

The Master-Plan of Evangelism – the Local Church

As we close off this series on evangelism, I want to talk to you about how evangelism and the gospel relates to the church. I want you to walk away from this sermon utterly convinced that evangelism centres in and around the local church.

I love the church. I was saved by Christ through the ministry of a local Baptist church. I was baptised in the same church. I stayed in that church through two different pastors. I began to serve in the ministries of that church when I was fourteen years old. I taught and participated in children's ministry, youth ministry, young adult ministry. I went on visitation with this church. I did street preaching with this church. I gave to the church. I prayed with it and for it. There were wonderful times and terrible times. There were times of revival and times of spiritual depression. I stayed in that same church for 17 years, until I moved to another city. In fact, when I made that move, it was only when I had found another church in the city I was living in, checked out its doctrine, and attended there.

When I have travelled overseas, the first thing I have done is to look for a church to attend. When I lived in Taiwan, I would walk several kilometres, catch a train to another city, and usually ride two or three buses to get to a church. I didn't do these things because I was under a heavy burden. I love the church. Wherever I am, I want to be in church. I met my precious wife in church. My children weren't born in church, but before they could almost open their eyes, they were in church. I don't just love church generically, I love my local church. When I'm away, I miss the church. We love the church; we're committed to it, because Christ is.

But it's a difficult time for the church today. It is a time when love for the local church is as rare as committed marriages. Everybody is just dating and living together and going from one relationship to another, and that's pretty much how people treat church today – they date it, they may even shack up with it for a time, but they're easy come, easy go.

It is the age of the autonomous individual and consummate consumer. By *autonomous individual* I mean people think of themselves as individuals who are self-sufficient, self-governing, self-directing and self-sustaining. I decide what I want, and my choices are of course, the right ones. My choices are self-validating. I don't really respect any authority. I respect the processes of life – like I must listen to my boss to get a pay check, but I do not accept the idea that I am under anyone – parents, pastors, politicians. I choose my own path in life, and no one can tell me it's wrong, because there is no wrong path. I am independent in a radical sense. I do not depend on others to teach me. I do not depend on history or tradition to guide me. I do not depend on a community to hold me accountable.

In fact, I construct those things as I please. If I want a community, I find it online, or with a few fleeting friendships here and there. If I want accountability, I'll get a psychologist or a counsellor who'll tell me nothing is really my fault. If I want direction, I'll turn to all the positive thinking, self-esteem, mind-over-matter books that tell me I can do whatever I want. All connections to other people or activities or organisations are chosen connections. I fly my spaceship where I want, and when I choose, I dock here and there and there.

By consummate consumer I mean people who think of themselves as buyers. We buy and buy. Not just food and clothes and soap and shoes, but we buy experiences. We buy entertainment. We buy travel. We buy holidays. We buy virtual reality in our electronic games. We buy an image for ourselves. We construct a world and construct meaning for ourselves by buying it.

Now you take those two mindsets- the autonomous individual and the consummate consumer, combine them and then let that mind approach the gospel. The autonomous individual mentality affects the way you view salvation, the way you view the church, and the way you view the relationship between the two.

Salvation is my personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Salvation is how I escape hell, and go to live in heaven forever when I die. Once I am saved, the most important thing I can do is have my own personal Bible study and prayer. Salvation is something I purchase for myself by some external act, praying a sinner's prayer, walking down an aisle, raising my hand during a prayer. Once I have given the required prayer or act, I get the best deal ever. No punishment, eternal bliss, all for the low, low price of asking Jesus to come into my heart.

The church, when done how I like it, is a great help to my personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It gives me a boost, a bit of extra knowledge. It's also nice to socialise with people who also have their own personal relationships with Jesus Christ. But church is no good when it starts pushing in on my time, when it tries to demand commitment out of me. The church provides a service, and should be quite thankful when I attend to make use of those services. The church is just a collection of private people who have chosen to do a bit of mutual encouragement. But if I no longer had a church, so what? I still have my own personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I can find the best preachers in the world online. I can listen to fourteen sermons from the best preachers in America, what do I need to go hear that ordinary pastor for? I know how to read the Bible. I can buy Christian commentaries, DVDs, books by the dozens. I can get a hundred times more information on Christian living than anyone in the past ever had. The church mustn't act like I need it, because I don't. If this church doesn't serve me, there are hundreds of others who would die to have me walk in the door. I'll just take my money elsewhere.

