

Local Church Evangelism

How Involved Should We Be With Missions And Events?

No one denies that the church should constantly engage in evangelism and that this is its main purpose after seeking to glorify God in testimony and develop ministry in disciples. But this is the rub, it is right here that many churches fail the Biblical requirement. They have a poor experience in sharing the Gospel as a body, growth is slow and so the church gets behind a particular mission, series of events or para-church organisation in order to catch up. It is right here that we completely miss the point.

The New Testament Practice

Gossiping the Gospel

All the church is called to be a witness (literally 'martyr'). This means that the Gospel gets shared in a multitude of ways. Each Christian is different and has a particular edge which they give to the Gospel message. As long as it witnesses to Christ and emphasises Biblical truth, the actual presentation can vary enormously.¹ Nothing is as effective as the whole congregation actively sharing the Gospel during their day to day activities and constantly praying for their loved ones.

Organic growth

The early church grew organically, just as its structure was organic. Modern methods emphasise organising and organisations, which is diametrically opposed to the Biblical model. Converts did not arise through things which were arranged by the apostles (special services, campaigns) but through the normal life and activity of the body. People got saved through visiting the normal Sunday service and seeing love in action (1 Cor 14:24-25), or through the faithful prayer and witness of friends and relatives.

Friends and relatives

Though included in both the above points, this needs special emphasis. The discipling of believers included an encouragement to share the Gospel and be a witness in the family and workplace. Christians were faithful in this, even in times of persecution, when it cost them their lives to do so. People will accept more from a friend they love, than from someone whom they know is an expert on a given subject. Furthermore, a one off sermon lasting 45 minutes, containing many points and illustrations, is not as effective as the continual short conversations of a friend who can 'scratch where they itch'.

Local not global

Initiatives and accountability always remained within the local church in the hands of the elders. Evangelism was thus always rooted in the local community. Any problems could be dealt with locally and properly. Matters which evangelism brought to the surface could be taken on board thus enhancing the Gospel with acts of love. For instance, a conversation with a neighbour may reveal that they were in financial need and suffering. The church could then meet that need - providing a food hamper and money - thus showing that the message

¹ This is not the place to describe this message, but we can note Paul's differing approaches to different ethnic groups (initial emphasis on God as creator and Lord requiring repentance to Greeks, emphasis upon the inability to fulfil the law and Jesus as the resurrected messiah to Jews).

was backed up with character. This counts for a great deal. On the other hand, if someone had a grievance (whether valid or not) this could be taken to the elders and sorted out. There was no distant leadership who drifted into the community for a week of ministry and then vanished three thousand miles away beyond the bounds of all contention.

Church based not mission (para-church organisation)

All New Testament mission is founded upon the church and comes out of an authorised ministry setting. Even when Paul and Barnabus go on long missionary journeys, they do so at the instigation of the Holy Spirit and within the fellowship of the church at Antioch. We never see a ministerial maverick who has no foundation in the local church. The reports of success are given, on return, to apostles and elders.

Modern missions and para-church organisations have no direct accountability to a local eldership team. This is completely unbiblical. God blessed some of the pioneer versions of these 100-200 years ago because the church was failing to obey the Lord's command to go to all nations. So he raised up godly men who paved the way to reach people who had never heard the Gospel, men like Hudson Taylor, David Brainerd, John Paton, Wilfred Grenfel, Charles Cowman, William Carey, WC Burns, CT Studd and women like Mary Slessor, Elizabeth Elliot and Amy Carmichael. Some of these set up organisations to continue the work effectively and God blessed them. As indigenous churches were established where these organisations grew up, they became less necessary; the China Inland Mission is not necessary where the Chinese indigenous church is growing rapidly. If there is a place where there is no indigenous church, or outreach by a nearby church, then a mission may be required. Other than that, the job is now quite capable of being completed by the local indigenous church or associated churches. Missions which do not see the establishment of churches as their ultimate goal have no sound Biblical purpose.

