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Evangelism

How Disciples “Make a Difference”

The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church.

Clarence Jordan¹

The world of today needs Christians who remain Christians.

Albert Camus²

The gospel proclaims that the coming reign of God has already broken into human history. But why should the world believe this?

The apparent falseness of the claim that Jesus inaugurated the rule of God appears easy enough to establish: merely read history books. Since the time of Jesus, war-making continues, greed consumes, injustice pervades. The kingdom of God has come, you say?—oh, really? Scripture recounts the manner in which believers were warned of the ridicule the scoffers would proffer: “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!” (2 Pet. 3:4). Such criticisms continued into the subsequent centuries of the early church, and the believers’ own sacred texts were

turned against them. Do not the prophets, asked Trypho, a Jewish critic of the early Christians, declare that with the coming of the Messiah would come a new era in which peace would reign? Do the prophets not envision that with the coming of the Lord's day, the nations would all stream to the house of the Lord, to learn the Lord's ways, and then "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks," and putting away the way of the sword, "neither shall they learn war any more" (Isa. 2:2-4; cf. Micah 4:1-3)?

Christians were thus called to account for their faith. Does not the witness of history and prophecy itself deny your claim that Jesus is the Messiah? No, replied the early church father Justin. The fulfillment of God's purposes has already begun, he claimed, and the evidence of this fact lies in the very ethic and lifestyle of the church. Yes, there are portions of the prophetic proclamations yet to be fulfilled, which await the coming advent of Christ. But in the meanwhile, the church lives and exists as a community that bears witness to the reality of the kingdom of God having already invaded human history: "We who were filled with war, and mutual slaughter, and every wickedness, have each through the whole earth changed our warlike weapons,—our swords into ploughshares, and our spears into implements of tillage,—and we cultivate piety, righteousness, philanthropy, faith, and hope, which we have from the Father Himself through Him who was crucified."³

Justin's mode of apologetics stands in stark contrast to many contemporary models of apologetics. Books on "Christian evidences," for example, often proceed upon the assumption that one might appeal to some "objective" court of appeals to demonstrate empirically that Jesus is Lord. But Justin here, at least, employs a different strategy: we claim that Jesus is Lord, and that certain practices accompany that claim, and one may see the truth or falsehood of that claim depending upon the degree to which our lives manifest that claim.

So in his *First Apology*, Justin cites Isaiah 2:3 as evidence for the Messianic status of Jesus. "That it did so come to pass," that the Messianic age began with Jesus, "we can convince you," he boldly asserts: twelve illiterate men went out from Jerusalem, proclaiming by the power of God that they were commissioned to teach the word of God, and "we who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies, but also, that we may not lie nor deceive our examiners, willingly die confessing Christ."⁴ In other words, Justin asserts that the nonviolent, truth-telling church embodies the new social order foretold by the prophets. You don't believe the new age has come?—asks

Justin. Well, just look at the church, and you'll see that all things have begun to be made new.

Justin was not alone among the early church fathers in such a strategy. Irenaeus, also commenting upon Isaiah 2 and Micah 4, claims that the evidence of Jesus as the Messiah lies in the effect of the word of God preached by the Twelve: their message *did* cause "such a change in the state of things" that all the nations of people now constituting the church "did form the swords and war-lances into ploughshares . . . and that they are now unaccustomed to fighting, but when smitten, offer the other cheek."⁵ In responding to unbelieving Jews, Tertullian also pointed to the peaceable church: "who else, therefore, are understood but *we*, who, fully taught by the new law, observe these practices . . . ?" The observance of the new has "shone out into the voluntary obediences of peace."⁶ Origen makes the very same argument in responding to the pagan Celsus, the one who had insisted that the church "get real," who had asked, "What would happen if everybody did that?" To Celsus, Origen replied that "we no longer take up 'sword against nation,' nor do we 'learn war any more,' having become children of peace, for the sake of Jesus, who is our leader."⁷

