

“What We Mean By Evangelism”

a sermon by

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**Text: “The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord.”
(Acts 11:21)**

This past Monday the *Charlotte Observer* reported the Easter service that was held in the Time Warner Arena by Elevation Church. The service attracted 11,500 worshippers and was one of the largest worship services ever held in Charlotte. Elevation Church is one of the fastest growing churches in America. It was a two hour affair, filled with a multi-generational, multi-ethnic audience, as well as a hard-driven Christian rock band, baptismal pools, and videos. At one point, in which the reporter noted seemed more like a game show, the pastor gave away a brand new iPad to one of the people who had checked a box on the “connect card” indicating that he had accepted Christ as his Savior.

Now, what is happening at Elevation Church in Charlotte is not unique. This wave of megachurches with contemporary worship and charismatic leadership is all over the country today. In fact, the *Charlotte Observer* noted that Mecklenburg Community Church, another evangelical megachurch, had also welcomed thousands of people at its outdoor Easter service at the Verizon Amphitheatre.

I.

Over the years the church has experienced some extraordinary periods of growth and expansion. The text from which I have read in the Book of Acts tells of a time in the New Testament when the church was expanding outside the walls of Jerusalem and Judea. After the death of Stephen and the persecution that followed his death, many members of the Christian movement began to move to other parts of the Roman Empire. Many came to Antioch of Syria, which was a major Roman city of the time.

In Antioch something remarkable happened. A number of gentiles (non Jews) became attracted to the preaching of Barnabas. The church began to grow, so Barnabas went to Saul (Paul) and invited Saul to join him in the ministry of the church. We read that many members were added to the church.

Over the years the church has always struggled between a religion that was primarily of the “heart” and a religion more of the “head.” The Presbyterian Church has always believed that our faith in

God and Christ is not only a matter of our devotion to Christ, but also that we are called to love God with our minds as well. Presbyterians historically have emphasized an educated clergy, established colleges, universities, and seminaries, and have always placed a great value on education and the study of Scripture.

But there have been times when the church was also caught up in great revivals, such as the ones going on today. In the Eighteenth Century, there was what was called a “Great Awakening.” Huge revivals were held that gathered thousands of people together for times of worship, religious fervor, and conversions.

II.

One of the questions that the Presbyterian Church has struggled with is the question of what we mean by evangelism. For some, the word is equated with large worship services such as the one this past week at the Elevation Church. Others have viewed it primarily as incorporating people in a community of faith. Today we are living in a time in which the mainline Protestant churches are experiencing a serious decline. It is a time in which there are numerous offerings for people in terms of worship styles, church membership, and people are very uncertain about what it means to belong to a church. In such a time as this, it is appropriate for the church to ask what we mean by evangelism.

The word “evangelism” is taken from the Greek word “evangelion,” which means “good news.” Historically, all of the Protestant churches were referred to as “evangelical.” From the beginning of the church in the New Testament the responsibility of the church was to bear witness to the gracious presence of God in Jesus Christ “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” That has been part of the great commission of the church from its beginning. But the style and form of evangelism has varied according to time and place. There is no one way of doing evangelism, as the history of Christian witnessing and confession demonstrates.

There is, however, a limit to the legitimate styles of evangelism. Some styles of evangelism corrupt and others strengthen. Some styles are built on guilt, manipulation, and often force people to make decisions on the basis of emotion and the pressure of a given moment. Other styles of evangelism are intent not on immediate decisions but on the task of building a life of commitment and a community of faith.

III.

There are three dimensions of our understanding of evangelism that undergird the work of evangelism in the church. The first is our understanding of God and Christ.

For Presbyterians, the “good news” that we proclaim is the activity of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Presbyterians have placed a great deal of emphasis on the notion of the Lordship of God. The first question of the Shorter Catechism is the question: “What is man’s chief end?” The answer to that question is: “To glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”

In the Presbyterian Church salvation is God’s activity. The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther insisted that “salvation is by grace through faith.” In other words, we do not save people. It is God who is the author of salvation. Evangelism in the Presbyterian Church is not our attempt to “save” people but to bear witness to a God who offers us salvation in Jesus Christ. In the Church of Scotland candidates for ministry were sometimes asked the question: “Are you willing to be damned for the glory of God?”