God's purposes are focused in the Church which is Christ's body. Organisations which view the completion of their objectives within themselves are going against the plan of God. The church is the instrument of God's work in this world and evangelism comes out of the local church - growth takes place when churches are multiplied. Large numbers of converts which are not disciplined into local church life is not a success, its a tragedy.

Modern Methods Which Have No NT Precedent

These would include:

- door to door knocking
- school work
- healing services
- open air dramas, mimes, performances and concerts
- painting
- open air worship
- marching bands
- hype (advertising and media exploitation)

Little needs to be said here as no one can give a Biblical apologetic for these types of activity; they simply do not appear in scripture. Furthermore, several of them are distinctly pagan in their origin (drama, marching bands) or emphasise human effort that has high success for cultic groups (door to door work). Most of them are modern, being little known in history. Where an activity was known to the apostles (like drama in Greece) it was not used as a method by them (even by Paul when in Greece).

Preaching - a failure?

It is often said that the modern age needs new visual methods since people have grown used to sound bites and have poor receptivity to spoken messages; but is this true? Firstly, since when did God change his command (Mk 16:15-16; 2 Tim 4:2)? He established the preaching of the Gospel and this command has not been rescinded. Faith comes by hearing (Gal 3:3,5), and hearing from preaching the Gospel (Rm 10:14-17; 2 Cor 5:11,20), the sheep hear the voice of Jesus (Jn 10:27) in the call of the Gospel (Heb 9:15; 2 Tim 1:9). Even if men have changed their cultural expectations, we must still obey God and not pander to man. But interestingly, it seems that the real problem is not the method, but the lack of unction and the poverty of truth which is the real problem. Where preachers have humbly shared the simple Biblical message (which includes hell, judgment and wrath) in the power of the Spirit, there has been a tremendous response of Biblical proportions in modern times (e.g. mainland China). Also, when the situation is right, crowds will listen to a speaker for hours. Recent domestic events in Europe, Russia and the Far East have shown many instances where political rallies have brought forth speakers who marshalled the opinion of the masses and kept crowds enraptured for long periods of time with invective, homiletic, sophistry, harangue and manipulation. In the right circumstances, the limits of sound bites evaporates and people will listen to charismatic speakers. The real problem is that the church has not produced a Whitefield, a Luther, a Calvin, a Chrysostom or a Spurgeon for a long time.

Mission and Growth

To what degree should we expect results? After all, many great missionaries, like: Adoniram Judson or William Carey, experienced very little fruit, and much suffering, for many years before they had any 'success'. Can we tolerate working hard to no avail?

This is where we need wisdom. Firstly, we should not despise the day of small things. Faithful, genuine service sometimes results in little to show for itself, and this should not be denigrated. OT and NT saints had this experience (e.g. Isaiah and Jeremiah) and even Jesus was deserted at his time of greatest need leaving a following of only a few hundred at most. But on the other hand, there are many missions which contain loyal workers which seem to have had no effect for many decades but still faithfully carry on, hoping against hope for revival and large numbers suddenly making up for all the lost years. When these organisations utilise methods which can be demonstrated to be unbiblical, then the lack of success, combined with lack of Biblicity, suggests that this work does not have God's favour and will never succeed.

But the local church does not need to team up with any organisation. It has all it needs amongst its members. It needs no specialist help if it has godly elders, faithful obedient people and a heart to pray. At the end of the day the church is not called to be successful in the world's way of reckoning, it is called to be faithful as a steward of God's grace. The local church must make prayer and evangelism a priority and seek wisdom from God about whom it should pray for and how it witnesses as a body. The church must go to God for vision and not seek the fleshly, fashionable methods of the time; furthermore, numbers are never the motivating factor, rather obeying God and being faithful is.

What Is The Local Church To Do?

The local church must pre-eminently develop its own strategies for evangelism. These

should be on the direction of the Holy Spirit and in full accord with the word of God. If a person is present who has a clear gift of being an evangelist, then he should direct this work. In any event, elders must assume full responsibility and accountability.