This model of evangelism and apologetics ups the ante: if you wish the *world* to believe what you say, you must live as if *you* believe what you say. Our profession and practice will oftentimes require critique of existing structures or practices. Furthermore, Christian theology sometimes requires us, in no uncertain terms, to denounce, to use our voices, to say the things that no one wants said, to say the things that we are afraid to say. As one commentator put it, reflecting upon the manner in which the church was complicit in the Rwandan massacre in 1994, "The greatest complicity was silence masquerading as prudence."⁸

But critique and condemnation, left to themselves, are not the gospel. These only further exposit the problem to which the gospel is the solution. The good news is neither that the world is going to hell in a handbasket nor that the world is full of corruption and greed and self-centeredness and animosity and warfare. The gospel, instead, announces the good, abundant, life-giving alternative, calling a community of people to order their lives with all steadfastness according to that alternative. So, Peter Maurin in his pithy way advised: "We should be announcers, not denouncers," and "Be what you want the other fellow to be," and "Don't criticize what is not being done. Find the work you can perform, fit yourself to perform it, and then do it."⁹

Our task is simply to "let the church be the church." Commenting upon the assertion in Ephesians 3 that the church is to declare to the world the manifold wisdom of God, Berkhof notes:

All resistance and every attack against the gods of this age will be unfruitful, unless the church herself *is* resistance and attack, unless she demonstrates in her life and fellowship how men can live freed from the Powers. We can only preach the manifold wisdom of God to Mammon if our life displays that we are joyfully freed from his clutches. To reject nationalism we must begin by no longer recognizing in our own bosoms any difference between peoples. We shall only resist social injustice and the disintegration of community if justice and mercy prevail in our own common life and social differences have lost their power to divide. Clairvoyant and warning words and deeds aimed at state or nation are meaningful only in so far as they spring from a church whose inner life is itself her proclamation of God's manifold wisdom to the "Powers in the air."¹⁰

When in graduate school, I had the great blessing of participating in an accountability and prayer group with several men from our local church, a church for which I also served on the ministerial staff. I shared one evening my deep struggles with my faith—"Sometimes I don't really know if I even 'believe,'" I said. "Sometimes I wonder whether it's all a big game, a farce. I suppose that I continue to struggle with these questions because of my graduate studies, constantly being faced with difficult questions about the nature of faith and doctrine." My good friend Sam, with whom I was on the staff at the church, began laughing: "You're not doubting your faith because you're in graduate school; you're doubting your faith because you work for the church!" Further reflection convinced me Sam was right: in the midst of a setting in which some church members were bickering, acting hatefully, and living spitefully, how could one believe there could be anything to their profession of faith? And there was not only the spitefulness of "those" church members, but at that time in particular, a recurring sin in my own life over which I was experiencing little victory. How can one claim "Jesus is Lord" and live as if he is not, unless Jesus is not really Lord? To reduce the claim that "Jesus is Lord" to arguments over how to "do church" is not sufficient: the church is to offer to the world what God created it to be; the task of the church is to be the church, and if it will not, it is its own worst enemy. The salt that loses its saltiness is perverse, foolish, good for nothing but to be cast out.

In 1948, the world-renowned author and unbeliever Albert Camus addressed the Dominican monastery of Latour-Maubourg. Camus was eminently qualified, as an unbeliever, to address his topic: What does the unbeliever expect of Christians? "For a long time during those frightful years" of World War II, Camus said, "I waited for a great voice to speak up in Rome. I, an unbeliever? Precisely." But it seemed not to come, Camus

alleged, as “the executioners multiplied.” When told that a voice from Rome did come, in the form of papal encyclicals, he asserted that it could not be understood: “What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out, loud and clear, and that they should voice their condemnation in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could rise in the heart of the simplest man. That they should get away from the abstraction and confront the blood-stained face that history has taken on today. The grouping we need is a grouping of men resolved to speak out clearly and to pay up personally.” In other words, said Camus, “the world of today needs Christians who remain Christians.”