It's a dangerous time, because many people filled with that mindset do not realise that the gospel, evangelism and salvation are not to be divorced from the local church. God saves us individually, but what He joins us into is corporate. He saves His church one member at a time, but does not mean one member is the church by himself or herself. There is a very unhealthy and dangerous trend today, to imagine that God may save you privately, and you can have your private relationship with God, and when and if it suits you, you can open it up a bit and get together with others.

When I meet people who are just stringing this thing together themselves, trawling websites, downloading sermons here and there, attending this speaker and that one, subscribing to this ministry and that one, having this and that home fellowship, I feel very concerned for such a person, because that is completely unlike the New Testament picture. The New Testament knows nothing of unconnected, independent Christians. When I meet or hear of these professing Christians and their approach to Christianity, the image that comes to mind is that of my two infant children aged three and one alone at home without their parents, rummaging through the kitchen shelves amongst edible and inedible things, sharp objects, electrical objects, but nevertheless determined to put together their own meals. They may do it. But the chances are, their diet will be unbalanced, they will probably injure themselves, and will get sick or worse over time. The Bible does not describe us as homing pigeons; the Bible describes us as sheep. Sheep go in groups, and sheep need shepherds.

I want to show you five ways in which the gospel is connected to the church like plants are rooted in soil. We'll see the gospel is preserved by the church, preached by the church, protected by the church and portrayed by the church.

First, the gospel is preserved by the church.

1 Timothy 3:15 but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

That is a powerful statement, especially in an age of my-truth. God says the church is the pillar of the truth. What do pillars do? They support a structure. They prevent it from collapsing. Without the church, what happens to the truth of the gospel? It would collapse.

It is also the ground – the foundation of the truth. What does a foundation do? It provides the basis for a structure. There would be no truth advancement without the church. People despise the church. People criticise the church, people cast all kinds of insults and angry statements at the church, but it is still God's ordained means of preserving the truth.

The gospel has not been preserved by human governments, by humanitarian organisations, or by recent Christian organisations. You have the gospel today because the church has kept on preserving it from generation to generation.

The church is not what saves you, but you would not have been saved had there been no church. The church has always been, and always will be what keeps clarifying and defending and fighting for the gospel. The fact that you hear the gospel today is not thanks to a TV preacher with a million-dollar smile, a Christian romance novel writer, a Christian radio psychologist or a travelling mass evangelist. In fact, one mass evangelist has done more to confuse the content of the gospel than anything else. The gospel you have today comes to you because of churches with pastors. Pastors like Athanasius, Irenaeus, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Conrad Grebels, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, and John MacArthur. These were pastors, but pastors who fought for the gospel.

We have many para-church ministries today. We have publishing houses, and mission's boards, and radio stations and evangelism ministries and Christian music ministries and Christian universities and seminaries and mercy ministries. Many of them do a fine job. But understand something: a para-church ministry cannot replace God's design. The way God has set up the church is His master-plan for evangelism. The further you go away from the church, the more these ministries become businesses, easily swayed by commercial interests, prone to follow trends to keep their financial support going, revolving around one personality, which tend to fizzle out when the interest in the one figure fizzles out.

So you have these ministries which, like parasites, absorb the hard work of the church, package it with slick media, and suck millions of dollars into their coffers, but they typically have done little to preserve the gospel.

It is easy to be enamoured by slick, million-dollar ministries. It is also easy to be filled with admiration for models, movie stars and celebrities. But the truth is, what you need is not a celebrity or a model in your life, what you need is your family and friends. What you need to preserve the gospel is not a ministry that will send you a holy handkerchief if you send them a cheque, but a local church founded on the Word of God, with biblically qualified and called elders, with biblical worship, fellowship, discipleship. The church preserves the gospel.

Second, the gospel is preached by the church.

Acts 2:41-47 *Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. ⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴³ ¶ Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. ⁴⁶ So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.*

Several things happen here, but notice two prominent things – the church baptised and disciplined the people, like Jesus commanded in Matthew 28, and the church met to fellowship around the Lord's Supper. Their testimony resulted in people being saved.

There are two very important ways that the church preaches the gospel. They are what we call the ordinances. Ordinance simply means a ceremony. It is something we are commanded to include in our worship and practise. The Bible gives us two ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Lord gave us these ordinances, because every time we administer them, they preach the gospel. Baptism preaches the gospel by visibly portraying what happens to a person at conversion. The Spirit of God takes a person, and puts them into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. You are identified into Christ, and so cleansed of your sin. Baptism is like a front door to the church. The church takes in members only as they are baptised believers. When you make a credible, clear testimony of belief in Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord, you are baptised.