Key Strategies

Foremost among strategies must be a continual encouragement to share the Gospel amongst the friends and relatives of the membership. This is the prime Biblical example and the one which statistics reveal is the most effective method. If there is a steady ingathering of converts through this method, other evangelistic activities are hardly necessary.

Special Events

Special events should only be undertaken at the clear direction of the Holy Spirit. They are not the norm and are not seen in the New Testament. Some church services could have a particular evangelistic edge if that is thought to be appropriate and relevant by the elders.

Local Missions

Formal involvement with a local mission should be considered with the utmost caution. As these are usually para-church organisations with no eldership accountability, they can be completely unbiblical and fraught with danger. If, in addition, they use non scriptural methods, they cannot possibly have God's sanction and should thus be avoided. Further to this, if they have little evidence of fruit over many years, then what is the point of associating with them in the first place. Often people do so because of a certain honour these folk have in localities (they are usually lovely people) and a lack of other alternatives. This is insufficient reason for getting involved and it may constitute disobedience to God.

Big Campaigns

National and international hyped up events should be avoided like the plague. They always have a total reliance upon the work of man and thus cannot expect the power of the Spirit. In recent decades Britain has seen many of these: the *Jesus In Me* campaign, the *Spree* campaigns, the Reinhard Bonke book to all households, the Don Double campaigns, the Billy Graham Crusades by TV link and so forth. In all but the Graham crusades, the net response, despite millions of pounds spent, was virtually zero when all was said in done. The Graham crusades always have a huge immediate response, but the statistics of his own organisation reveal that the later drop off rate is up to 95%. After the big flurry of excitement at the time, even though some churches may initially gain professing converts, the result a few months later is always that little has really changed.

It is not only the fact that they do not work, but who measures the fall out and depression amongst believers who worked hard to make it work at the instigation of their pastors? During the *JIM* and Bonke Book mission I was associated with a local Brighton pastor. We talked of these initiatives and I urged him not to get involved and warned of the dangers. He ignored this advice, under denominational pressure and expectations. Members got fully involved in both efforts and not one convert was gained, neither could anyone tell us of any converts at all in the Brighton / Hove area. Despite the posters, the T shirts, the printing expenses, the concerts, the preaching etc. nothing was gained. Afterwards many folk went into a deep spiritual depression caused by the unreal expectations and the hard work. I know of at least two people who left the church as a result. I urged that at least a statement should be made to apologise and simply say that the leadership had got it wrong. This was unacceptable to them and so the malaise dragged on for months until it was finally forgotten. This sort of pastoral crisis is repeated time and time again after one campaign or another. It makes the church look foolish to the world and damages the flock. It should be stopped.

Biblical Reactions To The Gospel & The Dangers Of Adopting A Seeker Friendly Approach

One of the key modern initiatives, in the corporate evangelism of modern local churches, is to adopt various forms of worldly presentation to share the Gospel. Now the evangel should always be presented in culturally relevant ways but within sobriety and the guidelines revealed in scripture. There is no gain in preaching, using King James English, to modern teenagers. However, the basic method and message of the apostles must be adhered to. The idea that we should water down all confrontational aspects of the Gospel and make people feel as comfortable as possible is totally opposed to apostolic procedures. We forget that the apostles were often persecuted for sharing the Gospel and many of the first generation of believers were killed for it. Their hearers were made distinctly uncomfortable.

The Message Of The Evangel - Key Missing Points

Firstly, we need to briefly indicate where much modern evangelism goes wrong in it's actual doctrinal message. Without going into a lengthy exposition here, what is vital is that the main Biblical structure of Gospel teaching is presented. This is actually diametrically opposed to many modern presentations. Nowhere, for instance, do the apostles predicate their summons to faith on the basis of: *'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life'*. The word 'love' does not appear in Acts at all and never formed a basis for apostolic preaching. This Arminian emphasis has all but destroyed the Gospel in modern times and is the reason for so many spurious conversions and weaknesses in local churches. God's love is only directed to the elect and is from the foundation of the world to them (Eph 1:4-5). Since we cannot know who is elect and who is not, we must preach the warnings and offer of the Gospel to all, offering no assurance to those who do not respond.

