

Church Evangelism

Evangelism 101

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As you're turning to Acts 20, if you are new with us either A) in person, or B) online, we are continuing a study on Sunday evenings regarding evangelism, the proclamation of our faith, the declaration of our faith, the sharing of our faith, and tonight we come to a very strategic passage in Acts 20. If you have a study Bible, you will notice that oftentimes there's a date that is given and typically you'll see either the years between 59-61 AD given in this passage. Why is that important? Because whom we know as the Apostle Paul is about to lose all his earthly freedoms and liberties. He is about to be imprisoned for the rest of his life.

Now we know that the Lord will give us what we call the prison epistles, a significant number of his writings from prison, but beginning in verse 27-30, I want to read a warning that the Apostle Paul gives us related to our subject matter tonight. He says,

27 For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. 28 Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. 29 For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, tonight as we study your word, as we look at a subject matter that was the subject of your last words to us before your ascension, Lord, may you implore us to be vocal, to be ardent representatives of who you are in the faith that you allow us to possess. Lord, tonight may we be that flock that is purely bought by your blood, may we not be drawn away by these men and these wolves that Acts 20 speaks of. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Tonight, I want to speak to a subject matter that I've entitled "Church Evangelism." Now if you've been a part of our study, that may seem somewhat contradictory because we've defined evangelism, the proclamation and the sharing of one's faith in the following manner: one beggar telling another beggar where to find food. So tonight when we speak

of church evangelism, we're speaking to the larger picture, the bigger picture, how we individual believers operate as a body of Christ, both as a local body and even larger as the universal body of Christ.

Now it would make sense to begin by asking what would appear to be somewhat of a rhetorical question but it is not: what is a church? You know my joke, you get two Baptists, you're going to get three different opinions, but the term "church" actually comes from a biblical word called ekklesia. You might be surprised that it does not necessarily mean a body of believers. In fact, we live in a culture today where if you speak something that is profound, you might hear somebody say, "Well, that's church." In other words, that is something that is set above, that is something that is distinct, that is something that moved me. The term "church" or "ekklesia" in its most simplistic definition just means an assembly of people. That's what it means. In fact, if you walk through your New Testament, when it speaks about the church, it's typically qualified by qualifying statements. For example, in Acts 20 when it says "the church of God which Jesus Christ bought with his blood." So when we speak about the church, when we speak about an assembly, tonight we're going to speak how we proclaim the gospel not as individuals as much as we do as a corporate body, how do we as a local congregation present the truth of Jesus Christ, how do our respective denominations within our culture present the message of Jesus Christ, and how do we as the universal church of Jesus Christ, how do we or do we not present the gospel message.

Speaking of that, what we know as the church, this is God's plan for reaching the world; his strategy to see the entire world come to know salvation through Jesus Christ was through the church, the assembly, those believers. Tonight, I want to give definitions for three very specific words and then I want to talk about how using these words in an improper sense can cause the issues that we observe in our world today when it comes to evangelism. First, obviously, is the term church. We've defined that. Simplistic definition means an assembly, more specifically to tonight's conversation it means the assemblies of believers of Jesus Christ. Then there's the term culture. Culture is the environment that one finds themselves in. If you want to truly grasp culture, then find yourself in a world that does not dress like you, speak like you, or eat like you, and you will understand culture.

Some years ago, I had the privilege of being overseas. It was an evangelistic tour where we were going around to soccer stadiums in their culture, we would use football stadiums in ours, and I'll never forget one Sunday morning after a local worship service that I participated in, the small little congregation was so excited because they were going to serve me an American meal. An American meal. Now think about when you think American meal, what do you think of? We all have our different flavors, I'm sure. This American meal consisted of a Coca-Cola, a bag of potato chips, and a piece of chocolate cake. And they just sat there and just were mesmerized. And you know, you pray before you eat and oftentimes our prayers are somewhat trite but, you know, sometimes you pray, "Lord, with all the cholesterol before me, don't let it kill me. I mean, this is a lot."

