

What's Wrong with the Church Today?

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“What’s wrong with the church today?” that is a question that has been raised in my presence on more than one occasion. Recently on a missionary trip to Zimbabwe, Africa, a deacon in our church, Phil Burno, accompanying me, reiterated the same question.

We had a rather lengthy conversation standing in the darkness of night in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe. But I was only able to scratch the surface of this subject and I am sure I left Brother Phil unsatisfied with my explanation. But more important, it is the subject that has troubled me greatly.

But before I can properly address what is wrong with the church today, I need to make some observations, declarations, as well as to lay out some foundational thoughts.

Evangelicals know that all is not well in their churches and missions. Behind the facade of glowing missionary reports and massive statistics, there is a profound awareness that the church has little power in evangelism. While bravely trying to produce an aura of joy and victory among their followers, Church leaders are uneasy and deeply dissatisfied with their present experience and results of their efforts.

The church is overwhelmed with questions about evangelism and hope for revival. Never have there been more missionaries. Never have there been more evangelistic meetings and campaigns. Never were more Christians studying to do personal evangelism. Never were there such enormous conferences to examine serious causes and cures of lameness in the Gospel ministry.

If I recall correctly in 1966, 165 mission agencies and 55 schools convened at Wheaton Illinois in a congress on the Church’s Worldwide Missions. Their task was to address themselves to the barriers preventing success in a world evangelistic thrust. Soon after that, 1300 men of 100 nations met in Berlin. They fervently hoped that this Congress on Evangelism would light the fuse for a worldwide evangelistic explosion. If I recall correctly in my studies, in 1969 great numbers met in St Louis to investigate and stimulate evangelism. Other such gatherings have taken place consistently until the present.

Yet the bewilderment is deepening among missionaries and local churches. After analyzing, evaluating, praying and hoping, missions are not revitalized and sinners are not turning to Christ in great numbers. The questions are still being asked “What is wrong with our Evangelism?” “What is needed to win the world to Christ?” “Where are the powerful Edwards and Whitefields?” “Where is the power of the Holy Spirit?”

I don’t pretend to have all the answers and perhaps I’ll raise more questions instead. But I am writing on the airplane, flying back to the United States from Zimbabwe, Africa. My thoughts are on this subject are running all over the place. But the truth is that the question that

Brother Phil is asking, has in fact gripped my soul. I don't seek to be judgmental and critical just for the sake of it. I have spent close to 20 years preaching, pastoring, teaching, evangelizing and training other pastors in other parts of the world. I have seen a lot of things that quite frankly are very disturbing.

In this honest search for God's power to return to the preaching today, evangelicals have been making some crucial errors. Those who believe in God's Word have been grasping at the same superficial solutions that liberalism has adopted. Relevance, respectability (whether intellectual or social) and especially unity have become the aims of God's people, with the hope that these will revitalize a weakened church. The church thinks, if only all Bible-believing people join together, the world would sit up and listen. Let's merge our mission boards to pool our funds and our personnel. Let's join in a common organization; we can have greater depth of evangelism. Thus organizational unity becomes the aim or the purpose of Gospel churches.

Now here is the problem or part of the problem as I see it. Having accepted the theory that unity is all-important for world evangelism, both the church and the individual must lower their estimate of the value of truth. You see in large conferences on evangelism, we could not insist on the truth of God's Word that might offend an evangelical brother. Just like liberalism, we must find the lowest common denominator to which all born-again Christians hold. The rest of the Bible will be labeled "unessential" for missions. After all, unity among Christians is more important than doctrinal preciseness.

It is for just this very reason that the mission societies have been unwilling to carefully examine the root problem in preaching. I addressed this issue a couple of years ago in a teaching directed to a Pastor's Training School on the preaching of the cross. Mission boards are hesitant to answer the question "What is the Gospel?" To thoroughly answer the question would condemn what many of their own missionaries preach. Once again, I am making this observation after 20 years in ministry and missionary work. In that time period, I have come across dozens and dozens and dozens of different missionaries and their mission board representatives. It would destroy the mission society which is usually a federation of churches who have differing answers to that question. To adopt the position of one church would be to lose the support of the five other churches. The whole system built on unity and generality would crumble.

I have also found that the local church many times may not get too specific about truth either. It may affect its harmony with the denomination or association. To define the Gospel carefully will bring conflict with the organization. It will prompt irritating problems with mission boards and embarrassing disagreements with missionaries supported for years. I have had numerous missionaries tell me that they could not change for fear of losing their financial support or being dismissed. It may condemn the entire Sunday School program. Giving too much attention to the content of the Gospel will mean friction with the evangelicals, and unity is the key to success.

TRADITION IN EVANGELISM

Now let's look a little bit at the history of traditional evangelism. Evangelicals cherish their Reformation heritage. We stand in the lives of Martin Luther and others that have broken the back of Papal superstitions. The Bible, God's Holy Word, is our guide in all things. We bow to no human authority.

Such a claim flows from a right spirit of allegiance to God. Yet the cry "Sola Scriptura" is more often an indication of good intention than it is fact. The evangelical wing of the Protestant church is so often saturated with doctrine and practices which have no Biblical foundation. Many teachings and habits touching the Gospel are as much the products of human inventions and traditions and certain doctrines in our midst are quite as dangerous.

In the central issue of the *Way of Salvation*, large segments of Protestantism are engrossed in neo-traditionalism. Basically speaking, we have inherited a system of evangelical preaching, which is unbiblical. Nor is this tradition very ancient. Our message and manner of preaching the Gospel cannot be traced back to the Reformation and their creeds. They are much more recent innovations. Worse, they cannot be traced to the Scriptures. They have clearly arisen from superficial exegesis and a careless mixture of twentieth-century reason with God's revelation.

