

**THE ENGAGING CHURCH:  
(3) ENGAGED IN OUTREACH**

Colossians 4:5  
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October 5, 2008

**PROLOGUE**

Miriam Martin provides the following anecdote that gives a light-hearted insight into what it means to be a missionary:

Many years ago when my brothers were small, one of them said to the other, "I'm going to eat you!" My mother overheard and said, "Oh, we don't eat people. There are some people who eat other people. We call them cannibals. Someone should tell them about Jesus." To which David replied, "Well, they'd better tell them over the telephone!"

**SCRIPTURE**

"Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity" (Colossians 4:5 NIV).

**INTRODUCTION**

The word "outreach" is relatively new to the English language but it has become popular with schools, churches, community service groups, labor unions, and even politicians - although politicians tend to use it as a euphemism for raising campaign funds. The word was first coined by Christian poet John Greenleaf Whittier in 1870. He used it as a synonym for compassion, the kind of compassion that can have an impact on society *and* consequences for eternity. The impact on society he had in mind was the abolition of slavery. His concerns about eternity had to do with the death of his friend, Ellis Gray Loring, with whom he believed he would someday be reunited:

No dreary splendors wait our coming  
Where rapt ghost sits from ghost apart;  
Homeward we go to Heaven's thanksgiving,  
The harvest-gathering of the heart.

Based on the original use of the word, I would define outreach as "loving people in such a way as to make an impact now and for eternity." It represents three Biblical mandates: 1)The command to Love our neighbors as ourselves (Gal 5:14), The command to Be salt and light for society (Matt 5:13-16), and especially the command to Proclaim the Gospel for the salvation of humankind (Luke 24:46-48). If we want to be an Engaging Church then we need to engage in Outreach.

**1. WE WILL ENGAGE OUR HEARTS IN OUTREACH AND FOLLOW A PRINCIPLE.**

**IF WE WANT TO BE AN ENGAGING CHURCH WE WILL ENGAGE OUR HEARTS IN OUTREACH, FOLLOWING THE PRINCIPLE OF WINSOME LOVE.**

The kind of love that is needed for outreach is what I have been referring to throughout this series as "winsome love." Winsome love is a love that is welcoming, accepting, and delights in making new friends. It is loving others as Jesus would love them.

The Scripture says:

"Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders" (5a).

The term “outsider” may have a negative connotation today, but Paul intended no such pejorative meaning. It was his matter-of-fact way of describing someone not connected to any church. Today we might say “unchurched” or some may even say “seeker.” It is helpful to speak this way because then we get away from the idea of judging people. We do not know who is saved and who is not saved. From time-to-time I have met people who have acted like they have had this knowledge but I am sure they did not. I am reminded of the words of Mark Twain who said, “Having spent considerable time with good people, I can understand why Jesus liked to be with tax-collectors and sinners.”

The Scriptures make it clear that only God knows our individual destinies (Matthew 7 *et al*). Furthermore, it is God himself who does the saving (2 Corinthians 1:21-22; Titus 3:4-7) and he can be trusted to be completely just in whatever he does (Gen 18:25). It is our job to be a loving and non-anxious witness to what Jesus has done for us. And if even one person finds new life, all heaven throws a party (Luke 15:10).

A few years ago Geoff and Becky Thurman wrote a popular song entitled, “Start A Party” a portion of which goes like this:

I wanna to start a party  
Up in heaven  
And get those angels dancin'  
For a new heartbeat  
It's a righteous celebration  
Singin' hallelujah  
I wanna start a party  
Angels rejoice, and the demons all tremble  
When a lost one is found, all of heaven assembles  
If we each do our part, This party could last for years.

What you like to do something really fun? Try getting an angel to dance. It may not be as hard as you think. All you have to do is help win one person back to God.

## **2. WE WILL ENGAGE OUR MINDS IN OUTREACH AND MAKE A PLAN.**

**IF WE WANT TO BE AN ENGAGING CHURCH WE WILL ENGAGE OUR MINDS IN OUTREACH AND MAKE A PLAN.**

The Bible says:

“Make the most of every opportunity” (5b).

This statement borrows language from the business world of the First Century A.D. The literal rendering has to do with purchasing a business. How many people do you know who would buy a business by accident or without some kind of plan? Purchasing a business is intended to be a willful and considered act, done on purpose and with a plan. The point being that sharing the Gospel or Good News also needs to be done on purpose and with a plan.

There are two key parts to any such plan: 1) What is essential and 2) What is determined by conditions. If I have the task of transporting bicycles, what is the essential component, the resource I cannot do without? Answer: The bicycles. On the other hand, what can change depending on the circumstances? Answer: How I transport the bicycles. They may go by truck or rail or ship or some combination. It depends on what country I am in, the economic conditions, even the weather can be a factor.

When it comes to sharing the Good News, we must ask, “1) What is essential and 2) What can change depending on the circumstances?” The *content* of the Good News is essential. The

content of the message as represented by "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16 NRSV), must not be changed or eliminated. It is a timeless, indeed, eternal message. To change it or get rid of it would mean that we are no longer, in fact, sharing the Good News.