That is a difficult and troublesome question. But it was designed to root out every element of self-centeredness for those who were concerned only with their own salvation.

Moreover, in the Presbyterian Church we have insisted that salvation is an act of God's grace. Our salvation is not something we earn. It is a gift of God through Jesus Christ. Any attempt to earn God's love by any human effort is doomed to fail, as Martin Luther discovered. The chasm that separates us from God is too wide for any of us to bridge it. The good news that we proclaim is that God has bridged that gap by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A second emphasis in understanding evangelism in the Presbyterian Church is an emphasis on knowledge and education. Catechetical instruction was one of the primary means of evangelism in Geneva under the ministry of John Calvin, and admittance to the Lord's Table was based on a commitment of life and knowledge of the faith. While Calvin insisted that knowledge of faith is existential – more of the heart than the head, he never trusted emotion or feeling when not subjected to critical reflection and rational understanding. Calvin stood in the tradition of those who believed that “faith seeks understanding.” He knew that any religion that requires the sacrifice of the integrity of the human mind with its critical functions is bad religion, for God is the creator of the human mind.

Presbyterians have always emphasized the importance of Christian education for children, young people, and adults. Presbyterians have historically established colleges and Seminary for the purpose of training not only ministers but lay people as well. In Charlotte, Presbyterians established what is today Queens University, Davidson College, and Johnson C. Smith University.

A third emphasis in understanding evangelism is the emphasis on ethics. In the Presbyterian Church the focus of the Christian life is not a sense of self-understanding or the state of one's soul, but a life that embodies the purposes of God. That is to say, the greatest purpose of our life is not understanding God but serving God.

In our church one of the ways that we understand ethics is through our service ministries. This morning we will dedicate a bus filled with much needed medical supplies, food, and clothing that will be delivered to the people of Bayonnaise, Haiti. There are 35 outreach ministries in our church that touch the lives of homeless, street people, and children at risk in our community. These ministries are an expression of our understanding that God calls us as a church to minister to those Jesus called “the least of these.”

Evangelism in the Reformed tradition is always concerned with the ethical life of faith and the call to evangelism is not simply to an ultimate destination but to a way of life in the present.

IV.

Having defined the nature of evangelism, it is appropriate as well to speak specifically of how we understand the work of evangelism in the church.

Evangelism is first of all the incorporation of individuals into a community where the Word of God is preached and where the sacraments are offered and received. The simplest definition of the church is the community which hears the Word of God in faith and obeys in love. There are many different kinds of communities in our society, many types of clubs and social gatherings. The church, however, is different in that it is a community that shares in common hopes, commitments, lifestyles, and activity.

Today, we are living in a time in which commitment to a church is something many people do not understand. Many people today shop for churches as if they were shopping for automobiles. Some prefer the worship of one church, the child care of another, the youth group of yet another, and move about from church to church seeking different benefits in different churches.

But, belonging to a church is more than convenience. It is commitment. It is commitment of one's time, money, and efforts to making an effective witness. There is no such thing as a perfect church. The church is a human institution that is constituted by God's Holy Spirit. God calls each one of us to faithful Churchmanship, even if we may not like every program or person in an individual church.

Evangelism is secondly the incorporation of individuals in a community in which the members are members of one another and share with each other in times of joy and sorrow. That is the pastoral ministry of the church. We are all part of a single body and we are called to "rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep."

This morning we commissioned a group of Stephen Ministers. These are individuals who have undergone a period of training and preparation to enable them to contribute to the pastoral ministry of the church.

There is nothing more important for the church than to be a real community – a place where every individual is important and cared for and every individual knows that he or she has a place.

Thirdly, evangelism is not an isolated, discrete activity of the church. It is part of the total life of the church. Each of us can play an important role in the witness of the church by inviting friends and neighbors who do not have a church home to attend First Presbyterian Church.

What we mean by evangelism is neither a program nor a technique of the church. It is the life of the church in its outreach and impact upon the world. Evangelism incorporates all that we do at First Presbyterian Church. It is present in our worship, our education, our outreach and our pastoral care. It is our witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus.

In the Book of Acts we read that when the people of Antioch saw the amazing work of those disciples of Jesus they called them "Christianoi" or "Christians." The Book of Acts says that it was in Antioch of Syria that the disciples were for the first time called "Christians."

What will they say of us in Charlotte, North Carolina?

Amen.