And so, again, our culture is the greater environment that we find ourselves in, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, it even kind of just the navigation of life. Then there's the important word: gospel. By definition the word gospel means good news. In our context, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news that in spite of the fact that we have rebelled against God, in spite of the fact that we've sinned against God, that Jesus Christ and the shedding of his blood has done everything that is necessary to atone for our sins and to provide for us a proper and right relationship with him.

So that being said, allow me to share collectively what we see happening not just in our culture but in the world at large when we see evangelism not taking place. Let's begin with the first paradigm. When you have a church and you add the culture but you subtract the gospel, you have liberalism. In other words, you have an assembly of people, you're very culturally relevant, you look and sound like the world around you but you never preach the reality of sin, you never preach the blood of Jesus Christ. That is what we would call liberalism. There are crowds, there are gatherings, and there is speech but there is no gospel.

If you want a perfect example in our contemporary society, all you have to do is look to the institution that most of us would claim is the greatest institution of higher learning in this land. We know it as Harvard University. You may or may not be familiar with the fact that Harvard University was named after John Harvard who was a pastor. Harvard University was named after a pastor and if you've never been on the campus, I've had the privilege of doing so, at all of the entry points to the old campus there is a plaque that is dedicated to either a church or a clergyman that helped establish the university. In the center of campus there is a chapel. That's the center building, and as you walk around the campus of old, on most of the buildings there is scripture that is engraved in the edifices. You say, "Why is that important?" Because in recent days Harvard University has done what many of us would consider the unthinkable, they've hired a new university chaplain who champions himself as an atheist. He champions himself as one who has no need of God. In fact, when being interviewed, he made the statement that he promotes a life that does not depend on God but depends on others. A university who is notorious for its academic rigor, is notorious for the acceptance rate is in the single digits, the overwhelming majority of people who desire to go to Harvard are rejected, they don't meet the qualifications, yet the most important thing that it was started upon does not even exist in its former context. That, my friends, is theological liberalism. There's a crowd, they're very cultural, but there's no gospel.

The next equation is that when you have the church and you have the gospel but you have completely removed yourself from any sense of the culture around you, we have what we would call fundamentalism. Now allow me to draw a distinction between a fundamentalist and fundamentalism, one is a belief and one is an attitude. Fundamentalist, even though that word's been twisted nowadays, actually comes out of the early 20th century when theological liberalism was taking root, there were those Bible believers who gathered together for, of all places, California, Biola University, and they gathered together and they proclaimed the tenets of the faith. They said, "These are the fundamentals." A fundamentalist is someone who believes the basics of the faith,

fundamentalism is a distinct attitude that runs counter-cultural. When we speak of somebody who is a fundamentalist or practices fundamentalism, what they typically do is this, they make secondary issues primary issues. Oftentimes, you'll see this mentality as approach to how one presents themselves, maybe it's the dress code that they don't just advocate but they dictate. There are times I've been in cultures that you and I would consider foreign cultures where they believed if that if you did not dress a certain American way, then you weren't dressed properly for church. That's fundamentalism, in other words, it's about the exterior, it is about how we present ourselves in a cultural sense, the gospel is present, the church is present, but the cultural, and I hate to use the term, but relevance oftentimes is lacking.

Then last, the gospel, the fact that we have a sin condition and Jesus Christ is the only solution, plus being culturally relevant but absent or apart from the church is what we call a parachurch. Now the word para or parachurch means alongside but apart from, and hear me clearly, I'm not anti-parachurch. There are some wonderful organizations within our community and within our culture that we would call parachurch. Fellowship of Christian Athletes is a parachurch. They can get into the locker rooms of football teams that you and I sometimes cannot. But one of the difficulties of a "parachurch" is that oftentimes an independent set aside organization left to itself can remove itself so far from the church that instead of working alongside the church it actually works against the church.

