

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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CRITICAL MASS No. 26: Scavenger Evangelism

by Gary North

And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil. But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us. But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me. But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs. And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table (Matt. 15:22-27).

The Canaanite woman knew that she was, ecclesiastically speaking, a scavenger. Jesus was sent to minister to the Jews; she was not a Jew. But she was in need, so she appealed to Him, not on the basis of her rights but rather her willingness to subordinate herself to the hierarchy of Jesus' assignment: to the Jews first. This open confession gained her Jesus' assistance.

With the coming of the New Covenant in its full authority, manifested by the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20), there is now a universal offer of the gospel to the lost, without respect to anyone's race, creed, or national origin. All people who refuse to name Jesus Christ as the sole basis of their judicial standing before God are declared "Guilty!" by God as sons of Adam. All who do name Jesus as their lawful substitute are declared "Not guilty!"

The Trinity and Evangelism

There is a doctrine known as the **ontological** Trinity: the equality of the three Persons of the Godhead. This relationship is said to be judicial. There is another doctrine known as the **economical** Trinity: a hierarchy of tasks. The Son is subordinate functionally to the Father, and both Father and Son send the Holy Spirit, who testifies to the Son, not to Himself. This relationship is said to be functional.

What about the gospel? Does it reflect both of these aspects of the Trinity? Is it universally offered by every church? Yes. Is it hierarchically offered only to certain members of the lost as a matter of church specialization? Yes. Both doctrines are true: the universal preaching of the gospel and the specialized preaching of the gospel. The first doctrine of the Great Commission is judicial: the universal offer. The second offer is functional: the specialized offer.

Paul said he was all things to all people. This is the universal offer of the gospel. Yet he did this for the sake of service: hierarchy. This is the specialized offer of the gospel.

For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you (I Cor. 9:19-23).

His point was not that we must become all things to all men at the same time. That way lies madness – or a reputation for being a slippery eel of a politician, trying to please everyone. Instead, we as individuals must be ready to become specialized servants to every class of individual, one at a time. The gospel is broad enough to encompass all mankind, yet specialized enough to deal with the specific needs and specific sins of each sinner. The offer is made to all, yet received only by individuals.

This is the application of the Trinitarian principle of the one and the many to the sphere of evangelism. The Trinity is equally plural and equally unified. The God of the Bible deals with groups as well as individuals, for He is both a group and an individual.

Specialization and Witness-Bearing

A church that speaks one language will find it impossible to evangelize a nation that speaks another language unless the church sends evangelists who speak the language of the targeted nation. This principle the Wycliffe Bible translators have fully understood, and they have produced the most successful work of Christian scholarship in the modern world. They are the acknowledged masters of practical linguistics.

No denomination has a large enough base to send out missionaries to every linguistic group on earth. So, each one concentrates on a handful of foreign missions fields. Each church freely (or maybe not so freely) acknowledges that other denominations possess legitimate, if temporary, monopolies in certain geographical areas. To argue otherwise would be to deny the universal offer of the gospel. I know of no denomination that formally announces: "Until we get someone on the mission field in [], no other church should. Better that those pagan people go to hell than become members of a rival denomination."

While Christians readily acknowledge this reality with

respect to foreign missions, they are less ready to admit it with respect to cultural differences at home. Yet class, racial, and cultural divisions at home serve as barriers almost as strong as linguistic barriers. A local church should speak the cultural dialect and accent of one segment of a local community, but without abandoning the universal grammar of the gospel.

Pentecostal evangelism traditionally has targeted the blue collar worker and the small farmer. Charismatic evangelism targets the middle class urban worker and the middle manager. Baptist evangelism also targets the broad urban middle class and anyone who drives a tractor. Presbyterian evangelism focuses on upper middle class people and academic types. Lutheran evangelism targets the heirs of traditional European immigrant groups that have been almost completely absorbed into American life. Episcopalian evangelism (not always an oxymoron) targets the upper middle class and the wealthy. Christian Reformed Church evangelism targets unmarried teenage sons of Christian Reformed parents. Protestant Reformed Church evangelism targets Christian Reformed parents.

