

# Transformations

## Evangelism: Putting God First

Matthew 6:33; <sup>3</sup>But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

### **Introduction**

It is often said by Christians that the Christian life is an exciting life. Yet many believers do not experience this sense of excitement and anticipation. There are probably a number of reasons that makes this true, but no reason impacts the joy of the Christian life more than not following the will of God. Evangelism is God's will. It is the primary responsibility of every person who is brought into fellowship with God through Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18-20). In fact, we are empowered in order to be effective in the presentation of the gospel (Acts 1:8). Our connectedness to God is deepened as we work together with Him to bring about the reconciliation of people whom God considers alienated from Himself, according to the Scripture. When the Christian is not involved in God's will and thus living outside of God's purpose for them in the world, they are reduced to anticipating the joy and excitement of the Lord only through those things that are temporal or material. Yet there is confusion over evangelism and how or what form it should take in our community.

### **I. The Confusion Over Evangelism**

The Church, particularly the African American Church that serves in the urban context, struggles to possess a clear sense of a unified direction because of the fighting within and the fears generated without. The external fear has to do with being labeled by a society that assumes that the church should remedy all of the social ills faced by African Americans. The fighting within is a response to this critique and in addition the theological perspective that because the church has historically been the vehicle through social issues found voice, it should also provide the solution for aberrant and oppressive behavior.

You would think that in the face of a clear biblical mandate, there would be no doubt as to the what church's primary responsibility should be. But since the Christian faith has been used by some in our American society to perpetuate racism, oppression, classism and sexism, many people who hold this faith dear, have questions and doubts about the focus and interpretation of the Christian message for daily usage. The interpretations of mandates and methods that have come into the African American Church community in many cases have come through historically fundamental denominations that have held secretly in some cases and other cases, openly racist views with respect to the interaction of the races, equal opportunity of the races and equal status of the races. And so, we are left with a splinter in our fellowship that impacts how we define outreach/evangelism and thus what things we should do to affect the enterprise.

- **The Development of the Black Church and Evangelism** occurred during a time of deviant behavior by a society that vehemently claimed to be Christian. It was in the name of this brand of Christian religion that slavery, Jim Crow, the KKK and other oppressive groups arose and wreaked havoc upon people of African descent. Evangelism was used to convert them for the purposes of the society controlling what was considered the minority population. Instead of the intent to bring men and women into a right relationship with God, their new found faith was used to create in them a mindset of contentment with the status quo and where that failed to occur, fear was the next product hoped for. The ruling class of men used the Christian religion to subject and subdue Africans and African Americans through the development of economic systems which these minorities could not participate in or benefit from and justified their actions using God's command to Adam to "have dominion over the earth." The systems created during this time remain in place and although some African descendants enter the system and benefit, the long-term effect of these systems prevent the large majority of African Americans from participation due to the lack of training opportunities essential for accumulating wealth and have access to the financial structures that facilitate successful living of other races. Those men and women who are converted through the message of Christianity often seem to be culture converts more than Christian converts and therefore lose credibility. It is this (culture conflict) and the sense of responsibility experienced by true African American Christian converts to help the oppressed in our society that gives rise to the tension existing between traditional evangelism and evangelism through social change.
- **Shall We Feed 'Em or Win 'Em?** Biblical evangelism is concerned with the preaching of the gospel message with the intent of converting the hearer, so that they might experience new birth in Jesus Christ. However, Jesus not only preached to lost people, he also fed them, healed them, and delivered them. It is this additional activity of Jesus (additional in the sense that it was not his primary purpose for coming), that leads to the discussion of gospel priority. Shall we meet the needs first or shall we preach the gospel first? The question finds its center in the social reality that too many Christians have ignored the needs of people while they might well have been able to do something to rescue them from suffering. This question never plagued the ministry of Jesus because he did each thing that he did with a view to its overall contribution to the work of reconciliation and redemption. His compassion was redemption. His benevolence was redemptive. And so it is proper that all that the church engages to do should be done with the purpose of redeeming and reconciling fallen humanity. It is our belief that the redemption of the soul should in addition to Eternal Life, begin a process which changes the destructive beliefs and behaviors within a person.

