

1 - The Witness of the Church

By Tom Chantry

One of the questions that sometimes perplexes believers is this: who has the responsibility to take the gospel to the lost? Is it the task of the individual believer or of the church collectively?

We live in a day in which discussions of personal evangelism abound. Books, seminars, and programs on the subject have become legion. Much of the material presses the same basic idea: don't count on the church to win the lost; it is your responsibility as a private Christian to evangelize. At the same time, churches are developing their own strategies and programs, striving to get everyone on board for their own brand of evangelism.

The consequent debates can be perplexing. As churches reorganize their entire program in order to be more welcoming to the unconverted so that their people can "bring their friends to church," others scoff at an evangelistic strategy which brings people to church. After all, you don't want to bring them to church, but to Christ! I've actually heard sincere Christians say that bringing an unsaved person to church is a grave misstep as well as a cowardly abandonment of personal evangelistic responsibility. In the meantime, some of the most conservative critics of seeker oriented services repeat their own mantra: "Worship is for believers, not for unbelievers."

It is easy for the Christian to be confused. Who is responsible for reaching out to the unsaved in the world? Is it the church, or the private Christian?

This is one of those questions which largely resolves itself once we recognize the inadequacy of the terms in which it is phrased. I mean, who ever heard of a "private Christian?" In New Testament terms, does such a thing even exist?

We have been so saturated in our day with the language of "personal relationship" with Christ that many Christians think of themselves as free agent Christians. This is the age of Evangelical knight errantry. Christianity is conceived of as a group of committed spiritually warriors wandering the earth individually in search of mighty deeds which they might do.

This is not at all the way that the New Testament describes the Christian life. It is true that individual sinners must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, but as they do, they are "added to the number" of the church. They become part of the body of Christ, the organism made up of cooperating believers by through which our Savior-King carries out His will upon the earth. No Christian, then, has the right to remain "private" in any significant sense. He is called to join himself together with others, to love them as his brothers and sisters, and to do the work of the kingdom in concert with them.

In the context of the misconception of private Christianity, many evangelicals also misuse the word "church." They tend to think of "church" in very medieval terms: when they speak of the church they mean the professionals whose occupation is ministry within the structure of church. Thus the divide between what the Christian does and what "the church" does. The great difference between evangelical and medieval thinking at this point is that in the Middle Ages the church professionals did all the important work, while in the modern setting the knight errant is the real hero, and the organized church serves a shrinking function.

It does not seem to occur to most that "the church" is nothing more or less than the assembling together of believers. The church is a gathering of individual, but not private, Christians.

So who bears the responsibility of evangelism - the Christian, or the church? The answer is “yes.” The Christian, as a member (that means an organic body-part) of the church, shares the responsibility for evangelism. Put the other way, the church, which is an assembly of Christians, has a responsibility for evangelism.

How that responsibility is met is a question which leads us to consider how the church is meant to function, and we intend to consider that in posts to come.

First, let us recognize that on the one hand, neither the church as organization nor the officers and employees so often thought of as “the church” can accomplish the work of evangelism apart from the body, the whole church through which Christ works His will. At the same time, no Christian should imagine that he may do the work of the kingdom except as an incorporated part of the church.

Evangelism is neither personal nor institutional. It is the work of a body of believers who, committed to one another, work to call outsiders into their midst, so that they will know the same Savior, and so that they will be added to their number.

2 - Who is Blessed in Worship

By Tom Chantry

Last week I posted some thoughts on the subject of witness. It is a mistake to draw too much of a distinction between the individual and the church with regard to the responsibility of witness. The truth is that the Christian, as a member of the church, must share in its responsibility for evangelism. The church is a body of individual believers. It is organized and disciplined in a certain way, but at its root it is a collection of believers, not an institutional structure. Neither the institutional hierarchy of the church nor the unattached Christian can properly evangelize. Rather, churches made up of committed believers are called to bear witness to Christ in the world.

In the midst of that argument I said the following: *In the meantime, some of the most conservative critics of seeker oriented services repeat their own mantra: “Worship is for believers, not for unbelievers.”* Let’s consider this frequent assertion again today as we begin to ask the question, “How should the church witness?”

