

OUR ROLE IN EVANGELISM

Our message is the good news about a Person, for the gospel lies in the Person of Jesus. Christianity and Jesus are not the same. People may have Him without embracing the systems that have been built up around Him. Or they can be involved in the system without knowing anything about Him. Whoever receives Him must take Him on His terms. To have Him at all is to take all of Him. Because He is sovereign over all that exists, He is sovereign over my person. This is the gospel in its essence.

Our role in evangelism can be compared with what John the Baptist said about himself: He saw himself as the best man in the wedding, Jesus is the bridegroom. The one who hears and believes is the bride. John's job was to see to it that the marriage occurred successfully, without attracting attention to himself in the process. The bride doesn't take on the best man's name. She belongs to the bridegroom.

When we understand that our intent in presenting the gospel is to bring about a new marriage, even those far away suddenly seem much closer. They are within reach. Of course, some, even after taking an honest look, will turn Jesus down. We cannot prevent that. But we *can* do something about people who reject Him because He comes wrapped in the traditions, dogmas, or moralisms of the messenger. Such potentially damaging influences we can avoid.

We must always remember that evangelism is not merely presenting the terms of a contract. It is introducing the Person of Jesus Christ. It is taking the time to help a person grasp the implications of His identity.

Evangelism is not merely bringing a person to intellectual assent; it goes beyond that. It includes helping a person work his way through his own rebellion and volitional obstacles.

But for many people this whole issue of Jesus' identity is not a concern. They are not asking the question. So how do I get a person to become interested in searching for an answer to a question to which he is indifferent? It will take the rest of this book to answer that one!

FIVE

THE FACT OF ISOLATION

Overcoming the Barrier of Mutual Fear

BECOME BLAMELESS AND pure, children of God . . . in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars . . . as you hold out the word of life. (Philippians 2:15-16)

LIGHT IS MEANT FOR DARK PLACES

This theme—that light is meant for dark places—runs throughout the entire Bible. The idea that Christians are to be actively involved in the world creates tension for many of us. Apparently, this has been the case throughout the history of the Church. The pendulum has swung back and forth between isolation and compromise from the start. On the one extreme are those who attempt to isolate themselves from the rest of humanity. On the other extreme, we have Christians who absorb the values and behavior of their business and social environments to the point that they are indistinguishable from the rest of the world.

This is a tension not easily resolved, caused by the fact that God calls on the Church to exercise two seemingly incompatible functions simultaneously: the edification of the saved and the disciplining of the unreconciled. How do we do both?

Once we have a nucleus of Christians, the temptation is almost irresistible to take them off to some safe corner to edify them. The problem is that when we do this, we remove people so far from their peers that further outreach among them is virtually impossible. The edification of the saved must be carried on in the midst of the world, with all its hazards.

This process of isolation I've just described is so common today that few Christians have meaningful relationships with nonbelievers. It has been observed that the average Christian has no non-Christian friends after he's been a believer for two years. Our contact with the world is then limited to casual acquaintances. We need to relearn how to build relationships with people outside our normal circle of Christian involvement.

In an article entitled "Old Time Religion" on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal* on July 11, 1980, Martin Marty, divinity professor at the University of Chicago, describes this isolation as follows: "If you're part of the evangelical sub-culture, it's your whole life. . . . You go to church, you buy the religious books, you watch the television programs. But if you're not part of the sub-culture, you never know it exists."

This article emphasized the degree to which evangelical Christians are isolated from the world around them. The subtitles reveal the reporter's conclusions:

An Evangelical Revival Is Sweeping the Nation but with Little Effect
Shunning the Sinful World
Effect Has Been Small
Shying From Involvement

The Journal's staff reporter, Jonathan Kauffman, writes: "The current evangelical revival has so far sowed little except curiosity among non-believers. . . . the movement has affected American society far less than the Great Awakening of the mid-1700s." He also notes the "historical tendency for evangelicals to shy away from involvement in the secular, sinful world."

The distance between the church and the world was brought to my attention by some early experiences in Brazil. Osvaldo was the first Brazilian student who became a Christian. We invited him to move into our home, and he lived with us for three years. While we taught him all he could about following God and obeying the Scriptures, he taught us all he could about Brazil's language and culture. The benefits were mutual.

As Osvaldo grew in his love for God, the relationship between the two of us also grew. He soon became a faithful friend. As I observed this progress, I decided it was time to begin taking him to church with us. It was Osvaldo's first exposure to Protestantism. Everything seemed to go fine. He never discussed his reactions, but he always went with us. I began to observe, however, that he was struggling.

One Sunday as we were walking home, I said, "Osvaldo, you don't really enjoy going to church, do you?" That opened the door. Out came the questions: "Why do they express themselves so strangely?" "Why do they sing like that?" "Why do they change their voices when they pray?" And on and on. His questions were very sincere; he was just looking for honest answers. But they irritated me. My attempts to answer them also irritated

me, because I didn't do very well.

The incident passed, but Osvaldo's questions stuck. Because of them, I began to see those services through the eyes of an outsider. I had to concede that almost insurmountable communication problems existed on both sides. The outsider would never feel at home until he submitted himself to a series of modifications in his customs and lifestyle. And the congregation was not willing to extend their fellowship to him until it was evident these changes were taking place.