But the communication of the Good News is cultural. How we share the Good News depends on the language, customs and practices of the particular culture we are trying to reach. For example, if you wanted to communicate the Gospel to people who are native Chinese, it would be pointless to speak to them in Italian. Instead you would not only learn Chinese but also become familiar with the customs and practices of Chinese culture.

Missionaries, including missionaries from America, have followed this strategy for years. But what most American churches are slow to realize is that America has become a major mission field. This is because American culture is now a radically different culture than it was fifty years ago.

What is the difference between "the Amish" and "Presbyterians"? Answer: 100 years. The Amish are a Christian sect stuck in the 1850s. Whereas Presbyterians are a Christian sect stuck in the 1950s. (To be fair, you could substitute the names of many other American Churches.)

The 1950s and 60s were the golden years of American Church life. With relatively little effort, pews were filled and Sunday Schools were bursting at the seams. But the American landscape has changed and today, according to The American Church Research Project only 17.3% of the population actually attends a church (Michigan is slightly higher at 19.5%).

If we want to reach that 82.7% of the population outside the Church we need to engage our minds and think like missionaries. We need to take seriously the incarnation of Jesus who took on our culture and became one of us in order to reach us. This is the meaning of the Scripture:

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14).

Like Jesus, we need to immerse ourselves in the culture around us in order to reach people. We do not necessarily adopt their values but we try to build bridges and look for common ground. We enter their world and try to see things from their perspective.

But we also need to look at the culture inside our churches. How much of what do in the Church is simply a cultural adaptation that came from another time and place in history? What are the "sacred cows" that keep us from communicating the Good News of Jesus Christ to a new world?

### **3. WE WILL ENGAGE OUR HANDS AND FEET IN OUTREACH AND DELIGHT IN MUTUAL PARTICIPATION.**

**IF WE WANT TO BE AN ENGAGING CHURCH WE WILL ENGAGE OUR HANDS AND FEET IN OUTREACH AND DELIGHT IN MUTUAL PARTICIPATION.**

The Apostle Paul says:

"The most important thing is that I complete my mission, the work that the Lord Jesus gave me - to tell people the Good News about God's grace" (Acts 20:24 NCV).

Each and every believer has the privilege and responsibility to participate in this work of telling people the Good News. Sherron Kay George from *Presbyterians Today*, writes:

“Every person in the world has the [need] to hear and respond to God's universal offer of grace in Christ. And sharing this good news is the responsibility of every Christian and the church as a whole. Christians in every country around the globe have the privilege of joyfully sharing the good news of the whole gospel with their friends, relatives, acquaintances, neighbors and colleagues.”

Sharing the Good News requires our “hands and feet.” More than anything else, this means our behavior needs to match what we say we believe. Our actions speak louder than our words.

Todd Hunter, formerly of Alpha USA, told a group of us that people today are not interested in whether or not there is historical evidence for the resurrection of Christ or any other Christian claim. The popularity of Daniel Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and the buzz over the so-called documentary on *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* by Hollywood producer James Cameron (The Titanic) would seem to bear this out. People are not interested in facts - they just like a good story.

Hunter told us this not because he himself dismisses the evidence for the resurrection of Christ, quite the contrary, but because it has implications for how the Church witnesses to the Gospel in today's culture. We are not going to convince people of the truth about Christ until we have answered the two questions they seem to be asking: "Is it real for you?" and "Do you accept me?"

The first question has to do with authenticity. If non-Christians are unable to tell whether or not our faith actually means something to us, they will not come back.

The second question has to do with integrity. If our message says, "Jesus loves you!" but our attitude says, "However, we would just as soon NOT have you around!" it really calls into question the sincerity of our message.

As a congregation, we have said our goal is, "To Share God's Love and Grace with All People and Celebrate the Truth of Jesus Christ." It seems to me if we are to carry this out we need to have positive answers to the two big questions that Hunter says people today are asking us: "Is it real for you?" and "Do you accept me?" I am also reminded of the advice attributed to St. Francis of Assisi:

"Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."

## **CONCLUSION**

Dr. David Livingstone is renowned as one of the greatest missionaries of all time and although he never used the word “outreach” his life embodied it. For thirty years, until his death in 1873, his life was spent in an unwearied effort to: 1) Relieve suffering, 2) Increase knowledge and 3) Proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. He relieved suffering as a medical doctor and as an abolitionist, increased knowledge as an explorer and scientist, and proclaimed the Gospel through teaching and preaching. He wrote:

“I place no value on anything I have or may possess, except in relation to the kingdom of Christ. If anything will advance the interests of the kingdom, it shall be given away or kept, only as by giving or keeping it I shall most promote the glory of him to whom I owe all my hopes in time and eternity.”<sup>1</sup>

If we want to advance the interests of the Kingdom of Christ then we need to engage in outreach. We need to love people in such a way as to make an impact now and for eternity.

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<sup>1</sup>Eerdmans *Handbook to the History of Christianity*, p. 563.