

Beloved

The Weekly Pastoral Letter of Dr. T.J. Gentry – August 3, A.D. 2008 – Evangelism VIII

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

Continuing with the idea that evangelism changes us, let's consider one final area of change. This one is particularly thorny; read on and I think you will see why.

When we commit to evangelize in an ongoing manner we may become frustrated with those in our church who do not make the same commitment. Evangelism becomes our priority but not theirs. We regularly pray for non-Christians with passion and genuine interest, and they seem content with one or two lines of canned, evangelistic prayer that has no connection with their actual practice. We are looking for ways to reach those outside of Christ, and they seem to be focused on keeping the doors shut to anyone that doesn't quite fit their mold for an ideal parishioner.

Initially, they seem quite supportive of our zeal; they may even offer what they believe are helpful insights and encouragement. Soon, however, we realize that they are decidedly not in the game. They are on the sidelines. They are not sharing their faith, and they don't plan to begin any time soon. Their idea of growth for the church is to find someone else's converts and teach them the Reformed faith. They either don't see the need for evangelism in any real sense, or they believe it is the job of a certain few. Regardless, they are not going to shoulder the burden with you.

Worse, they may actually become hostile toward your efforts. They meet with others of like conviction and bemoan your obvious lack of sophistication and maturity. They say and believe things like, "He will cool off after a bit; this evangelism thing is just a phase." They may even begin to speak directly against your efforts and question your motives. This is especially true if you begin to see professions of faith and church attendance from those with lots of baggage from their sinful past. Divorcees come to Christ and bringing their rowdy kids on the weekends they have them. A struggling addict shares a prayer need to keep clean for one more week; even worse, she asks to use the church one evening to meet for prayer and accountability with others recovering from the same addiction. Someone from the local housing comes to Christ and brings with them their welfare mentality and their questionable associates. A black family comes into your white congregation. A blue-collar, tattooed and rough-mouthed convert joins your professional, upscale group.

The scenarios are nearly endless, but one thing is certain: the person on the evangelistic sidelines finds

all of this most distressing and distracting. He will tell you that he is glad to see people come to Jesus, but he's not sure your church is the best place to meet their needs. He may even suggest that you begin a special worship service just for them, or maybe plant another congregation better suited to their kind. All of it is a cover for his prejudice. He is out of step with the Holy Spirit and in need of personal revival. He has long since lost any burden he might have had for the lost. He is officially turned inward; the keeper of the status quo. He is a thorn in your evangelistic side. Ugh.

In that scenario, your options are few. You could leave for a church sharing your evangelistic burden. You could begin to divide the church into program after program to meet the individual needs of each type of convert, essentially creating a group of strangers whose only contact with each other is on Sunday morning. You could go directly to the person and tell them they are wrong; call them to repentance and explain the need to get on board. All of these options are, in my opinion, bad choices. I think they are inconsistent with your commitment as an ambassador of reconciliation.

Here's my counsel for those serious about evangelism and yet struggling with a sideline full of critics and complainers. Stop and thank God for them. One by one, name by name, day by day, pray for them. Ask God to bless them and to give you a heart of compassion for them. Ask God to change you as you seek to love them. Thank God that He is revealing your lack of sanctification in this particular area, and that He is giving you another opportunity for growth and transformation due to evangelism. Don't stop the work of evangelism, just look for ways to reach those on both sides of the cross. Find ways to include those on the sidelines. They may turn down your first and second and third and fourth offer, but once they see you are serious about their involvement and that you value their input something will happen. Hopefully, it will be a change for the better, but something will happen.

Remember, you have a divine mandate to share the gospel. Every Christian has that same divine mandate. You do not, however, have a license to do so without regard for the church in which you serve. *The church where God has you.* You are to serve faithfully, loving the brethren and evangelizing. Don't create an either/or situation in your mind. It is never that you either love the church or you reach the lost. Love the church *and* reach the lost. In the process you are changed and God is pleased. Rest assured that He has a way of getting players off the sidelines and into the game. – T.J.