It is understandable how this has become a catch phrase. In recent decades evangelical churches have been falling over themselves looking for ways to redesign church services in a manner attractive to outsiders. The main goal in church planning has too often been the development of an atmosphere of ease. The result is usually a worldly church. The gospel is not clearly proclaimed, but neither are the people of God fed. As members watch their churches change, they wonder what has happened. They long to be fed again. Naturally they question whether it is right to ignore the Christian and consider only the needs of the unconverted visitor.

But it is a mistake to say that worship is for the Christian rather than for the unbeliever. In fact, worship is for God. We are not to order our worship in order to satisfy the needs and tastes of believers any more than those of the world. Worship must be governed by the demands of the Lord. It *is* correct, though, to say that worship is a meeting between God and His people. In that meeting they offer praise to Him, but more importantly, He speaks to them. What does He say?

God's word to men is, of course, the message contained in the Bible. It is an introduction of Himself, an explanation of who He is, who we are, and how we are to relate to Him. The primary message of God's word is the message of the gospel - the good news that God, through Christ, has made a way for men to know Him and be known by Him.

Genuine gospel preaching communicates that news. Wherever the gospel is preached, men hear that God has graciously extended salvation to sinners through His Son. They hear that they are sinners whose violations of God's law will drive them into hell if not for His grace. They are urged to trust in Christ, who alone can save sinners. They are called to believe on Him and to rejoice in the grace and mercy of God. Such preaching is intended to be the centerpiece of biblical worship.

So who can benefit from such a message? Certainly this is the primary message which the church needs to hear. It is the gospel of Christ which feeds the souls of believers, not merely another how-to workshop on the Christian life. Solid admonition is to be built around the core of the gospel, not substituted for it. So if we really were going to design a worship service around believers, this would be its primary element.

Obviously, though, the same preaching is the very thing which the unbeliever needs. The proclamation of the grace of Jesus Christ is necessary if men are going to turn to Him and believe. What could be better for the lost soul? Gospel preaching is obviously to be chosen above all the cheap entertainments by which churches sometimes try to trick the lost into being found. What they need is the preaching of the truth.

If worship meets this ideal, or even if it strives for it, then worship, properly organized as a conversation between God and His people, will be a great benefit to those who come but are not saved. Should a Christian feel guilty about inviting unbelievers to church? What better place is there for them to be?

3 - Preaching and Conversion

By Tom Chantry

In recent weeks I have been circling around the question of the place of church in evangelism. First we addressed the question of the responsibility for evangelism. Christ has commanded the church to witness, but the church cannot be thought of in purely institutional terms, or as a collection of clergy; it is rather an organic entity made up of testifying Christians. We then turned to the main corporate function of the church to ask whom the worship service is intended to benefit. True worship is oriented on God, but is a blessing to believers and unbelievers alike.

Let us consider further how the worship service will be a blessing to the unbeliever. If the service is oriented on God and His perfections, it will not be an enjoyable or entertaining experience for the unbeliever. In fact, he will hear much that offends him and much more that he simply does not understand. To "bless" the unbeliever we must do much more than entertain him; we must expose him to the powerful workings of the grace of God.

Of course, only God converts anyone, but we ought not to adopt a passive stance, waiting for God to awaken hearts. Rather, in obedience with Christ's commands, we ought to endeavor to bring men under the influence of the Spirit of God. We cannot control the Spirit, who blows

where He wills (John 3:8), but there are patterns to His work. These are the means of grace - the tools which God most often uses to communicate grace to men. Effective, God-centered evangelism will attempt to utilize these tools by bringing lost sinners to the streams where God's goodness may be tasted.

With all the modern talk about "personal evangelism" the church has largely forgotten the location of those streams. Yes, it is true that some have been brought to a saving knowledge of Christ through personal witness, but is that personal connection *alone* the *common* means which God uses in the salvation of souls?

Consider Paul's words in Romans 10:13-15 - *For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"* What does this critical passage tell us about the way that God saves?