So when we talk about God's plan to reach the world, allow me to address some very important issues. The church. Some have forgotten that this is God's plan. You realize that the only thing that Jesus Christ shed his blood for was for the church. That's it. He didn't shed his blood for the culture. He shed his blood for the church. The only thing that Jesus Christ was willing to give of himself for was what you and I call the church, those who are believers in Jesus Christ. Yet we live in a world today where some see the church as irrelevant, that somehow culturally we've progressed beyond the need for the church. With the access to and the implementation of technology, which you know that I personally embrace wholeheartedly, that technology should be an extension of the church, not a replacement of the church. There are those that would say that the gathering of the believers, the gathering of the saints as we're doing in this context tonight, is no longer "culturally relevant" and so therefore they've invented means and ways of embracing, communicating and dialoging about their faith apart from the body. Let me remind each and every one of us toward the end of the book of Hebrews it says "let us not forsake the gathering of the believers." And there are some that have become what I want to call victims of the edifice complex, that from their perspective there has been such an over-emphasis regarding buildings, an over-emphasis regarding the structures and such that somehow, someway, and by some means they have forgotten what the church really is.

You know, some years ago, I ran across a young man who talked about his salvation experience. He had been brought up in a biker gang. That's who he was. He was one of those guys. He's what an old ball coach of mine used to call, he was rough-tied, alright, he was a rough fellow but the Lord can save any and all who so desire and this young man was saved and he had this rough exterior appearance. And when I speak about the

edifice complex, you'll understand when I share this story. The young man that led him to the Lord was a part of a certain specific body of believers. One Sunday evening he was baptized. Now you do understand biker gang here, you understand the appearance of what that would look like, that as he was being baptized, the pastor in introducing him made the statement, "As soon as this young man comes out of the water, he's going to cut his hair and shave his beard." That's an edifice complex where we're so focused on the material that we forget about the spiritual, and because of that there have been some who have rejected and said, "I don't want to be a part of the corporate body." Again, it goes back to those equations we shared.

Then the issue of a sharp, what we might call, clergy, laity discrepancy and this is where I'm going to address what you and I know as the prosperity gospel. If you're not familiar with the prosperity gospel, it is a very Western cultural concept though it is promoted in the Eastern world, that claims and believes that the more that the Lord favors you, the more material items and wealth you attain. Unfortunately, when you and I observe what we might call "Christian television" there is a lot of the prosperity gospel where certain pastors live lives of luxury at the expense of their people. Their people are starving and going without food so they can live lives that are often paralleled to celebrities.

Why are those the issues? Because in spite of that and in spite of those concerns, the church of Jesus Christ is still the only entity that Jesus Christ shed his blood for, so we as individual believers are to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ but we collectively as a church individual body, church larger body, we bear the responsibility of sharing with the entirety of the world the truth of Jesus Christ even in spite of those who may be painting what we would call a very poor biblical picture.

So let's talk collectively. What we might formally the church growth movement, how do we collectively see people come to faith? I know it's individual, one beggar telling another beggar where to find food, but I want to share with you some metrics on how we can observe God moving in our midst. This is as a collective body of believers. This is any local congregation or even a cultural group of believers. We define these as E0 through E3, that's just a formal designation. This is all going to make a whole lot of sense in a moment with what you observed through your life.

What we call E0 is when we see the gospel of Jesus Christ shared and received by those who are already within the congregation. Allow me to share how this is easily viewed: when children and grandchildren come to know the Lord. This is what we call E0. This is why we place so much emphasis, at least here locally, on children and student ministry because we know what the statistics are. Statistically speaking in the United States of America, once a young person turns 19 years of age there's only a 6% chance they will ever be saved by Jesus Christ. So therefore statistically the majority of people who come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ do so at a very young age. In fact, the overwhelming majority of those who come to faith and are baptized in a local congregation, even this local congregation, tend to be the children, the grandchildren, the nieces, the nephews of those who are already within the congregation.

