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If the church is the place where we should gather as many ‘unchurched’ as possible in order to evangelise them, then it can only be common sense to devise the best method we can to attract as many ‘unchurched’ as possible to our meetings. Christendom, in its own terms, has been doing it, more or less successfully, this past 1800 years. Many evangelicals, at the opening of the 21st century, however, have lost their way in this. They have failed to keep pace with the times, failed to adapt to the surrounding culture, and consequently failed to attract the ‘unchurched’. Inevitably, therefore, their churches are a dying breed. If things are not quickly put right, they will soon be as extinct as the dodo.

Ray Evans has not been slow to spot this. But he has not wasted time wringing his hands. He has been impressed by what he has seen certain Americans doing. He has pondered on the UK problem, pondered long and hard, and – as he and many others would see it – pondered to great profit: he has come up with a scheme to put things right, one which is well thought out, thoroughly tested, strongly supported, and superbly fit for the purpose. He has confirmed all this by experts from the worlds of business, marketing, sport, and such like; indeed, it is their methods and success which form the real basis of his scheme. He has bought into their systems – heavily bought in – and the upshot is his *Ready, Steady, Grow*. If the churches which agree with the original premise – that the church should be geared to attracting the ‘unchurched’ into church to be evangelised – were to adopt Evans’ system, many of them, which are at present suffering an extended period of decline, would see a thorough revitalisation of their prospects.

Trying to carry out their aims half-cock, however, as most of them do at present, is worse than useless. They should buy into Evans’ scheme forthwith, roll up their sleeves, and get on with it. I go further. A failing church, one which wants to take

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Evans' prescription, would be well advised to approach another church in the locality – one which has a proven track record in the use of the scheme – to see if that successful church would be prepared to second some of its members and offer some advisers in order to help the failing church implement the scheme and get it off the ground. If they were to do this, within a few years, or less, most of them would see nothing less than a staggering change in their fortunes. They, too, would have an embarrassment of numbers, with a consequent pressure on space. This is no pipe dream! Nor is my tongue anywhere near my cheek when I say it.

But... and there is a 'but'... whether or not all this is for the glory of God and the eternal good of the 'unchurched' – leave alone the believers who work the scheme – depends, of course, on the rightness, or otherwise, of the original premise.

In my view, the premise, as I have explained, is fundamentally flawed. Christ never established the church for the purpose of gathering the 'unchurched' into its meetings and evangelising them. Why, the New Testament does not speak of the 'unchurched'; it does not even allow us think in terms of the 'unchurched'. The proper term, the biblical term, is 'unbelievers', 'ungodly', 'pagan', or *somesuch*. Further, the New Testament does not speak of – it does not even allow us think in terms of – gathering the 'unchurched' into church to evangelise them. Inevitably, therefore, however brilliant Evans' system might be, it is bound to take those churches which adopt it into an appalling clash with clear New Testament principles.

All this I have tried to spell out.

Certain questions remain. How was the gospel spread in New Testament days? By gathering the 'unchurched' into the *ekklēsia* by believers setting up schemes to attract them? Not at all! Success came by the Holy Spirit, by the sovereign act of God; by persecution (Acts 8); by providential guidance (Acts 16); by invitation of unbelievers, not to church, but to proclamation, discourse and discussion (Acts 28). How did Paul reach sinners? He went to the synagogues so that if he

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was invited to address the congregation he could preach Christ to them. He frequented meetings where he would be allowed to speak. He engaged passers-by in conversation in the market place. When invited to the Areopagus, he grasped the opportunity with both hands. When on trial in the courts, he declared the gospel. And, although he showed respect, he never tried to ingratiate himself with his hearers, but always confronted them with the gospel. Moreover, never did he confuse his efforts in this field with *ekklēsia* life, or allow them to impinge upon it, let alone adulterate it.

Relationship Evangelism, however, substitutes systems engineering and management for the work of the sovereign Spirit. Yes, we have to use common sense, but above all, we desperately need the Spirit, not schemes; we must have the Spirit's power, not programmes. It is, as always:

...not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts (Zech. 4:6).