The Scavenger Mentality

The scavenger mentality is a perversion of specialized evangelism. The scavenger church in effect abandons the universal offer of the gospel. It assents psychologically to the traditional reality of its sources of growth: procreation by members and defectors from other churches. It acknowledges that it has not successfully recruited people from the broad pagan culture. It has relied on the evangelism of other groups - normally, dispensational fundamentalism - to do the initial harvesting of souls. As the harvest pours into the enormous grain silos of the Baptists and charismatics, a few grains fall to the ground. These become seedlings for scavenger churches.

It would be a mistake to call this gleanings. In the Mosaic law, owners of the fields were told by God to invite the poor into their fields to harvest the corners of the field and the leftovers. But those who own today's ecclesiastical silos do not invite in the poor and hungry denominations that are barely surviving. On the contrary, the owners keep close watch to keep the harvest of souls sealed off from the scavengers.

In some cases, tiny churches prefer this. I call these churches **ghetto churches**. Ghetto churches do not want visitors. These may be racial ghettos closed to outsiders, such as immigrant heritage churches. These may be sectarian ghetto churches whose members define themselves in terms of theologies or liturgies that no other denomination on earth accepts. These congregations and denominations become **procreation churches**. Their growth is a function of their member families' birth rate.

Scavenger churches are interested in gaining new members from outside the existing gene pool. They "bottom fish" the ecclesiastical leftovers: members of other denominations who decide to wander away. They structure their programs to meet the needs of people who already have some grasp of Christian theology. They specialize in some aspect of Christian worship that the general public knows nothing about and cares nothing about: a particular doctrine, a particular liturgy, or a particular judicial structure.

The scavenger church views home missions pretty much as rustlers view ranching: existing ranching operations become the most convenient sources of future gains.

Resistance to Church Growth

Most scavenger churches and all procreation churches are members of denominations or associations. Independent churches cannot rely heavily on church growth techniques based on people who move into the area who were members of the same denomination in another region. Most scavenger churches are amillennial. They believe that things will never get better, that a revival is always a delusion, and that any minister whose church is experiencing fast growth is either compromising with theologically deviant church growth techniques or is located in the middle of a growing neighborhood. Since congregations in these traditional denominations are usually located in older neighborhoods, there is an unstated but very real sense of hostility toward congregations in the denomination that are growing. Growing churches embarrass other pastors. The growth-oriented pastor faces the silent pressure of envy.

The independent church, usually premillennial-dispensational, is not part of a denomination. Its pastor thinks his skills can make his church grow even though society at large is headed for the Great Tribulation in a handbasket. He is expected to become entrepreneurial, growth-oriented, and a harvester. If every local congregation were in one huge denomination, premillennial pessimism regarding the future of the church would do what amillennial pessimism does: bring suspicion on statistically abnormal local church growth. Pessimillennial evangelism is unofficially regarded as a zero-sum game: for every large gain in one church's membership, there must be a loss somewhere else, since God has predestined his Church to failure prior to Christ's second coming. The envy factor would go to work: pressure on churches not to grow faster than average. If this sounds like a kind of ecclesiastical communism - shared rice bowl evangelism - that is because it is.

What saves premillennial churches from stagnation is their independency. They see evangelism as primarily local. Church members take pride on being in a large and growing congregation: more people to bowl with or play Tuesday night basketball with or marry off children to. Premillennialists enjoy travelling through life's turbulent waters in large, independent lifeboats. Amillennialists have learned to be content floating along in a convoy of small ones. But both groups insist that civilization's fleet of ocean liners is headed into the ultimate typhoon, and most of their passengers will refuse to abandon ship before it sinks them all. Premillennialists offer the fleet's passengers pleasant but somewhat mindless accommodations in large lifeboats. Small convoys of amillennialist lifeboats drift along behind, picking people out of the water, almost all of whom decided to abandon someone else's lifeboat.

Conclusion

A local congregation that has long resisted the development of systematic programs to assist members in bringing the gospel to the lost in the local community is probably a scavenger church or a procreation church. Where church growth is regarded as guilty until proven innocent, the scavenger mentality will strangle most efforts to present the gospel to the lost among the general population. If you are a member of either a scavenger church or a procreation church, you should consider transferring. The pessimism regarding the local church's future will eventually get to you.

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