

Is the Church a Fox Hole or a Floodlight?

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Jesus and His apostles have called every believer to the task of reaching out to those around us. However, if we are honest we will have to admit that the great majority of us find this calling very difficult. Faced with the challenge to make the Gospel known to people in our families, workplaces and neighborhoods many of us feel inadequate, discouraged, and defeated. Of course not everyone feels this down about evangelism, but the truth is very few believers find sharing the Gospel easy or comfortable.

As if our own sense of inadequacy and lack of confidence were not enough of a problem, we soon realize that there are other barriers to communication of the Gospel between Christians and unbelievers. What are some of these barriers that the Church faces today?

The Loss of Truth

In addition to our own internal struggles we face the walls of unbelief created by the prevailing ideas in our culture. There is the loss of belief that there is one truth that explains the world. We live in a society where everyone has “his or her own truth.” There is the loss of the clear conviction that there is an infinite and personal God who is involved in ruling the nations or in caring for us in our daily lives. Many people in our culture have lost the confidence that there is a transcendent moral law which applies to all people of whatever background or culture; and no longer recognize that we live with a constant moral obligation to our neighbors and to the society in which we live.

Instead there is simply the commitment to enjoy our own individual freedom and to pursue our own personal happiness. Fewer and fewer of our contemporaries have the expectation that we will all have to give an account to the Supreme Judge one day. Along with this goes the loss of a sense of sin and objective guilt. Younger generations have for the most part lost the hope that we will live forever as physical beings in a real world; indeed many teenagers have no hope for the future at all.

We may summarize this loss of truth by saying that our society has lost the Christian story. This is the only story that makes sense of our world; that acts as our moral guide; that fills us with a confident hope for our individual futures and the future of our race and of this world. People may still encounter the Christian story in a sentimentalized form as they do their Christmas shopping, but the majority of them no longer hear this story as truth. They only hear it as a fable, as a comforting Christmas tale, just like stories about Santa or Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Many of our generation still listen to the “music” of the Christian story, whether in Christmas songs and carols, sacred music like Handel’s Messiah or Bach’s Oratorio, or even in church attendance. Yet, by most of our contemporaries, this “music” is not understood to be making truth claims, nor does it act as a control over life.

Perhaps even more unsettling to us is the recognition that these walls of unbelief affect those of us who are within the Christian church as well as those outside. Do we believe firmly that this message of the gospel is Truth, what Francis Schaeffer called “true truth”? Or is it the case that we have been touched by the skepticism and uncertainty of the age in which we live, like our unbelieving contemporaries? Do we secretly think that, after all, the Biblical message is wishful thinking, or just my “truth” and that others have their own “truth,” whether they are Hindus, Moslems, Buddhists or even atheists?

To the extent that we are affected by this loss of truth all around us we will feel uncertain about making our “good news” known, and we may feel even more insecure when we ask ourselves: “What do non-Christians believe?” How can we become confident in communicating truth in an age that accepts personal religion but rejects passionately the claim of exclusive truth?

We need to be sure for ourselves that our faith is indeed the truth. This will mean taking our own questions and doubts seriously and being prepared to work them through so that we come to a place of confidence. It will mean a readiness to answer our own children’s questions and to help them become committed to the truth. It will require a willingness to answer the questions and objections of unbelievers, and this will demand some hard study for ourselves both of our own beliefs and of theirs. If we are prepared to respond to doubts and questions and seek to work them through, then we will discover that we have a growing excitement about the truthfulness of the Biblical message. We will learn about its strength in facing any objection or attack and about the wonder of the answers that the truth gives to the problems and needs of the culture in which we live.

Faith without Life

Yet another wall is raised by the lack of reality in the Christian church. People still mention the scandal of the televangelists as a primary objection to considering the claims of the Gospel. I had a store clerk tell me I was in a good business, when he learned that I was a pastor. He assumed, and meant it as a compliment, that I was into preaching for the good financial rewards. Most non-Christians have a very different reaction to those who preach for financial gain!

Our hearts are made heavy by the all too frequent failures in the areas of finances, sexual chastity and marital fidelity among priests and pastors. A student who was in the insurance business before coming to seminary repeated the warning his boss had given the agents during an educational session: “Remember that God is our worst customer!” By this he meant that churches, Christian institutions, and customers who were the quickest to ‘push’ their Christian commitment were often the slowest at paying their premiums, and the worst at keeping their word.

This kind of comment ought to make us weep as we reflect on the damage done to the cause of the Gospel by failures in the area of financial integrity. In many churches the members dread sermons on giving, as they expect a “guilt trip” as the approach, rather than a serious and careful exposition of Biblical teaching about finances. Even our own church members sometimes are made to feel that all we want is their money! If believers feel that way, what is the world thinking?

