

The Problem with the Way Things Are

M. W. Bassford, 2009

Introduction.

Although you may not realize it, this Sunday is a significant day. Almost exactly a year ago, we began a series of lessons about how ordinary Christians needed to serve God outside of the assembly. Since that time, we've taken up that challenge together. We've invested a great deal of time and effort in doing the Lord's work, and the changes have been profound. We've experienced dramatic growth, in both a numerical and a spiritual sense, and taken a powerful step toward making this church what God wants it to be. The past year has been as successful as any of us could have hoped.

However, we're still a long way from being the church God wants us to be, and one of the most obvious areas where we fall short is evangelism. God's word tells us that we ought to be seeking and saving the lost, and to be blunt, most of us aren't doing it. Let's all pause for a moment to do a silent self-evaluation. Let's ask when the last time was that we led a soul to Christ. Was it a year ago? Was it five years ago? Ten? Twenty? Ever? Remember, brethren: the same God who has commanded us not to steal and not to commit adultery has also commanded us to go and make disciples, and either we are going and making disciples or we are not. If we aren't, there are two possible reasons for that. Either we aren't trying, or we are trying and failing. Both of those, thankfully, are problems that can be addressed by the word. A proper study of Scripture will both motivate us to save the lost and tell us how we can do it effectively.

For the next three months of Sunday mornings, that's going to be our goal. Just like we spent the last three months of 2008 talking about work groups and service, we're going to spend the last three months of 2009 talking about evangelism. Let's begin by showing why this is needed. Let's consider the problem with the way things are.

Obedying God.

Of all the problems with being a non-evangelistic church, the most obvious is that **IT DISOBEYS THE COMMANDMENT** of God. This is true in a specific sense. Look at the passage to which we referred above, Matthew 28:19-20. On its face, this is a commandment directed toward the eleven remaining apostles, but notice that part of it instructs the eleven to teach the new disciples all that Jesus commanded them. Part of those commandments was the commandment to make disciples. All of us who are instructed by the apostles through the word are instructed by them to save the lost. Admittedly, some Christians are better at this than others, but no Christian is exempt from doing the will of our Lord here. None of us have the right to say, "Evangelism is not for me." That's like saying, "Baptism is not for me" or "Faithfulness to my spouse is not for me." God expects all of us to be bringing the lost to Jesus.

Even more than that, though, when we refuse to take an active role in teaching outsiders, we're not just disobeying a single commandment. We're rejecting the idea that is at the heart of Christianity. We see this idea set forth in Romans 13:9. The point that Paul is making here is that every commandment in the New Testament is an expression of love for somebody. It's either an expression of love for God, or it's an expression of love for our neighbor. If we disobey the commandment, then, the problem is not just disobedience. The real, underlying problem is the selfishness and lack of love that caused us to disobey. Brethren, that's every bit as true of the commandment to save the lost as it is of any commandment in the book. If we are not active in evangelism, it points to our failure to love.

Think about it, friends. If you show me a non-Christian, without knowing anything else about him, I can tell you what his biggest problem is. It's not his job status. It's not his love life. It's not his health. The single biggest problem that every non-Christian has is the fact that he is not a Christian. All those other problems may make his life on earth more difficult, but failure to obey the gospel will doom him to an eternity of torment. That is the biggest disaster imaginable. How can we see someone in such a terrible situation, choose to do nothing about it, yet still claim to love him? As John tells us in 1 John 3, whoever does not love abides in death. That's strong language, but it reflects the judgment that God will pronounce on the unloving. If we are indifferent to the lost, we will be lost ourselves.

A different, but related problem with the failure to evangelize is that **IT ABANDONS THE PATTERN**. As a church, we are primarily concerned with the pattern of work and worship that we see in the first-century church. We know that those long-ago brethren pleased God in what they did, so we seek to imitate them 2000 years later in the knowledge that if we do, we will please God too. We sing like the early Christians did, use church money like they did, organize ourselves like they did, and on and on. However, there is one significant area in which we do not follow the first-century pattern. We do not evangelize like they did. Consider, for instance, the evidence of Acts 6:7. I've been worshipping with so-called churches of Christ my entire life, but I have never yet been associated with a church whose numbers multiplied greatly, and that includes this one. Some brethren will dismiss the example of the first century. They will say that modern-day America is too wicked to be interested in the gospel. I don't buy that for a second. The apostles taught the gospel to a generation that Jesus Himself described as evil and adulterous, and yet the word had tremendous

success. The same is true today. When the darkness is deepest, that is when the light of truth shines most brightly. There are countless people in the Joliet area right now who are longing for the Lord. It's our job to find them.

