

“What We Mean by Evangelism”

a sermon by

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Text: “....and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

One of the most troubling questions that faces the Christian community concerns the question of how we understand our faith in a world of religious pluralism. Some years ago John Hick, a Presbyterian minister, wrote a book *The Myth of God Incarnate*. In that book he maintained that Christians must give up the belief of the divinity of Christ. For Hick the Christian belief in the divinity of God is a divisive notion in a world where religion is already a major source of conflict and violence.

This morning I want to deal with the question of what we mean by evangelism. The first chapter of the Book of Acts represents a transition from the life of Jesus to the beginning of the early church. In the Book of Acts Luke describes a forty-day period between the resurrection of Jesus and the ascension of the Christ. During this time Jesus met with his disciples and encountered a number of people--both believers and nonbelievers. This passage contains the command of Christ to his disciples that is very similar to the “Great Commission” in Matthew’s Gospel (cf. Matthew 28: 19-20). In the Book of Acts the disciples are charged by Jesus that “you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

This sermon will address two questions: 1) What is “evangelism?” and 2) How do we practice “evangelism” in the 21st Century?

II.

First, what do we mean by evangelism? The word comes from the Greek word “euangelion,” which means “good news.” The early Christian church believed that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ they had encountered something extraordinary. For

Presbyterians, evangelism is the proclamation of the good news that in Jesus of Nazareth God has unequivocally declared his grace, mercy, and goodwill to all people, indeed to all creation. Evangelism in the Presbyterian Church is not something the church does to save lost souls. It is our conviction that it is God alone who has the power of salvation. Evangelism is the activity of the church in response and obedience to the prior (prevenient) reality of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Someone once told the story of a man who came up to Dr. Dwight L. Moody, the famous evangelist. The man had obviously been drinking a good bit and said to Dr. Moody, "Dr. Moody, you remember me. You saved me some years ago." Moody replied, "You look like something I saved."

As Presbyterians, we believe that the proper response to God's love in Jesus Christ is repentance, obedience, discipleship, and worship. But the order is critical. We don't repent, obey, follow Jesus, and worship in order to earn God's love. We do so in response to God's saving activity in Jesus Christ. One of the most disturbing parables that Jesus told is the "Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard" (Matthew 20:1-6). In that parable Jesus tells about a farmer who went out to hire a group of laborers. Some worked all day. Some worked a half a day. Others only worked an hour. In the end, all received the same wage. The point of the parable is that God alone is the one who offers salvation and it is God's prerogative to do so in whatever manner God chooses.

So, how then are we to engage in the work of being God's witnesses in "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth?"

II.

The first task is to practice evangelism gracefully. In other words, our evangelism should reflect our fundamental belief about God's grace. Above all else, it means that the church does not present the gospel in a coercive and manipulative fashion. Or to put it another way, we are not called to judge other people or their religion. Our task is to bear witness to God's love in Jesus Christ. The church, through the ages, has struggled with a host of perplexing questions that include the question of those people who never have the chance to hear the gospel and those who are part of other religions. At the end of the day, there is not much more we can say than to say that we trust in God's grace.

John Leith, in his book *From Generation to Generation*, states that the crisis in the Presbyterian Church today is related to the ability of a particular church to proclaim the centrality of Jesus Christ. Leith believes that the difference between churches that are alive, vital, growing and energetic and those who are dying can be discerned in the way that a particular church answers the question that Jesus put to his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Those churches that can answer unequivocally and without any ambiguity with Peter "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," are those that have life, vitality, and energy.

The confession that Jesus is the Christ comes only by the power of the Holy Spirit. Hence a renewed and vital church cannot be programmed, arranged, and planned. It always comes as a gift of the Spirit, for which we have to wait. There are some that believe that the renewal of the

church begins with goal setting, task forces, and organizational methods. These may be helpful, but they do not insure renewal. True renewal is a gift of God's grace that comes from the integrity of the faith and practices of a worshipping community.