The foundation of the Good News is that there is bad news to be faced and overcome. All men have rebelled against the holy God who created the universe and he will call all to give an account of their lives. Those who do not live up to his perfect standard of righteousness will be judged and sent to hell for eternity to pay for their sins of thought, word and deed; sins of commission or omission. The Good News is that this God sent his Son to die in the place of those who repent, and he has borne the full penalty of their sins on the cross. All are commanded to repent and come to the saviour for mercy and believe his message. Those that do will be changed and their sins forgiven; more than that they will become part of God's family and be assured of eternal life and great blessing.

Modern woolly messages which give no place to sin, judgment, death and hell are failing the Biblical norm. No patient can be convinced of a necessary healing treatment unless he is first convinced he has a serious medical problem.

The Gospel Message Is A Mystery

(Mk 4:11; Rm 16:25; 1 Cor 2:7; Eph 3:3, 6:19; Col 1:26-27, 4:3; 1 Tim 3:9)

The mystery of the gospel. (Eph 6:19)

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began. (Rm 16:25)

The power of the Gospel is the application of the truth in the conscience by the Holy Spirit. Success does not depend on our methods and anyone who suggests that certain forms of presentation have a better success rate than others simply means that people are being more psychologically manipulated by one means than another. The conversion of saints is

sovereignly in the hands of God not men. Often a person will get converted under a poor message or a sermon about some Biblical subject not closely connected with the Good News per se. For instance I know of a person who got saved whilst listening to a message on tithing. Often the most wonderful presentation yields no fruit at all. God is sovereign.

The Gospel is a mystery, a mystery which requires initiation. The means of initiation is preaching the truth under the power of the Holy Spirit. This means that some will respond as the Spirit calls them effectually whilst others will not. Jesus made this clear:

And he said unto them, 'Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them.'

(Mk 4:11-12)

The success of evangelism does not depend upon our using the right modern methods which improve communication and make people feel comfortable. This may well work against the Spirit's ministry and was never a feature of apostolic ministry. Success depends upon clear presentation of spoken truth (not acted, sung, mimed etc.). Methodology is not a major criterion for our attention, obedience to the scriptural teaching and submission to the Spirit is.

The Gospel Message Is Foolishness

(1 Cor 1:18-25, 2:14, 3:19)

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. (1 Cor 1:18)

Since the Gospel is a mystery which we cannot unveil without the Spirit no matter how hard we try, it follows on that the message we preach will be ridiculed because it is old hat, outdated, foolishness. Talk of repentance, a saviour, sins, judgment, hell, God, baptism and so on is not what people want to hear. Modern people are more prepared to listen to the teachings of witches, New Age practitioners, Eastern Gurus and so on, even if they are way out. Biblical Christianity is considered to be a Victorian relic which has now ceased to have any modern currency.

Yet this attitude also confronted Paul 2000 years ago, just as it confronted Jesus before him. As Jesus said, if people persecuted the master, they will treat the disciples in a similar way; so, our message will certainly be seen by some, or many, as stupid when presented Biblically. Why then do churches go out of their way to avoid this and make the Gospel presentation acceptable by importing foreign elements like: drama, mime, dancing, puppets, performances, music, top ten chart songs, aerobics? We should be concentrating on making the spoken message clear not trying to soften the presentation with a worldly veneer. We should also remember that adopting worldly methods to make the Gospel more acceptable and understandable to the world is foolish itself:

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness. And again, The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain. (1 Cor 3:19-20).