When I say "our job", I don't mean "our" in the sense of some amorphous work of the church. I mean that it is the personal, individual responsibility of each one of us. It is nearly certain that every Christian here knows at least one person no other Christian knows, and that means that each one of us has a unique opportunity to reach out to a sinner. After all, individual work was the pattern in the first century too. We see this in Acts 8:4. As ordinary Christians fled the persecution of Saul, they brought the gospel with them everywhere they went. Do we take the gospel everywhere too? Do we bring it with us on the job, to our homes, to our classrooms, and even when we're just hanging out with friends? Or, instead, do we leave the gospel behind in the church building, where it won't embarrass us or make us stand out? Our brethren 2000 years ago faced persecution for their teaching, but they taught anyway. We need to follow their example.

Following God's Plan.

Nor is that all. In addition to failing to obey God when we don't evangelize, we also fail to fulfill our role in His larger purpose. Along these lines, we must recognize that failure to seek the lost **COSTS SOULS**. This is important because of how much a soul is worth. We see Jesus' take on this subject in Matthew 16:26. This is not a notion of value that comes easily to us. We are used to valuing tangible objects, like groceries and houses and cars. Souls, on the other hand, aren't anything we can touch. We can't even log onto the Internet someplace and see the current Zillow value for our soul. Nonetheless, our souls are our most precious possessions, and that is true no matter how many other possessions we have. Someday, the earth and its works will all be burned up. Everything in the physical universe will be consumed by fire, but even after that process is over, every soul will still remain.

This is an idea with profound consequences. Let's think about this the next time we go to the mall. As we go from store to store, let's pause to consider the stream of people headed in the opposite direction. Old or young, rich or poor, black or white, every one of them has something that is worth more than all the riches of the world, and most of them don't give it a moment's thought. What a tragedy it is for something so precious to be destroyed simply by ignorance and neglect! Let's take a stand against that destruction by remembering the value of a soul.

Because each soul is so valuable, our efforts to teach others about Jesus are so vitally important. We see James discuss this in the context of rescuing fallen-away brethren, in James 5:20. This isn't about getting somebody to come to church on Sunday. This is about rescuing them from death, a death so profound that we can't even comprehend how disastrous it is. That means that if we succeed in leading one person to be a faithful disciple of Christ, it is arguably the most important thing we can do in our lives. If, on the other hand, we refuse to reach out to the lost, anything else we might do with our lives becomes trivial by comparison. Brethren, we need to make a decision. Do we believe what God's word says about the value of a soul, or don't we? If we do, we must also recognize the cost of not seeking them.

Finally, perhaps the most global problem with refusing to share in the work of saving souls is that **IT FRUSTRATES GOD'S PURPOSE**. We may be of two minds about the value of a soul, but God certainly isn't. We see His desire for all of mankind described in 1 Timothy 2:3-4. The bottom line is that souls are worth so much because God says they are worth so much. Every sinner on the planet right now is precious to Him. There is not one, no matter how wretched, whom God would turn away. He loves every one of them, and He wants nothing more than for them to be in heaven with Him forever. If God places such a value on souls, as His children, we must do the same.

In fact, the Bible places an even stronger emphasis than that on how important the lost are to God. Look at the terms in which this importance is described in Ephesians 1:3-4. We all have plans and purposes. Some of them we accomplish in 20 minutes. Others take months or even years. None of our plans, though, can hold a candle to the planning that God has invested in saving souls. This passage says that even before He created the world, He looked into the future, decided that He wanted to save the lost, and had the whole plan worked out before He ever said "Let there be light." Through thousands of years of human existence, God stayed faithful to this plan. Every promise that He made, every miracle that He worked, every intervention in human history, all were to bring His purpose to fruition. Then, finally, at the consummation of the ages, God gave up the most precious thing He had for His plan. He sent His Son to die on the cross for the sins of mankind. All of this is because He loved us and wanted to save us.

This is the greatness of the God we serve. Everything has been prepared for us and for everyone else who is willing to obey Him. Only one thing is missing. God has left it to us to preach the message of salvation. Our decision to preach the word or not determines whether God's plan is carried out in the Joliet area, or whether His purpose is frustrated by our lack of obedience. Think of the responsibility we have, brethren! Thousands of years of the most intricate plan ever devised have led to us. God has placed the gospel in our hands. What are we going to do about it? Are we going to carry out the responsibility we have been given? Are we going to sow the seed of the kingdom in the hearts of those around us, so that they to can join in God's eternal purpose? Or are we going to let the seed wither and die right here, because we'd rather spend our lives in futility than carry forward the work of God?