E1 is where we begin to share the gospel outside of the walls. Now this is where it gets a little interesting because the overwhelming majority of people that local churches see come to know Christ as Savior or already a part of their congregation, yet years ago the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association did the research that 97% of the people that they saw saved got saved outside of a local church. Interesting, the majority of people who come to faith in Jesus Christ don't do so in a local church service but the majority of them are connected to the local congregation. How many times have we as a local congregation heard testimonies from our baptistry of parents conversing with their children at night in their bedrooms? And so it doesn't have to be in a restaurant or a coffee shop, it's just outside the walls.

Then we speak of what we call E2, that's crossing ethnic, cultural barriers. This means that the gospel of Jesus Christ is being preached to, being promoted to, and being advocated to people who don't look like we do, who might live in different neighborhoods, might have different socioeconomic backgrounds. In other words, it's at this point that the church truly can be declared a hospital and not a country club, that those who are willing to hear, those that are willing to embrace, those that are willing to believe, it does not matter their background, their geographical location, or their specificness of life.

Then finally what we call E3 is crossing linguistic barriers, seeing the gospel promoted and propagated to those who you personally cannot even have a personal conversation with. This is why oftentimes, and hopefully the majority of the time, local congregations embrace missions, going to all the world, those who not only don't live here but we cannot communicate with.

Now here is what you can use as kind of a, I hate to use report card but allow me to do so on a local congregation. It should be that all of these are present. It's not just that one of them is but all of them. Now there's always going to be an emphasis in a local congregation such as here at Opelika that has been here for so many years and so many multi-generations of families, there's going to be a whole of E0. It just makes sense when you grow up the third, the fourth, and the fifth generation of somebody in this community that's a part of this local church, we're going to see them come to faith but that cannot be the only kind. We must proclaim the gospel outside of these walls. We must be willing to embrace whomever the Lord brings no matter what the package is. And lest you question that last metric, it's not just about going overseas but you may or may not know we have a very vibrant congregation on our campus every Sunday that speaks a language that I understand not one single word, allowing those who we cannot even have a normal conversation with to minister the gospel of Jesus Christ. So the desire is to have all of them and in our own personal lives and in our corporate life, if there are absences of, then there needs to be an emphasis in.

So how is it that we see a group of believers revitalized when one of these areas is missing, when we're struggling? Now I want you to think beyond just a local congregation. We've studied in previous weeks that denominationally every major denominational "group" in the United States of America is on the fast decline.

Worldwide, outside of areas of strong and heavy persecution, the stalwarts of biblical Christianity of days past, i.e. Europe and the United States, are quickly fading. So when we look at that bigger picture, when we look at Egypt when you reside in Goshen, number 1: know the field. Oftentimes we allow what we believe to dictate what is true rather than what is true to dictate what we believe.

Some years ago, I had a dear friend of mine, he was called to a local church to do a study. This church was on the rapid decline. They were in an area that was socioeconomically changing not just by the year but by the day, and they were losing numbers, they were losing impact, they were losing influence and so as a "consultant," he met with them and he talked with them, and he said, "Okay, you tell me who you believe you think you can most effectively reach with the gospel outside of these walls." And they gave a description of just who they believed the Lord gave them to reach. He went and did a study. In a five mile radius there were 30,000 people that met that metric. In other words, when we "know the field is realized," that Jesus was right in John 4, he said the field is ripe for the harvest but we've got to be willing to know and to see the field.

Second, we've got to be willing to change the culture, and I mean the culture of the church. We spoke in previous weeks of moving from a culture that says serve me, give to me, please to me, to a culture that is missional in its mentality, more willing to see and have them hear the gospel than to experience what my personal preference may be.