The church is not what saves you, but the church is what you are saved into.

The Lord's Supper preaches the gospel by visibly portraying the body and blood of Jesus Christ broken and shared out for believers. By eating and drinking, we symbolise the fact that we have taken in Jesus Christ as our life and righteousness, and that we are in fellowship with Him and with one another. The Lord's Supper is like a back-door. If somehow you slipped in through the front door without a clear testimony of salvation, then the Lord's Supper is going to push you out the back door unless you are truly converted and living for Christ.

But think about it? Who is to administer the ordinances? Who was commanded to baptise? The apostles, and by implication, those they appointed. The church is to baptise. When is the Lord's Supper to be celebrated? I Corinthians 11:33 says: *Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.*

I understand that there can be exceptions to the rule on the mission field. But the very acts of baptism and the Lord's Supper don't speak of a private, independent experience. They speak of a corporate relationship with Jesus Christ. We eat together. We don't baptise ourselves, someone else must do it.

It is really a very serious thing to neglect the Lord's Supper. Certainly we must not partake unworthily. But some people do not partake by simply dismissing the importance of the whole thing. If I move on from here and join another church, and I am not one of the elders, one of the things I will do is to make sure I am present for the Lord's Supper.

The church preaches the gospel in its ordinances, and I want to be there every time it does.

Third, the gospel is protected by the church.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13 ^J 1 Corinthians 5:1 ¶ It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles -- that a man has his father's wife! ² And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. ³ ¶ For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. ⁴ In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁵ deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ ¶ Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷ Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. ⁸ Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. ⁹ ¶ I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. ¹⁰ Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner -- not even to eat with such a person. ¹² For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? ¹³ But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "put away from yourselves the evil person."

Here the church at Corinth had a man involved in a scandalous sexual sin. He was not repentant, the sin had become public, and no one was doing anything about it. Paul says, put him out the church. Deny him fellowship and access to the Lord's Table. No longer keep company with him. This is church discipline. It is the church acting to protect the testimony of Jesus Christ within and without the church.

Question: how could the church put someone out, if they did not know who was in? How do you exclude people, if no one is formally included in the first place? If there is no defined boundary which demarcates who is in a local church, and who is not, it becomes impossible to discipline. Furthermore, who exactly was supposed to discipline this man, if no one was actually a member of the church at Corinth? If everyone came and went as they pleased, could a first-time visitor discipline this man? No. It is clear that the church has always had some kind of way of saying; we extend to you the hand of fellowship for this local church. You are one of us. You are part of us.

The reason that is done is to protect the testimony of Jesus Christ corporately. Membership is the church's way of seeing who claims to be Christian and who doesn't, for the sake of our corporate testimony. If you become a member of a Bible-believing church, you must give an account for your claim to be a Christian, and then, you must back up that claim with your life lived in close fellowship with fellow Christians. That is God's good and healthy plan for protecting the gospel. Yes, we all know of people who claim to be born again and live rebellious lives. But what church do they belong to? If they do belong to a church, then the church's reputation as gospel-protecting is marred. It's my hope that New Covenant Baptist Church would be a healthy church: a church where the members have clear testimonies of salvation, and strive to live it out in the world.

If you refuse to be a member of a church, you are refusing to put your Christian testimony up for scrutiny. You want to fly under the radar. You want the benefits of church, but not the responsibilities. You want the things the church can give you, but where you can still sit in the driver's seat, and press eject at any time. You don't want your testimony examined; you don't want to be accountable to a group or believers or accountable for a group of believers. You want the

escape route where if you deny the gospel with your life, no one is going to come knocking on your door. You want a social situation where the bonds are easy come, easy go. That's nice for your selfish nature, but it's completely unbiblical.

Let me add something. The Bible says the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked – who can know it? What that means is that the very last thing I want to do when it comes to my salvation is to depend on my own sense of personal assurance and security. To make sure of my salvation, I want to involve others. I want to tell them why I think I am a Christian. I want them to listen, and if needs be, tell me, “You know, there are some vital things missing from your testimony. Let's sit down with the Bible and see if you really do understand the gospel.” I want others in my life; close enough to see me, so that if there is a pattern of unrepentant sin, they can call me on it. Because if I refuse to repent of something that my elders tell me is true of me, that others say is true of me, then I am living in a deluded world of my own making, and I may in fact, be as deluded about my salvation. There is safety for your own soul in submitting yourself to a local church.