The resulting product is a dangerous conglomerate – just the sort that Satan uses to delude the soul of sinners. Tell me what cult has not learned to use verses of the Bible and half-truths to establish their lies? That has been the Devil's strategy from the beginning (Genesis 3:5). By selling another gospel to our generation, Satan has been employing many sincere men in preaching a dethroned Christ. The glories of the Savior are being hidden, even from His servants because preachers will not give careful attention to the Gospel of God's Word alone.

Products of modern evangelism are often sad examples of Christianity. They make a profession of faith and then continue to live like the world. Decisions for Christ mean very little. Let us take a moment to identify and define the term "Decisions". [To become a Christian, a sinner must decide to turn from sin and trust the Savior. Repentance and faith are inward acts of human will. But these must be carefully distinguished from the outward procedure of going forward, verbally confessing sin and publicly asking Christ to be one's Savior. For the purposes of this discussion, the term "decision" will refer to the formal ceremonies connected with evangelical services, for these have become identified with "decisions" in the evangelical minds, with unfounded assumption that participants in outward ceremonies have, in fact, inwardly decided to follow Christ.]

Only a small portion of those who "make decisions" evidence the grace of God in a transformed life. When the excitement of the latest campaign has subsided, when the choir sings no more thrilling choruses, when the large crowds no longer gather, when the emotional hope in the evangelistic invitation has moved to another city, what do we have that is real and lasting? When every house in our mission village has been visited, what has been done? When the smoke clears and the dust has settled, what has been done? The honest heart answers, "Very little". There has been a great deal of noise and dramatic excitement, but God has not come down with His frightful power and converting grace.

All of this is related to the use of a message in evangelism that is unbiblical. The truth necessary for life has been hidden in a smoke screen of human invention. On the shallow ground of man's logic, large numbers have been led to assume they have the right to everlasting life and have been given an assurance which does not belong to them. Evangelicals are swelling the ranks of the deluded with a perverted Gospel. Many who have "made decisions" in modern churches and have been told in the inquiry rooms that their sins have been forgiven, will be as surprised as many others to hear "I never knew you; depart from me" (Matthew 7:23).

Many of you who read this teaching have inherited practices and teachings which you assume to be the right way of evangelism. You have never seen a lively church actively evangelize in any other way, so you have never questioned it. I know that there are some who claim to possess a more precise theology of evangelism who do nothing to win sinners to Christ. I can recall one of my professors in college who once said "The absence of zeal is a dreadful predicament on one hand. But there is also danger of zeal without knowledge." But let me change that thought pattern to get closer to the biblical concept. The absence of evangelistic zeal is a dreadful predicament on one hand. But there is also a great deal of danger of zeal which is not according to biblical knowledge.

Could you be misleading souls and misdirecting the labors of other Christians? Have you closely examined your message and methods in the light of God's Word?

Pastors, this is no idle question. Have you not wondered about those converts who are as carnal as ever? What about those who have "Decided for Christ" and you cannot tell what they've decided? They are not godly like the Savior they profess, nor zealous for His cause. They do not study the Word and do not mind if they are absent when it is preached. Consequently, you know that they give no evidence of true conversion. Have you considered the possibility that they were never evangelized at all? Have your preaching and methods led them to comfort apart from Christ?

Many case histories of our Lord's personal evangelism and many apostolic sermons would serve well in defining the Gospel. Jesus' interview with the rich young ruler has been chosen because it is a vivid instance of the elements essential to Gospel preaching which are found everywhere in the New Testament. The words of Mark 10:17-27 stands in stark contrast with the prevailing doctrine of evangelicals today. The difference between today's gospel and Jesus' Gospel are not in minor details, but in the very core of the matter. Modern changes are serious enough to grieve the Spirit and yield empty nets. They are dangerous enough to misguide souls for eternity.

Some will immediately retreat behind the convenient shield of relativism. The excuse, "It's only a matter of emphasis", will be used to escape a serious self-examination in the light of God's Word. But the ensuing contrasts between Christ's Gospel and today's popularized gospel are crucial and not minor. In these contrasting messages may lay the difference between life and death for a soul, between vitality and sterility for a church.

No sincere Christian intends to deceive sinners. In love for souls true evangelicals inevitably present some profound truths in their witnessing. Yet by the unconscious omission of essential ingredients of the Gospel, many fail to communicate even that portion of God's Word which they mean to convey. Here is the point: when a half-truth is presented as the whole truth, it becomes an untruth.

Though the answer may be painful, you must ask if your church, your missionaries, your evangelists, your Sunday School teachers, and you yourself, are preaching our Lord's Gospel. Though the answer may bring some discomfort, conflict, misunderstanding, and loss of friends, you cannot dishonor God by ignoring His truth. If you are unwilling to take a firm stand on the content of the Gospel, then say no more about zeal, sacrifice and activity. If you are not willing to insist that the "story to tell the nations" be precisely Jesus' story, why go on with so called "evangelism" and "missions" at all?

All of us need to look closely then at the Master Evangelist of all ages. Listen to His message, observe His motives and note His methods, they reflect on your own ministry. In the young man of 30 AD you will see the faces of the young men of 2004. To reach them you must say what our Lord said. That is if you believe that He is the same yesterday, today and forevermore. To please God we must labor as Christ labored. We must cast off the shackles of evangelical traditions! We must refuse to pay for outward unity with coins of fundamental truth. We must learn to follow the Christ of the Scriptures in evangelism. We must lay hold of the authentic Gospel and discard the synthetic.