

Beloved

The Weekly Pastoral Letter of Dr. T.J. Gentry – July 13, A.D. 2008 – Evangelism VI

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

One specific way in which we are changed as we evangelize has to do with how we feel and act toward those outside of Christ. We feel differently toward them in that we begin to hurt for them and to love them. We act differently toward them in that we are more concerned to build relationships with them and to be sensitive to their needs. Ideally, as we pray and prepare for the duty of evangelism, our entire orientation toward those around us changes to that of a servant looking for an opportunity to serve.

(Christians in our life will also benefit from this as we give greater attention to their life and ministry as well, hopefully encouraging them by our words and deeds to be more evangelistically-focused. In this sense, evangelism is often times more caught by than taught to those in our lives. When believers see us live out our evangelistic lifestyle they, too, will begin to desire and do the same. Consider it – you and I may be the impetus to another Christian’s obedience to God in the area of sharing the gospel. Consider further that the opposite may also be true if we don’t share the gospel. We may become contributing factors to their disobedience. Ouch.)

Put another way, what I am saying is that as we evangelize we start to love sinners and desire that they will come to Christ. They become real to us; real people with real lives and a real need to repent and believe lest they spend eternity in a very real hell. Take, as an example, my experience as a much younger minister. It was New Year’s Day and as I drove from my parent’s home to a neighboring town I noticed a rough-looking man walking on the side of the road and hitchhiking. His unkempt, long hair and ragged jeans were only upstaged by his denim jacket. In large, black letters a four-letter word of profanity was written across the back. Literally, I could see it from a distance of at least 50 yards. It was written that large! As I got past him it struck me that this young man was probably not a Christian. (Duh!) My heart broke for him as I reasoned that he was probably not just lost in a clean, Richie Cunningham kind of way. (No offense to Richie.) Rather, based on his appearance, I concluded that he was a pretty hardened, tough character.

This moved me to do two things. One, I prayed for him, asking God to soften his heart and bring him the gospel. (You can probably see where this is going, can’t you?) Two, I pulled my car over to the side of the road and offered him a ride. (This is something I don’t recommend to others, by the way; but it was the right thing at the right time.) As he

got in, I introduced myself and we began to talk about him and his life and (quite literally) his future destination. ☺ Then I did something totally bewildering, even to this day. I asked him if he would like to trade jackets with me. I was wearing a new black leather bomber jacket that was conspicuously absent any profanity on the back side. He looked at me as if I was loony. Quickly, however, he agreed to the trade and he was out of that filthy denim in record time! I handed him my jacket and also gave him a copy of a Christian rock band’s tape that I was listening to. At this point, as you might imagine, I had his attention and so I proceeded to share the gospel. He sat there in cold, dead silence. When I asked him if he would like to repent of his sins and trust Christ he flatly told me he wasn’t interested in my religion. Not even maybe. No way! We arrived at his destination not long thereafter and I prayed with him and gave him my ministry card and told him to call if he ever needed anything. That was it.

I wish I could tell you that he called later and I had the opportunity to lead him to profess Christ. It never happened. I often wonder, in fact, what exactly did happen that January day I gave up my jacket. I’m not sure of everything that the Lord did, but I do know that in hindsight I glean at least one insight. (Especially after more than two decades of ministry.) Now I know that the most important thing to happen that day happened to me. I understood in a real, tangible way that being a messenger of the gospel requires loving sacrifice for the lost sheep. It requires that I love them – unconditionally giving of myself for their eternal good. (Especially the ones with profanity on their back.)

Some day my friend with the jacket may come to Christ (or already has, for that matter). Regardless, I know that every day I must feel the need of the lost around me in a visceral, gut-level way. I must consciously look toward building relationships with them. Such feelings and actions are essential to sustained evangelistic effort. God knows this; it’s all part of His plan. (Think of the times Jesus and Paul were motivated to act based on their compassion for the lost.) God also knows that when we begin to share the gospel, the feelings and actions will follow. When we determine to love God and obediently share His love with others, He will change us in such a way that we begin to want to identify with and sacrifice for those around us who don’t know Him. And they may never know Him, even if we share. But we will. We will know Him in a deeper, richer way. Something about us will change; that’s for sure. Hold on to your jacket. – T.J.