Note how God sounds the negative and the positive, both of which are found in the exceedingly serious warning to Israel, this being recorded in Scripture that we might learn and apply both lessons from it (1 Cor. 10:1-11):

‘Ah, stubborn children’, declares the LORD, ‘who carry out a plan, but not mine, and who make an alliance [that is, weave a web], but not of my Spirit... who set out to go down to Egypt... to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt!’ (Isa. 30:1-2).

As Christ promised the early disciples:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

I acknowledge that Evans speaks of the Spirit, but in reality his book is concerned with setting up the system, and managing it well. But of one thing we may be sure, Relationship Evangelism will produce what Relationship Evangelism can produce – and nothing more. Only the Spirit of God can create regenerated, convicted and converted

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sinners. Pragmatism does what it does best, but if we want scriptural results, we must apply and keep to biblical principles.

Evans' book majors on organisation, closely followed by the institutional church. How does this square with 1 Corinthians 2:2; 9:16; 2 Corinthians 4:5? Which text tells us that the apostles majored on organisation?

And think of the 'customers' – yes, I use the word; that is what they are, customers – of Relationship Evangelism. We might be told of the 'success stories', but what of the failures? How many, having been pleased with coffee on tap, cartons of popcorn and a plate of cake, free meals, entertainment, trips, welfare... will end up in hell? How many of them thought that, while they were enjoying the goodies on offer in Relationship Evangelism, it meant that they were 'safe', on the road to heaven? How many were lulled into that appalling condition because churches made them feel 'at home'? At home in a church; then at home in hell!

What is more, compromise with the surrounding culture always kills the message.

And it is not only unbelievers who suffer in all this. As Robert L.Reymond put it:

For decades now evangelical churches have been conducting their services for the sake of unbelievers. Both the revivalistic service of a previous generation and the 'seeker service' of today are shaped by the same concern – appeal to the 'unchurched'. Not surprisingly, in neither case does much that might be called worship by Christians occur. As a result, many evangelicals who have been sitting for years in such worship services are finding their souls drying up, and they have begun to long for something else.¹

These are serious matters, serious in the extreme. Believers should be separate from the world. Evans, however, promotes full involvement in the pursuits of the world; he brings the world into the church. In his scheme, worship and witness,

¹ Robert L.Reymond: *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, p873.

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even the gospel itself, must be made culturally acceptable, and in order to meet this requirement the church needs worldly methods to help it undertake social activity for the common good. Doing justice and dispensing mercy among the unconverted becomes a highly important aspect of a gospel-centred ministry. Relief of poverty, hunger and injustice becomes equal to the spreading of the gospel. The old (scriptural) well-defined standards of believer-separation from the world are lost in the fog of a pseudo-intellectual jargon so that believers can be lured (lulled?) into a compromising flirtation with the world in order to make best use of a worldly message. Getting believers to become unduly prominent in social activism in the work of the church is elevated to rank alongside gospel work as defined by the New Testament. Holding church events that are attractive to families who are uncomfortable with a traditional worship service is acceptable. More! It is commendable. It works! Everything must change. Believers must 'do' church in a way that welcomes 'unchurched' people, they must share their lives with one another and the world to welcome unbelievers into the network of relationships that make the church culturally sensitive.

To be sure, not everything that is traditional is right. There is plenty of tradition that ought to have been jettisoned the day it was invented – let's make a start with Christendom! But in throwing out the traditional, let us ensure that we keep the scriptural. Babies and bath water spring to mind!

With certain minor adjustments ('church' instead of 'business', 'reaching the community with the message' instead of 'to add value... making a profit', and so on), Evans' book would fit hand in glove with the ethos of the supermarket where nothing is left to chance. Far from it! There's nothing haphazard in the world of the supermarket! Everything is worked out to the nth degree – from the parking space (lots), the temperature of air-conditioned blast to greet customers as they pile through the automatic doors, the signage, aisle width, layout of each aisle, what to place at

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which level, where to locate the cheap offers, piped music, free coffee and newspaper, welcoming dining area where customers can sit and enjoy a pleasant chat, and so on, *ad nauseam*. We in the UK have learned to copy our American cousins and have greeters, staff with free samples or ‘tasting opportunities’ stationed at the end of each aisle, bag packers on every till line, and all the rest of it. All this is research-based and fine-tuned to maximise customer satisfaction with ‘the shopping experience’ and hence – and here’s the punch line – maximise profit for the supermarket. But, I need to hasten to add, whatever the management do, they don’t let the customers in on that last secret; best let them blissfully continue to think it is all for them, all for their pleasure in the mall. What I am saying is this: tweak the terminology and, bingo, you have the well-run Relationship-Evangelism church in a nutshell.