Sometimes it is possible for a new Christian to accept this process and submit to the changes. It's not hard to find illustrations to support this. But even successful transitions are dubious victories because they are often at the price of severed communication with the new Christian's former peer group.

This is hard to admit, but the secularized person who comes to Christ often has no place to go. He and many of our existing churches are worlds apart culturally. This is even more true of those unreached people of the world who live in totally different cultures.

Apparently, I'm not alone in this conclusion. In *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, Ralph Winter asks, "Are we in America. . . prepared for the fact that most non-Christians yet to be won to Christ (even in our country) will not fit readily into the kinds of churches we now have?"

There are several reasons why this distance between the Church and the world exists. It would be beside the point to go into all of them here. Some of the reasons are positive, others are negative. What does concern us here is the fact that Jesus Christ has sent the Church into the world, and for this reason we cannot dare lose touch with those who live in the world.

As Jesus related His ambitions for the Church to His Father just before His death, He said, "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world. . . . they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. . . . As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (John 17:11, 14-15, 18).

To a large degree, our purpose for remaining in the world is for *its* sake, not just our own.

But even as Jesus expressed His will for us, He recognized the dilemma He was thrusting upon us: being *in* the world but not *of* it. How can a Christian obey the call to "come out from them and be separate" (2 Corinthians 6:17) and at the same time be "sent . . . into the world" (John 17:18)?

The Christian's relationship to the world has been a point of tension throughout Church history. Over the centuries, as Christians have sought to strike a balance between these two seemingly contradictory commands,

we have swung from one extreme to the other—from hermit-like isolation to conformity to the world. But either extreme defeats God's purpose. Conformity to the world obscures the glory of God. Isolation renders the Christian model useless. The value of the congruence between our lives and our faith will be lost to the world if separation becomes isolation. "Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl" (Matthew 5:15).

THE PULL TOWARD ISOLATION IS UNDERSTANDABLE

The world is a hazardous place! "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy . . . prowls . . . looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

Compatibility with nonChristians is limited. "What fellowship can light have with darkness? . . . What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? . . . We are the temple of the living God. . . . Therefore come out from them and be separate" (2 Corinthians 6:14-17).

Certain activities don't fit comfortably any longer. "For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do. . . . They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation" (1 Peter 4:3-4).

All things considered, the prudent thing to do seems to be to retreat to a "safe distance." The question is, what constitutes a safe distance?

A few years ago, I attended a seminar where the lecturer said, "As a Christian takes his stand, he forces his non-Christian friends and acquaintances to choose. They will either be drawn into the Christian life or they will withdraw. Withdrawal also means loss of friendship. Consequently, there will come a time when the maturing Christian has no real friendships among nonChristians." Another teacher said, "As we become more and more mature, we become less and less effective with the world."

Is this what we mean by a safe distance—to think it is a Christian virtue to have no real friendships with unbelievers? If we do, that is tragic, because such isolation has a destructive effect on a local body of Christians, as well as destroying our communication with the lost. Christians who keep to themselves, who do not experience a continuing influx of people just arriving from the dominion of darkness, soon isolate themselves within their own subculture. Receiving no feedback from people fresh from the world, they forget what it's like out there. Peculiar language codes, behavioral patterns, and communication techniques emerge that have meaning only for the insiders. As such, a local body becomes increasingly ingrown. It also becomes stranger and stranger to outsiders. Eventually, communication with the man on the street is impossible.

So what is a safe distance? Jesus answered this question with an intriguing statement in John 17:17. He asked His Father (in the context of

sending His disciples into the world) to "sanctify [set apart for sacred use or make holy] them by the truth; your word is truth." Fundamentally, sanctification is not a matter of geography (where we are), but of the heart (*who* owns it). A safe distance is maintained as we are constantly transformed by the renewing of our minds through the truth of God's Word. This requires time alone with Him, when we are actively submitting our minds to the truth. If this practice is not a part of our lives, or if it is not effective, we are ill-prepared for encounters with nonChristians in the world. In such a case, perhaps isolation would be best after all!

MUTUAL FEAR

A Barrier to Honest Relationships

The Christian fears the influence of the ungodly. On one hand, this is legitimate. "Bad company corrupts good character" (1 Corinthians 15:33). On the other hand, it is not, because the Christian has been given adequate resources to stand while living *in* the world.

But whether fears are real or unnecessary, they constitute a formidable blockade against the communication of the gospel. Think for a moment. If you were absolutely free from any fear, what kind of witness would you be?

Even the intrepid Apostle Paul had to deal with fear. He told the Corinthian Christians that he came to them "in weakness and fear, and with much trembling" (1 Corinthians 2:3). He asked the Ephesians for prayer that he would "fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel" (Ephesians 6:19). Paul's fears were based on past experiences with ships, prisons, and stones. Our fears are usually based on more abstract dangers, but are no less valid.

It is also true that the non-Christian fears the Christian, and his fear is also predictable. "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life" (2 Corinthians 2:15-16). The presence of the Christian is a reminder of God's impending judgment. Some of the non-Christian's fears are real, some are groundless.

The non-Christian fears in part because we are a reminder to him of facts he prefers not to think about: sin, death, and judgment. But some of his fears are due to the censure we transmit to him. This is unnecessary, because we are not his judge.

Overcoming the non-Christian's fears. The Christian tends to measure the non-Christian against a rather ad hoc list of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. The list is a mixture of clear-cut commands from the Word of