

HOW (NOT) TO EVANGELIZE
On authentic incarnational evangelism
2 Corinthians 2:14-17; 1 Peter 3:15-16

Some Mennonites have an allergic reaction
when they hear the word evangelism or evangelical.
I guess it conjures up scary images
of revival preachers with loud suits and big hair,
of pushy door-to-door peddlers of the Gospel,
of dogmatic and divisive Christian celebrities
who pretend to speak for all Christians,
telling us what God hates about the world.

I understand and appreciate some of our allergy
to things evangelical.
We want to distance ourselves
from distasteful and offensive evangelism.
But I have heard some Mennonites make
the rather *astounding* claim
that Mennonites are *not* evangelical,
even with a *small* “e.”

So to those among us who are allergic to evangelism,
I want to offer some antihistamine this morning.
My goal for the sermon is not very modest, actually.
I would like all of us to walk out these doors today
not only relieved of this allergy,
but enthusiastically committed to be evangelists
for Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God.
Now, before any of us break out in hives,
let me explain what I mean by evangelism.

I said last Sunday
that God is on a mission to save and redeem this world,
and that God has called a people, a community—us—
to join that mission.
The church is to proclaim God’s salvation,
and to demonstrate the saved life.
All peoples of the world are invited into a new saved life.

Saved from a self-serving, destructive, violent,
and fragmented existence that *passes* for life.
Saved from sin that cut us off from our Creator who loves us.
And saved back to God’s loving embrace.
A salvation offered freely . . . without coercion.

So the church is the bearer of good news
for all who have cut themselves off
from the whole life God created them to live.
We don’t *have* to live a half-life or non-life.
We can live fully and joyfully and freely as
the whole human beings God lovingly created us to be.
God doesn’t promise a life of constant cheer.
No, just a whole life, the complete life God created us for,
made possible through the saving work of Jesus Christ.

That’s the good message we have for the world,
a message to be shared in word, in deed, in demonstration.
That’s evangelism, literally.
The word comes straight from the Greek, *eu-angelion*,
translated, “good message”
So, an evangel is a “good message.”
Evangelism is the practice of sharing a good message.
Evangelists are those who share a good message.
An evangelical is one who thinks it’s a good idea
to share a good message, if we have one.

So the question is *not* whether Christians ought to be evangelical, or not.
The question is whether Christians even believe
they have a good message to share.

It’s hard for me to imagine that any Christian
would downplay being evangelical.
It’s basic Christian theology.
All Christians believe and affirm these three things:
(1) God is on a mission to save and redeem the world.
(2) God’s saving mission was revealed most fully in Jesus.
And (3) we, the church, are called to carry on
the ministry and message of Jesus.

How could anyone *believe* that,
and say they don't think Christians should be evangelical?

I think maybe Christians who dismiss evangelism
are just dismissing a particular narrow definition of evangelism.
Maybe they're just dismissing big-hair-loud-suit evangelism.
At least, I *hope* that's the case.
I hope not too many of us actually have trouble believing
we have a good message to share.

But *if* we believe
that we've been entrusted with the good message
that God loves the world and wants to save it,
the real question is not *whether*, but *how* we share the good message.
Isn't that the crux of the matter?
How to evangelize. How not to evangelize.
The message is good,
but it can be shared in a way that is effective,
or ineffective.
It can be shared in a way is authentic—true to the original,
or *not* authentic—*not* true to the original.

I grew up in the church during the 60s and 70s
and heard a lot about evangelism.
I was personally schooled in the art
of presenting the *Four Spiritual Laws* to total strangers,
and knowing how to lead someone in the “sinners' prayer.”

We had lots of evangelistic programs in those days.
We invested ourselves in crusade evangelism,
Christian film evangelism,
Evangelism Explosion,
door-to-door evangelism,
street evangelism,
beach evangelism,
and any number of tried-and-proven methods
of confronting individual strangers
with the good message of the Gospel.