Paul asserts that men must call on the name of the Lord to be saved. Now this is Paul, who certainly knew that men are dead in trespasses and sins, that they will not call on God unless He changes their hearts. Nevertheless he lays out a very practical set of conditions if we are to expect men to be saved.

First, they must believe in Christ if they are to call on Him. That seems obvious; assent to the message of Christ is necessary before one can trust in Him. Secondly, if they will believe in Him, they must hear of Him. Just as assent must precede trust, so awareness is necessary to assent.

So far the advocates of personal evangelism are with us: men need to know about Jesus to believe and trust, so we must be busy telling them. Paul, though, has two further conditions. If they are to hear, someone must preach, and he must first be commissioned - sent by the church. The last condition is critical; Paul is not using the word "preach" in the general sense of proclamation, but in reference to the office of preaching - the formal work of those commissioned by Christ's church to preach the gospel. When men are commissioned to preach, others hear of Christ, and some believe and trust. Paul does not say that all who hear will believe and trust, but he does ask how we can expect it to happen at all if there is no preaching!

We need not conclude that no one can ever be saved without preaching, but Paul considers it a highly unusual event! It is the *preaching* of the gospel which God uses to penetrate dead hearts and awaken faith. This is His means of grace - the channel in which His saving power is most likely to flow.

How absurd to imagine that bringing people to church to hear the gospel must be ineffective! Men who are dying of thirst should be taken to water, and if there is a river in their vicinity, that is a likely place to take them first. Where is the river through which the streams of grace are likely to flow? If it is in the preached word, then should not the goal of personal evangelism be to bring men to that river?

4 - Witness and the Church

By Tom Chantry

Last week I wrote about the place of preaching in conversion. According to the Apostle Paul, preaching is the primary means of converting grace. “How are they to hear without someone preaching?” If that is so, then a biblically organized worship service, one in which all deference is given to the commands of God and in which the gospel is clearly proclaimed, is the very best place for an unconverted person to bring.

This must affect the way in which we think about “personal evangelism.” Does it mean that the very idea of individual Christians witnessing to their friends and neighbors is unbiblical? Certainly not, but if God’s primary means of bringing sinners to Christ is through the preached word, then our evangelistic strategy must reflect that fact.

The key is for the Christian to think as part of the church. He is not merely a personal ambassador for Christ; he is instead much more than that. The individual believer is a member of the Body of Christ, and if he has been obedient to Christ’s commands, that membership manifests itself in participation in a local assembly of believers. The individual Christian who witnesses to his friends and family does ought to do so from this perspective.

It is not enough, then, merely to say, “I’ve discovered something wonderful that has changed my life; let me tell you so that you may discover it too.” That is a part of evangelism, and it ought to be said, but it is not all. The Christian should also be able to say, “I have been by the grace of God made part of something wonderful, and I would like you to be a part of it also.” The truth is that Christ has not merely saved individuals and placed them back into their lives like so many spiritual mavericks. Rather He has saved those individuals and bound them together in His church. Their strength flows from Him, but it is experienced as part of a community of faith on which His blessings are regularly poured out.

We can understand why some will be squeamish about making the church central in our evangelism. For one thing, the church is imperfect, and its failings could well discourage anyone from seeking Christ. It is tempting to keep the church in the background, much as a young man hides keeps his odder family members a secret when he goes courting. More importantly, the church saves no one and converts no one. We would not want to substitute the church for either Christ or the Spirit.

Yet we must understand that the Spirit works *through* the church to bring about conversion and that Christ delights in adding those He saves to His church.

Individual Christians should be prepared to speak of the grace of Christ. They should adorn it with godly lives. They should give their friends and family a reason, both in their character and in their witness, to investigate the gospel further. But they should also be willing and ready to invite the lost to church. That is the right place to investigate the glorious news of Jesus Christ. Will the lost be offended by the imperfections of the church? Perhaps they will, but that is no reason to fail to bring them to the place where the gospel of Christ is proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit.

By all means invite the lost to church. Make them welcome there. That is where they need to be.