*But evangelism presents its own series of challenges to the Christian. Notice these*

## **II. Challenges to Evangelism**

### **A. It Takes Work. "Seek ye"**

It takes effort to do God's will. Whether one sees that effort as initiated by God within the believer or a free-will response of the believer to the grace of God, a

Christian must “seek” God’s will. It takes work to put God first and to evangelize.

Knowing “**what**” to say takes work. (message) *2 Corinthians 5:18-19* *And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup>To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.* In order to give a “word of reconciliation” a Christian must know what God wants the sinner to know. This takes searching the Scripture, understanding and employing the words and concepts of the Old Testament and of Christ and his apostles. This is mental, intellectual and spiritual work. But it is a work that those who are redeemed should possess a passion for, because it is possible to elevate a person’s social and economic status without that person experiencing redemption. However, it is not possible for a person to be redeemed and not begin thinking about the effect of redemption on every area of their lives. Knowing what “thus saith the Lord” equips the believer for redemptive ministry.

Knowing “**how**” to, takes work. (method) *1 Corinthians 9:22* *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.* This idea of becoming “all things to all men” does not mean that we act, behave or live as they do; but it embodies the concept of learning how people communicate and using such knowledge of their communication to draw their attention to the gospel. It includes a person’s public presentation of himself and his/her articulation of the message. The message needs not be entertaining but interesting, motivating and understandable.

Knowing “**who**” to, takes work (focus) *Matt 7:6* *Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.* Jesus is quoted in *Mark 16:15* telling us to “preach the gospel to every creature.” It is our responsibility to respond to each opportunity that God gives us to declare this gospel of reconciliation. There are, however, those persons whom believers have tried over and over again to bring to Christ, who refuse and often with detailed arguments and rebuttals, defame the name of God and resist the gospel, who should be left to God alone after one has done all that can be done. We cannot convert. We can only preach and witness.

**B. It Takes Understanding the Message** – *Luke 24:45-48* *Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures, <sup>46</sup>And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: <sup>47</sup>And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup>And ye are witnesses of these things.* One problem with generating a passion to communicate the gospel is that believers often sectionalize the message. This is done when one part of the

message becomes more important than the rest of the proclamation. For example, physical healing occurred during the ministry of Jesus and of his disciples. Therefore, physical healing becomes the point of emphasis for some believers. The use of spiritual gifts is another point of interest. Both of these are legitimate operations of grace, but neither of them *is* the message of redemption. Jesus came to bring men and women back into right relationship with the Father. All that happened in the process was leading to that ultimate goal. The problem with sectionalizing the message is that it waters down the gospel and also disappoints the factional believer when that particular emphasis does not manifest the result they expect. We should understand that the message of the gospel is, God restoring, rebuilding the relationship between Himself and fallen humanity through the substitution and sacrificial life and death of Jesus Christ. The message is about God's initiative on our behalf. The human heart had and has no capacity to restore the life that was lost through sin. The message is God's grace; God's mercy (i.e. God giving us favor we did not earn and God not giving us the punishment we did deserve).

**C. It Takes a Natural but Spiritual Inclination** – *Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV)*

*Therefore, as you go, disciple all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,<sup>20</sup> teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you every day until the end of the age.* A by-product of our redemption is that we proclaim this message of God's redeeming love as we go about our lives. When the Church does not fulfill this evangelistic purpose, God stirs the sea of humanity to motivate her to carry out her task (See Acts 8:1-4 the death of Stephen and the scattering of the Church). A natural function of redemption is to seek the empowerment of others. The power spoken of in Acts 1:8 indicates ability not authority. Authority had already been given to the disciples as recorded in Matthew 10:1. What they would need to carry out their task was ability. Jesus promised in Acts 1:8 "*But ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto me...*" The Holy Spirit ignites passion. He changes our incapacity to speak into functional ability. It is from this point that the Church possesses both authority and power to bring the message of redemption to a world that is alienated from God, and yet loved by God (John 3:16). This phrase *ye shall be witnesses unto me...* is a statement of what they would be. Christians speak because they were born to speak. It is our natural disposition to speak of reconciliation. Evangelism happens not out of duty, but out of being. *You are the salt of the earth (Matt 5:13). You are the light of the world (Matt 5:14).* Too often the Christian has attempted to operate out of a sense of duty instead of operating out of a sense of being. Our passion and evangelism spring from the new man spoken of in Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10. And so, it is natural and it takes a natural spiritual inclination for the believer to proclaim this message.