Why the Gospel Is Not Sectarian

Thanks in no small part to the immense popularity of H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*,¹¹ it is not uncommon to think of a serious commitment to Christ's way of forgiveness, prayer, reconciliation, sharing, and nonviolence as “sectarian,” and thus irrelevant to the workings of human history. Such a way is construed as a “withdrawalist” strategy, concerned with a desire to “keep one's hands clean,” desiring to stay unsullied by the “realistic” and “necessary” things that “must be done to get things done.” Such Christians are charged with “tribalism,” self-righteously concerned with their own little group being more holy than thou, unable to make a difference in the real world.

In response to such critiques, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon object: “We reject the charge of tribalism, particularly from those whose theologies serve to buttress the most nefarious brand of tribalism of all—the omnipotent state. The church is the one political entity in our culture that is global, transnational, transcultural. Tribalism is not the Church determined to serve God rather than Caesar. Tribalism is the United States of America, which sets up artificial boundaries and defends them with murderous intensity. And the tribalism of nations occurs most viciously in the absence of a church able to say and to show, in its life together, that God, not nations, rules the world.”¹²

The gospel is not sectarian, but a call to an indiscriminate, suffering love. The particulars of such love will vary, obviously, with the context, but unlike the principalities and powers, who think it is the power brokers to whom we should cater our concerns, the gospel reminds us that it is particularly “the least” whom we are called to serve, for in the least is embodied the person of Jesus (Matt. 25:31–46). This may mean that the

respectable Dallas businessman must learn to go to the trailer park, or that the Christian school must learn to truly honor its immigrant workers with a respectable living wage, or that the old established church must flee the temptation of white flight, or that the physician must challenge the profiteering hospital that turns away the uninsured, or that white southerners should learn Spanish in order to minister to the influx of Hispanics. The possible permutations are innumerable, but they are all part of the fabric of the good news of the kingdom. The gospel is neither sectarian nor irrelevant, but the only hope of a world hurtling toward self-destruction; it is the only hope of a world that seems eager to storm the very gates of hell. The gospel is the offer of good news to a world that, if left to its own devices and methods, would destroy itself. The gospel offers much more realistic responses to the desperate needs of the world. Neighborhood victim-offender reconciliation programs, modeled after Jesus's injunctions to seek reconciliation before going to the judge, offer a long-term, more effective manner to deal with dispute and offense than does a hard-nosed "justice system." The recovery and hope offered in twelve-step groups, modeled after so much of the best of the Christian tradition, provide a response to addictions of whatever stripe that's much more "realistic" than a criminal justice system that responds only with incarceration. Most should be able to see the insanity of the burgeoning super-max prison system in which inmates are caged for twenty-three of every twenty-four hours, especially when the vast majority of those offenders are then released to the larger world, only more hardened and wounded by the "justice" they have received. And where would be the present good of African-Americans in the United States had Martin Luther King Jr. championed the way of the sword rather than the way of suffering love? The same might be asked of the population of India under the British, or South Africa under apartheid, or innumerable others.

If the good news is the presence of the kingdom of God, then "evangelism" is much more than "saving souls." Evangelism means sharing and showing to the world how to realistically, faithfully, and creatively respond to the real needs of a world laboring under ongoing rebellion. Evangelism means living according to the ways of the kingdom of God and inviting others to join us on the way. Evangelism is not selling Jesus, but showing Jesus; evangelism is not mere telling about Christ, but about being Christ. The prophet Zechariah envisioned the day in which the nations and peoples of the world would hear the news of the reign of God; and they would receive it not because of arm-twisting or guilt-preaching, but because they would recognize it as good news:

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Peoples shall yet come, the inhabitants of many cities; the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, "Come, let us go to entreat the favor of the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts; I myself am going." Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favor of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you."

Zechariah 8:20–23

The gospel offers the world a real alternative, the possibility of something truly good, for it is of God. The challenge of evangelism may, however, be first a challenge of discipleship: Will we be what we have been called to be? Or will we, all in the name of "relevance," be grasping and grabbing to get our hands on the throttle of the old ways that have been defeated, are on their way out, and are, in the end, irrelevant themselves?