Once, in my youthful enthusiasm, barely out of high school,
I picked up a hitchhiker, an older man,
and discovered he was in a great deal of
personal, emotional, and spiritual distress.
Before he got out of my Ford Maverick,
I had led him in praying the Sinner's Prayer.
When we got to the other side of town,
I dropped him off and went on to my destination.
I never saw him again, of course.
I have no idea if he ever found a faith community,
or ever began a genuine walk with Jesus,
but I do know *this*.
I chalked up a conversion.
I would never have to hang my head
and tell my Christian friends
that, no, I had never led a person to Christ.

Now, was I compassionate and sincere in what I did?
Absolutely, I was.
Could the Holy Spirit have used that brief encounter
to bless that man's life in some unknown way?
Yes, without a doubt.
Am I suggesting we should never share the Gospel message
with a stranger?
No, I'm certainly *not*.
But is there a better way of being a faithful witness
to the costly and life-transforming and community-shaping
gospel of Jesus Christ?
I sure hope so.

David Fitch is a friend and professor of mine.
He teaches at Northern Seminary in Lombard,
and is one of my readers for the thesis I wrote this summer.
He's also a local pastor in Chicago,
and author of a recent book called, “The Great Giveaway,”
which I highly recommend.
He has a provocative and compelling chapter on evangelism.

The method of evangelism I engaged in as a young adult
he would say is “evidentiary apologetics.”
That’s just a fancy way of saying I was using
rational and scientific arguments
to try and prove the objective truth of the gospel,
to an individual, and hopefully rational, human being.

Throughout the 20th-century, Fitch says,
in the age of Enlightenment, rationalism, and modernism,
evangelical Christians were committed to presenting the Gospel
as a rational, objectively truthful, proposition.
We believed that if we could present this objective truth
to rational human beings who were willing to seek truth,
that they would be convinced by the evidence alone,
and would make a good individual and rational decision
to accept our proposition as truth, and thus be “converted.”

That might have worked in past generations,
Fitch says, but he says it won’t fly in a post-modern culture.
It does not mean that approach is always wrong,
or that the proposition isn’t true,
or that there’s never a time for rational defense.
But, he claims, the current generation is not being impacted
by the traditional way evangelicals present truth and defend faith.

Post-moderns experience and engage truth in a different way.
They want to see how truth is lived,
not just talked about as intellectual information.
The truth of the Gospel
is a truth to be worked out in the lives of real people
living in real community,
not an intellectual argument to debate and to win.
It’s a living reality, open for people to “come and see.”

So the church becomes the center of evangelism.
It’s not just one stranger meeting another stranger,
and making a convincing case.
It’s the church community embodying the Good Message in its life.
Incarnational evangelism.

Witness rooted in Christian communal life.

Listen to how David Fitch says it,
and this is a “Big-E” evangelical pastor talking
(Christian & Missionary Alliance):
“Evangelicals often preach that what the culture needs
is absolute truth,
but what the culture needs is a church that believes the truth
so absolutely it actually lives it out.”

Now, Fitch doesn’t buy, and I don’t buy
that long-standing Christian debate
about witnessing with words *vs.* witnessing with our lives.
That’s a false dichotomy. It’s nonsense.
Some suggest our witness is *only* in our action,
and quote St. Francis of Assisi,
“Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.”
Francis is *right*, of course.
Our lives—individually and in community—
are a constant public witness to the gospel.
But words will always be needed.

Because *if* we have the courage and strength and wisdom
to embody the deep truth of the Gospel in our lives,
then we *will* be thrust into conversations about this life we live.

That’s what the apostle said in 1 Peter 3, which we read this morning:
“Always be ready to make your defense
to anyone who demands from you an accounting
for the hope that is in you;
yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

Trust me, in this broken and sinful and cynical world,
grasping for some small shred of hope . . .
a people who live in joyful hope will stick out.
Communities that embody hope will attract attention.
They will elicit conversation.
They will be asked.
They will be challenged.

They will, as scripture suggested,
be demanded for an account of the hope that is in them.
And they will need to explain.

And as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 2,
another one of this morning's texts,
As Christ leads us together in procession through the world
a fragrance will be spread.

"We are the aroma of Christ . . .
among those who are being saved
and among those who are perishing."

When we carry that fragrance, Paul says,
"We are not peddlers of God's word like so many;
but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity,
as persons sent from God and standing in his presence."

