

Beloved

The Weekly Pastoral Letter of Dr. T.J. Gentry – August 17, A.D. 2008 – Evangelism X

Grace to you and peace, beloved. May the Lord be with you!

Evangelism is the fruit of a healthy church. Let that statement sink in for a moment. *Evangelism is the fruit of a healthy church.* Questions may flood your mind. “Does he mean that if there is no evangelism, then the church is not healthy?” “Is evangelism the sole determiner of church health?” “What does he mean by evangelism?” “Does he mean that as long as there are some in the congregation who share their faith, the church can be healthy?” “Is he saying that evangelism must be an activity sanctioned by and sustained by the church in order for the church to remain healthy?” If you are asking these questions, then you are paying attention. These are good questions to ask, the kind of questions that take more than a simple cliché to answer. Let’s look at them, one by one. (We’ll begin our answers in this installment and conclude in the next.)

You ask, “Does he mean that if there is no evangelism, then the church is not healthy?” My answer: “Yes, that’s exactly what I mean.” The Reformed church historically understands the true church to be marked by three activities. One, the true preaching of the pure gospel; two, the faithful administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper in accord with that gospel; and three, church discipline (i.e. both formative and corrective application of the Word of God in the lives of disciples). Evangelism is assumed in the first activity, isn’t it? Of course it is. Evangelism is one instance of the true preaching of the pure gospel. Unless you are willing to contend that this mark of a true church should be understood as preaching the gospel only to those who are already Christians, then you must conclude that evangelism is a necessary expression of preaching the gospel. Thus, no evangelism means no true church. While it is possible for a church to go through seasons of poor health when evangelism is overlooked or neglected, ultimately a healthy church will be an evangelizing church. Conversely, a church that does not evangelize will eventually die.

You ask, “Is evangelism the sole determiner of church health.” My answer: “No. Church health is based on more than evangelism but a healthy church will evangelize.” In general, a healthy church is a church committed to the faithful practice of the three activities mentioned above. Healthy churches preach the gospel, they celebrate the sacraments in the context of God-honoring worship, and they engage in formative and corrective church discipline. Sadly, it is common to see churches that regularly and vigorously promote evangelism but neglect the

other marks of a true church. These churches want to win souls but there is no commitment to the sacraments. They have a passion to reach the lost but church discipline is an altogether foreign concept. These churches devolve into what is essentially an ongoing evangelistic rally. Such churches are not healthy. No. True church health requires a balanced practice of all three activities. Anytime a body of believers gets out of balance in one area, their health is compromised and, eventually, even the one area they seem to do so well will become corrupt.

You ask, “What does he mean by evangelism?” My answer: “Evangelism is the intentional and ongoing proclamation of the good news about Jesus Christ.” I will have more to say about the specifics of this good news and its proclamation in a future installment; for now, I want to focus on what is meant by “intentional and ongoing” evangelism. By intentional, I mean that evangelism is something you intend to do. It’s not accidental or coincidental. It may appear to be so at times, but ordinarily, evangelism is something you determine beforehand to do. You plan to evangelize. You prepare to evangelize. You teach yourself to look for and seize evangelistic opportunities. As I said, it is intentional. It is also ongoing. Rather than something you might do once a week or once a month or every now and then, evangelism is something you are always looking to do. Evangelism is a lifestyle. Notice, by the way, that I did not say we are to be about lifestyle evangelism. Those who use such terminology generally mean that we witness by our actions more than anything else. While it is true that we must live in a manner consistent with our gospel profession, it is only a copout to conclude that evangelism is best done by actions and not words. Francis of Assisi is often quoted in this regard for allegedly telling his associates something like, “Preach the gospel as you go; if necessary, use words.” Sounds nice, doesn’t it? There is a kernel of truth in it, as well. The only problem is this: it’s not the whole truth about evangelism. The gospel contains propositional content that I cannot communicate without words. Nor can I call someone to repentance and faith without words. *Evangelism demands that I speak up. It is not the work of mimes.* Usually such approaches to evangelism are the choice of those who really don’t want to have to confront someone with a message that may bring ridicule and scorn. (No offense intended to Francis.) It’s just this simple. Evangelism requires intentional and ongoing effort. May God help us to speak up. – T.J.