The Gospel Message Is An Offence

(Rm 9:33; Gal 5:11; 1 Pt 2:8)

The offence of the cross. (Gal 5:11)

Whenever the true Gospel is presented it will cause an offence to those who do not positively respond. Although the Greek word used is the one we derive 'scandal' from, in Greek it

means something that trips you up, traps you. Jesus' ministry divides, it causes some people to fall. It did when he was on the earth, he stated that it would afterwards and it has done throughout time. This is because the elect will respond but the reprobate will react against it. The few are chosen, but the many called and not selected will be offended.

If our Gospel preaching never causes any offence then there must be something wrong somewhere. If we have watered down the Gospel message to avoid confrontation, then we may have pleasing contacts instead of offended folk, but we will have no spiritual results. If we have adopted all sorts of worldly presentations to mask the Gospel message and make it more acceptable, again we will have less confrontation but probably fewer genuine results. We are not here to make things so wishy washy that no one is offended, but we are here to make converts.

No one wants to be told clearly that they will go to hell in their sins if they reject God's saviour and his Gospel. But this is what we are called to do. Clear messages like this will give us a bad name, but we will be obeying God and are much more likely to see authentic fruit.

The Gospel Message Is A Stumblingblock

(Rm 9:33; 1 Cor 1:23; 1 Pt 2:8)

Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, "The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone," and "A stone of stumbling And a rock of offence." They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed. (1 Pt 2:7-8)

Our job is not to stop people falling over the Gospel; it is meant to have that effect. One word used primarily means, 'an obstacle'. Because it divides believers from unbelievers, the Gospel is an obstacle to many people having faith - the reprobate were never appointed to have faith but were predestined to stumble. The true Gospel will always cause problems to the world and people will be broken as they trip up over it. It is wrong to so arrange the Gospel presentation that offence is minimised and it becomes acceptable to the world. When sinners can walk into an evangelistic service, be charmed by all kinds of events (dramas, dancing, songs telling them God loves them etc.), enjoy it thoroughly and then go out without any conviction of sin, there is something seriously wrong. True Gospel preaching will make things more difficult for some, it will present a real obstacle to them. We should not fear this and try to make the Gospel acceptable or non threatening by facile means.

Scriptural evangelistic presentations will cause some people to stumble but others to find the truth. The stumbling of some should not deter us from holding fast to the acceptable, Biblical model of clear, preached Gospel truth prayerfully presented.

The Dangers Of Using Worldly Methods To Bolster The Gospel

What is the point in using dramas, mimes, dancing, aerobics, hit songs etc. in evangelistic services? If people are attracted to this type of service and feel like coming again, will they not be very disappointed when they find that normal services are completely different? What are we telling folk when we establish special exciting services for evangelism? We are saying that our normal services are not suitable for them, they need a special event. If we admit that the event was a lure to entice them to come to the normal service, is this not deception? Are

we not giving very mixed messages to folk by using special events for the Gospel? The alternative to this (and perhaps more honest) is the American Willow Creek approach of Bill Hybels - all the main weekly public services are established on a 'seeker sensitive' methodology. In this case enquirers feel able to go to any meeting, not just some special staged outreach event, because they are all adapted to using worldly methods: rock music, sound bites, dramas etc. The problem here is that all Biblical meeting norms have been thrown overboard and the meetings cease to be scriptural Christian fellowship at all.

Another danger of using modern entertainment methods is the increased likelihood of spurious conversions. Many people are captivated by the songs, the music, the presentations, the drama etc. and this encourages an emotional response to any Gospel demands. One can never be sure what prompted the response in situations like this. This is why the simple preaching of the word is paramount.

God's work must be done God's way. The Lord is the architect of the church and the clever ideas of man will only hinder his work. *'Unless the LORD builds the house, They labour in vain who build it;'* (Ps 127:1). For centuries the church has leaned on the arm of flesh to gather converts and all it produced was an army of Ishmaels. The time has come for the church to cease following the world and simply act as the Bible teaches. The fashions of the world were open to the apostles; many converts must have been actors, poets, singers, musicians or playwrights (especially in Greece and Italy), but they never deviated from simply preaching the Gospel, and personally witnessing to Christ.

