of our evangelistic usefulness.

However, the problem with negative speech goes even deeper than that. James warns us about it in James 4:11-12. The truth is that when we speak ill of one another, we show that we have an evil, judgmental heart that condemns where God does not. Love, not contempt, is the foundation of Christianity, and that love is meant to attract seekers who want to be loving themselves. When we say contemptuous things, we're definitely telling those seekers something. We're telling them, "I claim to be a disciple of Christ, but in reality I'm not, and you can tell by the hateful things that come out of my mouth." Let me tell you, brethren: one of the refreshing things about preaching up here is that I don't have to deal with the bad reputation that churches of Christ have in the South. Nobody here has heard of us, so we get to shape their impressions of the church. If we speak evil of one another, we create a bad reputation for ourselves all over again.

That's a general rule, but in a more focused area, we need to **BE BROTHERLY**. This is essential when we are attempting to reach Christians who have fallen away. Paul warns us about two errors that we can fall into in dealing with brethren who have strayed in 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15. The first mistake is acting like nothing's wrong. When a Christian we're friends with leaves the Lord, we can't go on being buddy-buddy with them like we were before. We're supposed to limit our social interaction with them in a way that tells them they should be ashamed of what they've done.

However, it's just as much a mistake to stop treating that Christian like a brother and begin treating him like an enemy, and I fear that this is where many Christians end up on the wrong side of Scripture. Let's be honest about this, brethren. Let's say someone invites us to a social engagement, but we learn that a Christian who has been withdrawn from is going to be present. If we refuse to go simply because of that one person, are we regarding him as a brother, or

are we regarding him as an enemy? Which statement rings more true: “I’m not going because my brother will be there” or “I’m not going because my enemy will be there”? I think we all know the answer, and the answer tells us what to do. If we truly love a fallen-away Christian as a brother, we will take every opportunity to reach out to him and save him.

Let me emphasize once again that none of this is an excuse for socializing. This is not just a reason to ignore 1 Corinthians 5 with impunity. The only reason why we interact with that straying brother is to show him that we love him and to lead him back to the Lord. James tells us why this is so important in James 5:19-20. In context, this passage is specifically about reaching other disciples who have strayed, and it could not be clearer about what a great work we do when we persuade them to come back. On the day of judgment, things aren’t going to go well for a lot of people, but they REALLY aren’t going to go well for Christians who have left the Lord. Jesus tells us in Luke 12 that people who knew His will and disobeyed anyway will be punished more severely than those who were ignorant. As a result, every strayed Christian we reach is a soul that we have saved from eternal suffering. What could be more important than that?

In the Assembly.

This same attitude of love, this same desire to save, should motivate us in the assembly as well. Among other things, it should lead us to **BE WELCOMING**. This starts with every one of us as individuals. Look at the command that appears in Colossians 4:4-5. We should always look to speak graciously to outsiders, but this is particularly important in our dealings with those who honor us by attending our assembly. This, in fact, is the reason why our welcome group exists. The leadership here decided more than a year ago that we were going to be focusing on evangelism now, and the elders wanted to make sure that when we did start getting more visitors to our services, that we would be prepared to treat them right. Let’s remember that and zero in on that now. If we signed up for that group, we need to make it our goal to greet every visitor who walks through those doors. Even if we didn’t, even if we’re maybe feeling a little intimidated by this whole evangelism thing, here’s something all of us can do. We’re the ones who are at home here; they’re the ones who have come to a strange and scary place. It’s easy for us to reach out, but it’s hard for them to reach out. Let’s do the easy thing. Let’s show them cordiality and welcome, so that our assembly will start feeling like home to them too.

Even beyond the work of the individual, though, it’s important for us to make sure that our worship services themselves make as good an impression as possible on visitors. We see Paul showing concern for this in his question in 1 Corinthians 14:23. He warns the Corinthians against having an assembly so chaotic that visitors would think they were crazy. Of course, even though being visitor-friendly is important, it’s not the first goal of our assemblies. Scripturally speaking, we come together to edify one another, not to reach out to the lost. However, as long as we’re fulfilling that primary purpose, anything that we can do to make our services more accessible to people from the community is worth doing. I’ll be the first to tell you, friends—I don’t know everything that such an effort might involve, and the elders don’t either. If you have some ideas about how our assemblies can be more visitor-friendly, talk to us. Even if it’s something just as simple as me preaching a sermon you think it would be good for your friend to hear, let me know, and I’ll preach it. We want to do everything in our power to make our assemblies as welcoming as possible for our visitors.

Finally, in our efforts to reach the lost, we need to work on learning to **BE LOVING**. Sad to say, many brethren and many churches struggle with the misconception that just as soon as the new Christian comes up out of the water, that’s the end of the evangelistic process, and we can just leave them to take care of themselves while we ourselves move on to something else. Brethren, when a mother neglects her newborn baby and doesn’t cherish it and care for it, that’s child abuse. When we neglect babes in Christ and don’t do everything we can to help them to stay faithful, that’s spiritual child abuse. Let me say now that I think we do a decent job at this, far better than many churches I’ve seen, but we can still do better. We can rise to the standard of John 13:35. Right now, we have a golden opportunity to do this. Every Sunday morning these days, we have 20 or 25 people in the auditorium who would not have been here a year ago. Many of these people are new or newly restored Christians; many more are children who will soon be making the decision about whether they wish to obey the gospel. The way that we interact with those people, the way that we treat them, may well determine whether they will be saved or eternally lost. Let’s throw our weight on the scale. Let’s do everything we can to love them, and to love those who will follow them, so that everyone can see we are truly disciples of Jesus.

Loving other Christians, especially loving Christians who aren’t core members, Christians who can easily be overlooked or ignored, is one of the highest and holiest responsibilities we have as children of the heavenly Father. Look at the way that Jesus emphasizes the importance of this sacred task in Matthew 25:40. Let’s ask ourselves, friends: if Jesus were to come and visit our assembly, how would we treat Him? I daresay that we would treat Him like the King He is. We’d be lining up to talk to Him and hugging His neck if we got the chance. We’d be rejoicing even to see Him. He’d probably get a dinner invitation from every one of us, and we’d do everything we could to get Him to come back tonight. What He’s telling us here is that we ought to give every Christian the same royal treatment that we would give to Him if we got the chance. We don’t have Jesus here, obviously, but we do have our brethren. Let’s act accordingly.