Thirdly, short-term mission trips. Now I know in a world of COVID this has been difficult at best, but I want to dismiss a criticism that I've heard people say throughout the years. It goes a little something like this. Why would we spend all that money and time to go around the world with the gospel when there's people in our own town? You've heard that and I understand the rationale behind that, but let me give you the secret tonight behind short-term mission trips, all right? Now I don't know how many times you've heard the truth but you're about to hear it tonight. As a pastor, we embrace short-term mission trips not simply for the ministry that will be done in that specific location because, understand, one week out of 52 weeks is but a small dent. Understand that a group of people who speak a different language and who look differently in their appearance makes a very small impact when only for a few days. Are we planting seeds? Yes. Are we furthering the ministry there? Absolutely. But hear me clearly, the main fruit of a short-term mission trip isn't what happens over there, it's what gets brought back here, to come back with a heart of fervency, to come back desiring to see what was seen there experienced here. In fact, I don't know in my own life a single short-term mission trip I've ever gone on where I didn't come back more zealous and more desirous of the things of God where I lived each and every day than before when I went on the trip. Sometimes the best thing we can do to become zealous for our faith here is to go somewhere else and allow the Lord to work on us there.

What we know as small groups, Sunday school classes, each and every person that not only comes to be a part of this local congregation but we talk to as guests and visitors, we encourage this. Why? It's called accountability. It's accountability. Not only is it Bible study, not only is it growing our faith but it is accountability, that you have someone who

knows your name, there is somebody who will encourage you when you're down and keep you accountable when you need to be done so.

Then finally I'm going to give you a phrase you may or may not have ever heard, it's called a comeback church or a breakout church. You're sitting in a specific location tonight of a church that's been here since 1859. There's a lot of churches in our land that have been around for a very very long time and yet the overwhelming majority of local congregations are not growing, they're not thriving, they're not winning the lost, and they're not baptizing. But there's an interesting metric that we've discovered, we call them comeback churches, breakout churches, maybe in the "days of past" we might say that congregation is having a revival. I want you to hear a very interesting set of statistics here, that a church, a local body of believers who finds themselves on the decline, they find themselves not zealous for the faith, not promoting the faith, not preaching the faith, not baptizing, not winning the lost, when they become stagnant sometimes we might call that a dead church. How is it that the Lord infuses life again? Yes, there's the means that we just spoke of but what is the metric? I'm going to share with you two very interesting statistics that we've discovered, that the average church, group of believers, who found themselves stagnant, not winning the lost, not baptizing people, not making a spiritual impact in their community or the world at large, that when that breakout came, when that revival came, when that comeback came, the stagnant period on average was 14 years. Phew, that's a long time, is it not? 14 years and here's the most interesting statistic: and the pastor on average had been there for 21.

Why is that important? And I want to close with this tonight. This happens in our personal lives, this happens in our Sunday school classes, this happens in our local churches, and this happens in our denominations, it even happens in the world at large, during times of stagnation, during times where things are not going as we would desire, now this is presuming that we're being biblically faithful, we're being true to the word of God, we're not deviating like we spoke of earlier, you're staying true, there is a worldly tendency to kneejerk and change. In other words, "Well, we've stagnated for a few years. Yeah, we're staying true to the word of God, we're preaching the word of God, we're teaching it, we're singing but, man, we haven't seen the baptisms we used to have. We've got to change something." And boy, leadership changes, structure changes, everything changes but these churches, 14 years was the average timespan and a pastorate of 21.

Tonight as I close, you may or may not know this but this local congregation has a reputation for evangelism. We have a reputation for sharing the gospel unashamedly and just keeping on keeping on. Every now and then there are individuals from other congregations both locally and abroad who call me and they'll say, "Jeff, what's the secret? How does First Baptist, Opelika keep being who they...? How does it work?" Can I tell you what my answer is? We know who we are. We know whose we are. And we just keep doing it. In other words, the latest fad we don't jump on. The latest newest thing we don't immediately kneejerk. We just keep preaching the gospel, keep living the gospel, keep giving to missions and let the Lord bless as we do.

Again, what we spoke of at the beginning today, those issues we have is because in times of stagnation and in times of down and out they decided to change new means, new methodology, and unfortunately a new message. The message must never change.