We have a choice. In evangelism, for our aims and for the means to attain them, we can go to the Bible. Or we can go to worldly-wise gurus. Or we can use a mixture of both – which, in effect, is to go to the world. In other words, it is Christ and his law, or it is the world and its ideas.

I said we have a choice. But do we? Surely there can be no choice. It must be – it can only be – Christ and his law; in other words, Scripture.

Although, as I have shown, Evans *uses* Scripture, he really prostitutes it having made the likes of Bill Hybels, Jim Collins and David Brailsford his guides – at least, that is what he did when he published his *Ready, Steady, Grow* in 2014. I am writing this paragraph in June 2018. If he were to produce a second edition of his book today, would Evans still use the ideas of these men? Are these names, and others he referred to, still revered by the world – or have they lost some of the lustre they once had? Are they timeless, as God’s word – or have they become dated, even *passé*?

All this highlights one of the dangers of drawing on the world’s ideas; the world, itself, quickly tires of them and

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moves on. What seemed authoritative relatively recently no longer enjoys the same adulation.

The Bible is clear on the relative worth of men and God. See Psalm 60:11; 108:12; 118:8-9; 146:3-5; Isaiah 2:22; 1 Peter 1:24-25. There is a choice – the ideas of men or the word of God. If we are believers, God actually leaves us with no choice. See Isaiah 8:20; Acts 17:11; Romans 4:3; Galatians 4:30; 2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5. For the believer, it can only be God and his word. The reason is obvious. In spiritual matters, man is impotent. Impotent! Moreover, it is a truism to say that the best of men are still men at best. As I have argued, their best advice, their ideas conjured up out of their heads, supported by management models and statistical reports may be valued today, but will be out of date by tomorrow, and totally disproved and on the ash heap the day after. Today's 'state of the art' so easily becomes tomorrow's trash. Ephemeral is the word. Man is 'a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes' (Jas. 4:14). Do not miss the weight God gives this in Scripture. See Job 7:7; 14:1-2; Psalm 39:5; 102:3,11; 103:15-16; 144:4; Isaiah 40:6-8; 1 Corinthians 7:31; James 1:10-11; 1 Peter 1:24-25; 1 John 2:17. In the spiritual realm, man's theories have no more substance than man himself has. Evans, and those who follow him, will prove it so once again.²

I began this book with a couple of parallels from biblical history – Israel hankering after a king, and David refusing Saul's armour. Perhaps, as I close, Abram's experience might ring a bell with us. Remember how he listened to Sarai, and tried to bring about God's purpose by the flesh (Gen. 16:1-16). Think how dark and long has been – and still is – the shadow that *that* has cast.

² Indeed, in Appendix 3 I give evidence from the work of David F.Wells to show that even as he was setting up his scheme, some of the principles Evans was calling upon had already passed their sell-by date.

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So, like I said before, do we have a choice? Is it to be fickle man and his changeable ideas, or Christ and his law? Is it the weathervane, or the rock, to which we will go? I have made my choice, and that means obedience to Christ and his law – that’s my choice. Reader, what is yours?

Let me end the way I started:

I am convinced that we – and, by ‘we’, I mean evangelical believers (churches) – we, today, are on the cusp of a sea change in what we call ‘evangelism’; that is, in the way we try to reach unbelievers with the gospel, in what we provide for them, what we offer them, and what we expect from them. I am convinced that we are undergoing a revolution in our thinking and practice in this vital area. I am also convinced that, within a few years, the result will prove catastrophic, and will be evident to all.