We have to recognize that these problems that are raised by non-believers are not only coming from their unwillingness to believe, but point to a deep-seated failure among those who claim to be Christian to teach and to practice obedience to the commandments of God. Despite all our talk about moral values, abortion statistics and divorce rates are similar in the evangelical community to the rates for the culture as a whole. In a widely publicized poll taken by George Gallup only about ten percent of professing Christians claimed that their faith had any affect on their daily life.

This is a formidable obstacle in our way as we seek to make God's truth known in our world. We have to acknowledge it with grief and repentance, both to the Lord, and to unbelievers who raise this kind of problem as an objection. It is of enormous importance that we do not try to pretend that there are no problems in the life of the Church today, or that it is inappropriate for these problems to create obstacles for non-Christians when we ask them to take the Gospel seriously. The Scripture teaches us (Proverbs 15:1) that a gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. We need to acknowledge with sorrow when there are failures in the lives of Christians.

This is also true if people raise problems about the past. If, for example, an African-American points to the involvement of white Christian ancestors' in slave trade or the practice of slavery, we ought not to ignore this history, nor should we try to explain it away, nor should we say that it has nothing to do with us. Think how readily (and rightly so) Christians want to point to beneficial ways in which the Church influenced the culture in the past, or how proud we are personally of the positive exploits of our own forbears (though these too have nothing directly to do with us).

If we want to be appropriately glad for the glories of the past, we ought also to be appropriately ashamed of the failures and sins of the past. We are to acknowledge with genuine sorrow failures of obedience to God's Word whether they are past or present. Scripture is a great encouragement to us here for it is strikingly honest about the failures of the people of God. In addition we see believers confessing to the Lord the sins of their contemporaries and of their ancestors (Daniel and Nehemiah are examples of this).

The Loss of a Common Language

Yet another wall arises from the lack of knowledge of the Scriptures in our society. More and more people are Biblically illiterate. Even teaching at a seminary we observe that our students have less knowledge of the content of the Bible each year. This being so we need to recognize that most of those around us no longer have any true grasp of what the Bible teaches; nor do they understand the language that Christians are accustomed to using.

The words that we hear every Sunday in most of our churches and that we use in our prayers are no longer part of the everyday language of our society. People simply do not talk about "justification" or "sanctification," nor even about "redemption," "salvation" or "sin." This means that "Church" as usual, and sermons that do not acknowledge this problem are difficult for our contemporaries to relate to, just as "computer" language is incomprehensible to many of us!

The last wall and perhaps the most difficult for us to acknowledge and overcome is the wall created by our sense of alienation from those around us. Many Christians have been taught to avoid close friendships or even business partnerships with non-Christians. We have learned to "come out from them and be separate" in every area of life. The Church, as it is affected by this mentality, goes into defense mode and becomes like a foxhole in which to hide or take cover rather than a floodlight to bless the world. This sense of antagonism to the culture and alienation from the culture expresses itself in four ways.

Intimidation

Many of us as Christians are afraid of the culture around us. We see that it is deeply hostile to the Christian faith. Both the intellectual culture in our universities and the popular culture of television and music are post-Christian and even frequently explicitly anti-Christian. Our response to this is fear, fear for ourselves, fear for our church members (particularly our young people) and fear for our children. Yet Jesus tells us not to fear the world, or even the devil, but to fear only God (Lk. 12:4-5).

We need to recover trust in the promises of the Lord to us and to our children, to pray to the one who is able to protect us, keep us safe and deliver us into His kingdom. Which of you, Jesus asks, is able to add a moment to your lives by fear and anxiety (Matt. 6:27)? In telling us not to fear He reminds us that He cares even for the sparrows, and that we are worth far more to Him than them (Matt. 10:28-31). We need to recover trust in the Lord, to recover prayer, both for ourselves as individuals and for our churches corporately. God's Word calls us to repentance, to fasting and to prayer, rather than to fear, when we feel overwhelmed by the opposition from our culture. It is overwhelming, but there is One to whom we can turn who is far greater, far more overwhelming than the society around us.

Condemnation

The second response of many Christians to our society is to condemn the general culture and to condemn unbelievers. Both in private and in our public worship we often find ourselves congratulating ourselves that we are not like the sinners around us.