The gospel invites us to forsake the way of playing the world's games, and to follow the good way of Christ. The gospel calls us to the adventure of being mere disciples.

Chapter Eleven: *Evangelism: How Disciples “Make a Difference”*

Overview

In this final chapter Camp describes “evangelism” as the practice of being church. Evangelism is not one particular activity of the church, in the sense of going out and declaring propositional facts, but is the very identity of the church: being a community that, by word and deed, by conviction and practice, embodies the good news itself.

Critics of the early church declared that Jesus could not have been the Messiah because the fundamental change in human history foreseen by the prophets (see especially Isa. 2 and Micah 4) had not occurred. Early church fathers responded that these changes had occurred—in the church community itself. The good news could be seen to be true, because the church was a community that lived by Good News, in Good News, and out of Good News.

“The good news is neither that the world is going to hell in a handbasket, nor that the world is full of corruption and greed and self-centeredness and animosity and warfare. The gospel, instead, announces the good, abundant, life-giving alternative, calling a community of people to order their lives with all steadfastness according to that alternative.”

Terms to Know

sectarian: Can be understood in at least two senses: first, a nonpejorative sense, in which a community has a clear sense of its differences with the surrounding host culture. Second, and in a pejorative sense, when that sense of difference is made manifest in attitudes of withdrawal, judgment of, and condescension toward the surrounding host culture. The gospel calls us to be “sectarian” in the former sense, but not in the latter.

tribalism: The charge made by Christians and non-Christians alike that the Christian church is withdrawn, sectarian, concerned only with what happens inside itself. Quoting Hauerwas and Willimon, “The church is the one political entity in our culture that is global, transnational, transcultural. Tribalism is not the church determined to serve God rather than Caesar. Tribalism is the United States of America, which sets up artificial boundaries and defends them with murderous intensity.” Often, the charge of sectarianism has been leveled at those persons or communities who focus upon biblical nonviolence, reconciliation, sharing, and enemy love. These are seen as not “relevant” to “the way the world works” and therefore are thought to make the church withdrawn from the mainstream of human culture and politics.

Content Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss the Clarence Jordan quote on p. 203 concerning the “proof of the resurrection” for the modern world.
2. Summarize the position of Jewish and pagan critics of the early church as described in this chapter. Then summarize the response of Justin, Tertullian, and Origen. Could the church today respond in the same way? Should the church today be able to respond in the same way?
3. Read the Albert Camus story again, and dialogue concerning Camus’ charge that Christians ought to “be who they are.”
4. Hauerwas and Willimon take exception to the critique that the church is “tribal.” How do they present the church? How do they critique other entities/allegiances/schemas of identity?

Questions Related to Discipleship

1. Camp mentions an accountability group he was a part of in graduate school. Have you ever been in a group like this? What were its strengths and weaknesses? What do you make of the observations by some in Camp’s group regarding his frustration?
2. Interact with Zechariah 8 (specifically vv. 20–23), and discuss among the group.
3. Discuss the sectarian spirit alive and well in most fundamentalist/evangelical tribes. Discuss the manner in which sectarianism is alive and well in Protestant liberalism. What is it about American

- Christianity (genesis and contemporary setting) that lends itself to breeding division and dissent?
4. Have you ever experienced a twelve-step group as a participant or an observer? What did the group (teaching, ethos, etc.) teach you about how the church *could be*?
 5. Go back and read the Yoder quote at the very beginning of this book (the page before the contents section). Do you agree with Yoder's description of Jesus?

For Further Reading

- Justo and Catherine González, *The Liberating Pulpit* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1994).
- Tony Hendra, *Father Joe: The Man Who Saved My Soul* (New York: Random House, 2004).
- Brian D. McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize: Evangelism as Dance in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).
- Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).
- Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).
- N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).
- William P. Young, *The Shack* (Newbury Park, CA: Wind Blown Media, 2007).