The second task of the church is to practice evangelism boldly. The urgency of evangelism is not the church's legitimate desire for more people and larger budgets. The urgency of evangelism is nothing more and nothing less than the urgency of the gospel itself, the urgency of the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

In recent years there has been a terrible erosion of membership in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as our membership declined from 4.2 million members in 1965 to slightly over 2.2 million in 2005. Recently, there is a chorus of voices that say that our church must respond by no longer keeping accurate rolls and reporting such statistics as the number of people in worship, the number of new members, baptisms, etc. We are being told by some that numbers do not matter.

Most of us know that numbers do matter. Frank Harrington, who for a number of years was the minister of the Peachtree Church in Atlanta, once told me that people often complained when he quoted statistics. Often he was told that numbers do not matter. Frank's response was to say that he had never had a number show up at church to join. Never did a number (say number 37) come before a Session. Numbers are people and people count.

If we believe that the Gospel of Jesus is something that is worth sharing, if we believe that having a living faith can make a great difference in the life of an individual, then do we not have a responsibility to proclaim boldly the gospel of Jesus Christ?

The third task of the church is to practice evangelism with integrity. That is particularly critical in a time in which many people are turned off by churches that use highly manipulate tactics to try to incorporate people into the church. That is why the evangelism of a particular church must be consistent with its understanding of its message. Let me share with you three aspects of a growing church that not only have integrity but are also highly effective.

The first is intentionality. Churches that are growing are growing because they have a vision of what it means to be "the church." That vision must begin with the minister of the church but the lay leadership of the church must share it. It must also be rooted in the Great Commission of Jesus Christ and in a passion for the gospel. Some years ago our session engaged in a long-range planning exercise. We had a great vision of what our church might be. We wanted to expand our worship, our outreach, and our Christian education. But we quickly realized that we could not fulfill any of our dreams without a critical mass of people and resources. As a result of that process, we hired an individual who was charged with one responsibility--helping us try to get new members to join with us in the task of witnessing for Christ in the Center City of Charlotte.

In my experience, many churches do not understand how important intentionality really is. Several years ago a minister came to see me. He was concerned about his church. They were

experiencing a tremendous loss of membership. The first question I asked him was how often they took in new members. He answered that his church only received new members on the second Sunday of every other month. I thought to myself: "It's working." That is not intentionality. That is an example of how not to encourage people to join a church.

The second characteristic of evangelism with integrity is that it is invitational by nature. Next Sunday our Evangelism Committee is asking each of you to invite someone to attend our church. The best evangelism has always been this. We are not asking that you know everything that is in the Bible or that you are able to explain to someone God's plan of salvation. We are only asking that you find someone at work, in your neighborhood, or someone else with whom you have contact to attend our worship, to visit a Sunday school class, to help with our outreach ministry. Each Sunday the worship of this church is broadcast to almost 22,000 people all over this region through WSOC-TV. Some of the people who visit our church come here because they have watched our worship service on television, but 70 percent of the people who join the church do so because someone asked them to join.

A third characteristic of a growing church is that it is hard work. Our church makes a strong and intentional effort to attract new members to our church. We offer membership classes and membership dinners so that people can find out about our mission and our membership. Susan Daniel, our New Member Coordinator, works hard to track visitors, to get in touch with them and to invite them to become a part of our church. Growing a church is not an easy task. It takes commitment, enthusiasm, resolve, and hard work. It also forces a church to change.

Several weeks ago I mentioned in a sermon the new biography of Henry Ward Beecher, entitled *The Most Famous Man in America*. Debbie Applegate, the author of the book, describes the magnificent preaching and worship of the Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn Heights, New York where Beecher was the minister. Each week over 6,000 people would come from all over Manhattan to participate in the worship of the church. After the church service a couple greeted me in the Narthex. They told me they were members of that church. I asked them how the church was doing. They smiled and said that things were different today. The church that once had over 6,000 today had 250 members. Now, they said, they had a sanctuary that seated two thousand people with only about 40 or 50 people on any given Sunday.

Today, First Presbyterian Church faces some tremendous opportunities as the Uptown continues to grow and the opportunities for ministry are almost limitless.

Surely, there is no more important question for us than the question Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"

May God give us the faith and courage to say with Peter "You are the Christ" and to be the light that God intends us to be.

Amen!