A fragrant community of Christ need not engage in salesmanship.
The good message is not something to hype, or to market.
It is embodied, and it speaks . . . with sincerity,
as people who stand in the presence of God.

Let me share my dream for Park View Mennonite Church,
as a *church*.
It's not an impossible dream.
I know that, because it is now beginning to be lived out, in part.

My dream is that every member of this larger PVMC community,
will be deeply involved in the life of smaller communities of faith
within the larger whole.

I dream of this church as a community of communities.
And in each small community we will actively
and mutually shape each other
for a missional life as a disciple of Jesus in this world.

My dream is that each one of these missional communities
will so vibrate with life and joy and hope,
and will be so open to the world around them,
so hospitable, so compassionate,

so filled with love for each other and for their neighbor,
that anyone in their vicinity cannot *help* but notice.

Our neighbors will be blown away by the beauty
of such a missional and communal and hopeful life.
The aroma of the living Christ will be
so compelling and so attractive,
that the seeking public *will* engage us,
and we will be ready
with an explanation for the hope that is within us.

These missional, incarnational, evangelical communities
will take all kinds of shapes.
One size does not fit all.
A missional community living in downtown Harrisonburg
will look different than one located in north Park View,
which will look different than one in Village Square,
or Troutbeck Lane, or at Hidden Meadow,
which will look different than one
that is scattered geographically.

I dream of a congregation filled with these evangelical communities
living out the good message in their own particular context.
I dream of communities that re-institute
the time-honored practice of hospitality,
actually inviting strangers into our homes for dinner.
David Fitch suggests in his book,
that if our lives are to be a message,
it's in our homes that the message comes into full view.
At home is where we
laugh, talk, listen, and ask questions of each other.
It's where we live, converse, raise children,
and deal with conflict.
When we invite a relative stranger into that space,
we take the risk of inviting them into our lives.
And better yet, do it with others in our missional community.
Then the neighbor has a chance to see the blessing
of Christian fellowship.
Not talking about a scheme, or a set-up

to spring the Gospel message on someone unsuspectingly.
Just talking about a willingness to be open to the stranger,
and to be real in their presence,
and let the Holy Spirit do the work.

I dream of communities that practice
grass-roots justice and peace-building.
We don't need to outsource that to social service agencies.
We can practice love and mercy and justice as small communities,
bathing our actions in a life of prayer and spiritual discernment.
We have close neighbors in Harrisonburg
who suffer from injustice,
who are victims of violence,
who are exposed to the elements,
who are hungry,
who need the touch of a healing God
embodied in a loving community of Jesus' disciples.
Will we be *their* neighbors?

I dream of small communities that gather to support each other
on our respective individual Christian journeys,
but know that it's just as important
to be on a missional journey together.
Who will actively explore specific ways
to be the fragrance of life to those around us.
Like one small Christian community in Brisbane, Australia.
A group of households were living in an area of urban decay
and decided to quietly and informally refer to themselves
as the "Waiter's Union."
They wanted to be "waiters" in their community,
people who just "hang around and help out."
They did not promote themselves, or set up an office,
or make a budget, or get matching t-shirts.
They just quietly developed networks of friendships,
of presence, of mutual support and respect.
This was nothing earth-shaking or even news-worthy.
But it would not have happened
without a conscious and deliberate choice to enter,
as a community, into the life of their neighborhood.

It was intentional, missional, incarnational, evangelism.

I dream of communities that make it a priority to meet together
to discern, mutually, where and how God is moving around them,
and how they might embody in their ordinary lives,
the good message of the Gospel.

I dream of a congregation made up *entirely* of
missional, evangelical, incarnational expressions of Christ's body.
Communities committed to being the fragrance of life
to the world around us,
first of all, to our near neighbors,
then to our larger community,
and to the systems of power at work, locally and nationally,
and to the hurting world beyond the reach of our borders.

We *are* the people of God's peace,
as a new creation,
spreading the fragrance of joy and happiness,
through God's great salvation.
"Hope we bring in spirit meek, in our daily living.
Peace with everyone we seek, good for evil giving."

Let's sing together hymn #407.

—Phil Kniss, September 14, 2008