

Missional Marker #3

Intentional Evangelism

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

If I admit to remembering the Billy Graham Crusades, Chicago, 1962, do I write myself off as irrelevant in our “post Christian” culture?

I was 9 years old. The meetings were held in the old McCormick place, (pre fire of 67) the exhibition hall, (tens of thousands) not Arie Crown Theatre. The concluding rally was held at Soldier Field on a 90 degree day. I remember several people being carried to ambulances because of heat stroke.

Mostly I remember “Just As I Am”, the mass choir singing as thousands of people walk down the aisles to form a large crowd in response to an invitation to receive Christ. It left a powerful impression.

Equally infused into my memory was my father who walked door to door among our neighbors, inviting them to come to the meetings with him. If my memory serves me correct he attended every evening and most of the time brought someone from our block. All of these friends attended St Cornelius Church.

Gladstone Park at the time was 80% Polish Catholic. Our family attended one of 3 Evangelical churches in the community. All these churches practiced intentional evangelism. And the focus of our evangelism was toward the Catholic population. Though most of us could not rightly name the theological constructs which shaped our differences we were convinced that they were in need of personal conversion as opposed to simple reliance on church membership and baptism as a foundation for faith.

As I have worked with many of our Covenant congregations in recent years I would be hard pressed to find those who would state that Catholics are “not in”. We have passed from those days. In fact, for the most part, in our Covenant churches we no longer use exclusive language when talking about the community of faith. We feel a lump in our throat when expressing ourselves in those terms.

Many in our churches have shared a discomfort with old styles of evangelism which seemed to isolate individuals through a sense of shame and pain till they responded in the proper form, saying a prayer in a prescribed way through which they gained entrance into the community of the faithful. For some even the word “evangelism” conjures up thoughts of rejection by friends who felt hoodwinked into some evangelical sales pitch. I get it! I share those concerns. But, maybe it is time for a baby and bathwater conversation in our churches.

We can't ignore the call that Jesus makes to his disciples to go and make more disciples. Jesus commissioned the church to make intentional evangelism a priority. We must have a conversation about what that looks like in the culture we find ourselves in today. This is not 1962 and the complexities are different indeed. In my neighborhood we might just as easily be talking about a myriad of other faith traditions, not just Catholicism.

I have been struck deeply by the thought of the church as an evangelistic community. George Hunter in his treatise called “The Celtic Way of Evangelism” has created a picture of a set apart community saturated by the good news of Christ, extending acceptance as a community to all within her field of gravity. It is a compelling vision and an equally compelling strategy of intentional evangelism. It also seems more in tune with the establishment of the early church.

One way to summarize Hunter's research is that people come to faith in Christ through relationships. It is the Holy Spirit's work through the community extending itself to others that result in people finding Christ.

For evangelicals in 1962 evangelism seemed more like a sales pitch. It played well to a consumerist society looking for the best deal in town. Once a person had bought in, saying the prayer, they were accepted within the church community for fellowship and training. It might be summed up in the statement, “believing precedes belonging”. This style is still at play today and I am not attempting to criticize it. Praise God for any avenue which leads people to Christ.

But as we engage our pluralistic world the community is again providing the avenue of faith. The creation of a community of faith, loving and caring, led by the Holy Spirit forms a compelling relational environment which extends immediate acceptance to those of the surrounding neighborhood. The fellowship is enfolding people within it in a way which causes them to understand that it is Christ who is at the center. This could be summed up in the phrase, “belonging precedes believing”.

Make no mistake about it, this kind of evangelism is also intentional and strategic. We must start by redeeming the concept of evangelism as the churches calling. Then we must trust the Holy Spirit to make us into the kind of compelling Christian community which invites the world around us to follow Christ as Lord. We could start by simply asking these questions, “Is our church compelling as a loving community to our neighbors?” “How do people find Christ in our church?”

As I think back on my father and his legacy in our neighborhood, I am reminded about the root of his passion. My dad never invited our neighbors as a sales pitch. He lived with them, saw them every day, knew their struggles and they knew his. The primary motivation for his invitation to hear Billy Graham was his deep love for our friends and his deep love for Christ.

It does me good to simply remember this.

Peace out.

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