**D. It Takes Faith Overcoming Fear.** "*...and all these things...*"

The writer of Hebrews in chapter 11 and verse six states that, *But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and*

*that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.* Every believer that will share his/her faith needs to trust God. We need to believe.

Believe that God knows our needs.

Believe that God will meet our needs.

Believe that God knows what and when to add things to our lives.

To evangelize, the Christian must be confident that his/her life and all of the events that occur are in the control of God. We must accept without fear the many roles that God assigns to His people. Sometimes He uses us like sheep. At other times we are ambassadors. Occasionally we are branches of the Vine. Sometimes we are used as the Potter's vessel. Sometimes we are the Lord's army, storming the gates of Hell so furiously that Hell cannot withstand the onslaught. Crucial to our "transformation" is recognizing fear and deciding to trust God so that, our faith overcomes our fear (*1 John 5:4 For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.*). We must decide to overcome the fear of consequences, through faith. We must overcome the fear of contradiction, through faith. We must overcome the fear of isolation, rejection and ostracizing, through faith. We must overcome fear of persecution, through faith. The writer of the book of Hebrews reminds us *For he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.*

**III. The Call to Evangelism** - *Acts 1:8 But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.* Evangelism is "Putting God First." It is prioritizing His agenda above our goals and desires. But, "Putting God First" must be framed by personal credibility. A witness must be credible to be effective. This call to being a witness must be affirmed by living practices that manifest change. The text of Acts 1:8 reads as though we will be called upon to verify the truth that God has provided redemption. It is as though God is on trial in our world and we are on the witness stand. Our lives must reflect the truth that we proclaim. No witness wants to experience the embarrassing stigma of being proved false or disqualified. The call to evangelism along with the passion it takes to carry out the mandate, demand a life consistent with the call. Seeking "*first the kingdom of God and his righteousness*" secures both focus and the ability to represent the King.

**IV. The Power of Evangelism** - *Rom 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.* Christian evangelism anticipates the change of an individual. It is believed to be effected by the power of God's Word and the mystical movement of the Holy spirit within the soul of a person. In Romans 1:16 Paul says *For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.* Because of evangelism a person's life changes, capacity or ability changes, purpose changes, and a person's perspective changes. *1 Corinthians 1:18 For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.* In his text **10 Myths About Evangelism**, George Barna says that it is a myth to assume that "Most churches are committed to evangelism." He says that "In a survey over the past 12 months, pastors

were asked to describe their church and one of the optional descriptions was evangelistic.” Less than one of four pastors described their church as evangelistic. When asked to identify their church’s top three priorities for the coming year, less than one-half of the respondents included evangelism in their top three priorities. Only one of eight pastors said Christians in their church were effectively prepared to share their faith.” In addition he says “Many think that if you can bring an unbeliever to church, the pastor can “save” them. **The reality is that they are much more likely to come to faith in Christ through friends or family. In our survey, only one of eight people came to faith because of a preaching presentation.**”

**Conclusion:** Putting God First is A Worthy Venture.

It cannot be overstated that Christians need to have their passion restored for seeing the lost saved. Jesus’ call for us to love the Lord with all of our hearts, minds, souls and spirits and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves figures prominently if we hope to be effective in winning the lost. The four terms Jesus employs speak of our emotions and our intellect. They speak of our personalities being saturated by this God - love and of God’s love being a constant part of our consciousness. With this kind of developing passion evangelism will neither be forced nor forgotten. This kind of passion will be done out of concern for the temporal and eternal well-being of every person in our world. It is at this point when we experience hope and passion like Apostle Paul which he speaks of in Philippians 3:10 expressing his desire to know Christ “ and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death.” Passion for evangelism changes how we see ourselves and the people we interact with each day. When we are transformed emotionally, we become intense in our feeling to fulfill Jesus’ mandate to “make disciples...”

A transformed heart possessing new allegiance to Christ is what causes an individual to “put God first.” Our feeling should be generated by our new person in Christ and our desire to become more intimately involved in Him. The writer of Philippians put it this way “...*I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death.*” This is a worthy venture. To have the affections changed to such a degree as to “put God first” is surely a testimony of the reality of God and of His love and grace. All that we do to reach others is simply evidence of His presence in us.