If you plan never to join this church, then may I lovingly call on you to find one that you can join. Somewhere along the line, you need to have your testimony of salvation heard and examined, and your life held to the standard of Scripture. For your own soul's sake – submit to that.

Fourth, the gospel is portrayed by the church.

Titus 2:9-10 Exhort bondservants to be obedient to their own masters, to be well pleasing in all things, not answering back, ¹⁰ not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things.

Here Paul gives a call to Christian slaves to have a Christlike attitude towards their masters: submissive, pleasing, not cheeky, not stealing, and trustworthy. Then Paul tells you why: that – purpose clause- they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things. The word 'adorn' means to set forth, to beautify, to decorate. It is actually the Greek word from which our English word 'cosmetics' is derived. Paul says the life of the believers sets forth something. What does it set forth? It sets forth the doctrine – the teaching – of God our Saviour. The teaching about our Saviour-God – which is the gospel, is seen by the life of the believer.

This is said by Paul in several other places.

1 Peter 2:12 having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.

Matthew 5:16 "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

Ephesians 4:1 ¶ I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called,

Colossians 4:5-6 Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. ⁶ Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.

Philippians 2:15 that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,

The idea is – the gospel is supposed to change your life. It brings a transforming power into your life. Over time, the transforming power of the gospel is inevitably noticed by others. They are curious. Your life preaches.

The church builds up Christians, so that Christians can preach the gospel with their lives. Weak churches mean weak Christians. Weak Christians mean weak testimonies and a weak witness to the gospel.

The church's ministry is very much concerned with building up believers to be like Christ. We seek to provide a variety of things that we believe the Christian needs to grow into Christ's image. In our discipleship hour, we give a variety of things that should be part of the mental furniture of every Christian. In the main morning service, we try to give you the meat of the Word as we go through Scripture. In second services, we will do something else, usually more topical, or more devotional. But with such limited times of teaching, we include all these because we believe it is important for every Christian. In addition, we provide books, sermon CDs, publications, home Bible studies and so forth.

But the problem comes when once again, our view of church is individualised and privatised. If I treat church like a buffet, where I pick and choose what I think my spiritual diet needs, I'm really telling the church that they do a lot of needless teaching. I don't need this or that. But what would happen if children decided on the supper menu every night? One of the reasons why God wants spiritually mature people in leadership is because those that have grown know what they needed to know and learn to grow. They in turn, include that in the diet for other growing Christians. But if we are all autonomous individuals, we decide what we will have and when. And usually, the result is Christians who do not have outstanding testimonies. The result is usually Christians whose lives are unbalanced and lacking in some or another area, and they are failing to attract people to Christ.

I am convinced that the greatest power of evangelism remains in discipleship. When Christians are discipled, their lives reflect the power and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. As you dwell in the world, others are exposed to the power of the gospel in your life. One Christian, satisfied in Christ, ends up affecting someone else, who also turns to Christ.

Fifth, the gospel is practised in the church - fellowship

1 John 3:16-18 By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. ¹⁷ But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? ¹⁸ My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.

1 John 4:10-12 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.

The gospel is that Christ died for unworthy sinners to give them what they need. True Christian fellowship is when we practise this gospel amongst ourselves. We die to self; we give up our needs to help one another.

One of the powerful testimonies to the gospel is unity. When a people of great diversity come together and forbear with one another, forgive one another, suffer long with one another, are patient with one another, speak no evil of one another, believe the best of one another, are not envious, jealous, malicious, back-biting, slanderous, but kind, generous, sacrificial, comforting, challenging, that speaks of the gospel's transforming power. Divisions, conflicts that go unresolved do not testify to the gospel's power, because it says the gospel is unable to humble man, and unable to break his stubbornness and pride. Christ is not powerful enough to overcome our sinful tendencies to war

against each other. We see the gospel in each other. And unbelievers see it too.

I hope you see that the gospel has a headquarters. The gospel has a hub. It is the church. The church preserves it, preaches it, protects it, portrays it and practises it.

Now let me challenge you:

First, what is your love for the church like? Do you love the very thing that brought you to salvation? If so, how do you demonstrate that love? Stop dating the church, and be committed to it. Second, when you think about testimony, think about both your personal testimony and our corporate testimony.

Finally, evangelism finds its greatest power in the local church. We don't need external programmes as much as we need to be a healthy church – which preserves the gospel in our doctrine, preaches it in baptism and the Lord's Supper, protects it through membership, portrays it with our growing Christlike lives, and practises it in our midst with sacrificial love.