What About Kids Ministry?

This is a very sensitive issue. Obviously much thought needs to go into presenting Gospel truths to young people at a suitable level for their stage of maturity. There is no reason why all sorts of methods can't be used to help young children perceive truth away from the church gathering for worship. What is critical is that youngsters need to be fed scripture stories to help them form a foundation for the application of the Spirit's work later on. This gives a basic scriptural groundwork which will serve a useful purpose throughout their lives (even if they leave the church) and God already has some capital of truth within them. Slightly older kids can also be encouraged to memorise scriptural passages, or even whole Psalms (like Ps 23), the 10 Commandments or the Lord's Prayer. Even older kids can be taught a basic catechism of doctrine with scripture proof texts. By this age kids will have formed an excellent foundation of truth.

Now how all this is done is up to the children's workers, but the focus should be on the truth. Games, competitions with prizes, painting, and so on, can all be utilised to make the learning attractive. What should be avoided are little homilies with a moral basis which have no scriptural foundation. They do not stay in the memory and serve no useful Gospel purpose. Neither should pagan practices be introduced which are becoming popular amongst modern liberal educationists like: face painting and complete freedom of physical expression.

Special event evangelism focused on kids can be useful, but what is best is to provide a regular meeting for local kids to enjoy themselves and form useful relationships of trust with kid's workers. This can be done through providing kid's holiday clubs or regular youth clubs on a week-night. Here healthy games, food and fellowship can be provided with the evangelism coming from 'gossiping the Gospel' naturally through trusted contacts, either from Christian kids or youth workers. This allows the Bible principles we have already seen to operate. We know that this is the best form of evangelism and where this is operating there is no need for special events or dragging in entertainers and specialist youth workers at cost. All that is required is a venue for games and a few trusted workers who care about kids and can develop an open, trusted atmosphere where relationships can grow. Why add

special costly events to what is already a proven successful method that has minimal cost?

What is critical is that any special kid's event does not take over a normal Sunday worship service. It is a dangerous mistake to try to attract parents of unbelieving kids, who have been attracted into the church by a special event, by staging a special extravaganza as an outgrowth of the kids work. There is a measure of deception in doing this as we have already seen ('Come and see what the kids have been doing this week', but 'Really we want to preach the Gospel to you'). This is pragmatism over obedience to scripture, and is the reverse of the scriptural precedent of reaching children through their parents. There are also potential problems with accusations of manipulating kids in this area. No real fruit will follow.

Another danger is that kids must never be encouraged to think that church meetings have to take on a special entertaining form for them to be part of it. Kid's should be part of the normal church family experiencing the normal church service as soon as they are able to cope with it maturely. There are no special youth meetings in scripture and all Biblical methods for teaching kids, throughout the old and new testaments, is within the normal family and worship confines. Young children attended the tabernacle worship system with their fathers, despite seeing animals gutted and screaming in the sacrifices. If we set up special event services for kid's outreach on Sunday, we are saying that they can't enjoy or be part of the normal church worship; they need special treatment. This builds up psychological barriers for later life.

When all is said and done, the Gospel ministry to kids is not really different to that of adults. Truth should be presented to the very young in a Biblical but relevant way for their age in church meetings outside the worship service (Sunday school); and outreach youth meetings should not be religious, but rather centres for development of sober relaxation and good relationships, coupled with opportunities for personal sharing of the Gospel as people ask.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, the means God established for the propagation of the Gospel was the church. There is no need for special, modern, worldly, events or missionary organisations, in order to be successful in seeing converts; what is needed are caring believers reaching out to friends, relatives and neighbours, Christians who can pray and witness to the people God gives them opportunities to talk to, a church meeting that is welcoming, preachers who can explain Gospel truths idiomatically with clarity and members who know how to properly lead a person to Christ.

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