The Scripture, of course, asks us to be discerning about sin, but is this reaction of condemnation and criticism appropriate? This question is important for us to consider, whether our condemnation is directed towards the culture in general, or towards particular individuals whom we identify as the leading enemies of the cause of Christ and of the moral commandments of God. Our condemnation may even be focused on people we know personally in our own neighborhoods and communities. However, consider these words of Jesus taken from Luke 18:9-14: To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable. "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'"

Jesus tells this parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector to warn us against the mentality of self-congratulation and of comparing ourselves with "sinners." He teaches us that God does not hear such prayers, for they are not genuine prayers. The only prayer acceptable to God is prayer that begins with a heartfelt recognition of my own sin and need like the prayer of the tax collector who "stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God have mercy on me, a sinner'" (Lk. 18:13).

The Bible instructs us that judgment is to begin with the household of God, not with the world, or with unbelievers (1 Pe. 4:17; Mt. 7:1-5). We are called to judge ourselves, not those around us. Indeed, Jesus teaches us that He did not come into the world to judge the world, but rather to save it. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (Jn. 3:17). What was true for Him is also to be true of us who bear His name (1 Cor. 5:12).

The truth is, that instead of judging those outside the Church, Jesus calls us to imitate Him by loving our enemies, blessing those who curse us, praying for those who mistreat us, doing good to those who hate us (Lk. 6:27-28). Rather than becoming involved in a war of words against the unrighteous and the ungodly, we are to give ourselves for them, just as Jesus did. We are called to be messengers of His love and mercy into the world, not His judgment. The time will indeed come for Him to judge, but that is His task and not ours.

This problem of Christians judging those we perceive to be our enemies has been made far worse by the culture war which engulfs our society. There is an intense conflict that is taking place in our communities, in our schools, in the media, even in the courts and in the corridors of political power about what way of life will govern our culture. Christians who have believed that we lived in a "Christian America" have woken up and discovered that they do not like what is happening around them.

Increasingly Christians are running for office as “Christians,” or are trying, for example, to get measures on popular ballots banning homosexuals from public service or from being treated with God-given dignity. Some politicians in this culture war denounce single parent families as they fight for family values, forgetting or ignoring the fact that the vast majority of single parents are women who have been deserted by their husband or companion. The great majority of single mothers are not women who have “politically” chosen an alternate family model. They are, in effect, the orphans and widows for whom God calls us to care.

For example, we fight school board elections over “values,” sometimes without earning the right to run by giving years of sacrificial service to the schools, and then complain of persecution or lament the moral state of the electorate when we are defeated. Christians, above all people, should be aware that we need to earn respect from unbelievers by our life of service to the community. Once we have earned that respect, then we may hope that we might be elected to public office. Simply standing on a platform of moral values without deeds of righteousness and mercy to back up our words is offensive to non-Christians and it is displeasing to the Lord who always asks us to keep words and actions together.

Our newfound political activism is a positive step, but this activism sometimes expresses itself in hostile and even abusive language. We hear jokes about political adversaries, and we are ready to demonize them, as if particular individuals now in office were single-handedly responsible for the lamentable moral decay in our culture. Instead of obeying the apostle’s command always to communicate with gentleness and respect we find ourselves in a war of words.

A more appropriate response to our dilemma than this war of words might be repentance for the failure of Christians to be more involved in the political process at the local and national level over the past few generations. Of course, those who have worked to undermine the hold of God’s moral law over the consciences and lives of Americans will have to bear their own load before God. But we, who are the Church of Christ, bear a far greater responsibility for the present situation, and must examine the plank in our own eyes, the plank of our failure to be salt and light in the public square for several generations. We were given so much by the efforts of believers in earlier times and yet we failed to be faithful and in serving our communities with the gift of God’s moral law.

We ought indeed to be involved in the culture war, but not with crude jokes, name-calling, demonizing, and abuse. We ought to take our part in humility and repentance, and with words of grace, seasoned with salt. Jesus spoke to us very plainly about this (Lk. 6:27-28): “But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”

In 1 Peter 3:13-17 we are commanded to always speak with gentleness and respect. This command is given within the context of discussing appropriate behavior for Christians when others are speaking maliciously against us. Even if we are unjustly attacked by those who are opposed to the Gospel we are to answer kindly and with our hearts and words filled with the mercy of the Gospel. The Scriptures teach us that we are to expect a judgmental attitude from the world. If the world criticized and persecuted Jesus (and it certainly did), then we should not be surprised when it criticizes and persecutes us (Jn. 15:18-20). But this is no excuse for us to retaliate in the same vein. The Christian is called to a higher standard by the Gospel, and if we feel it is an impossible standard, then, let it be so, for what is impossible for us is possible for God. We are, as Francis Schaeffer used to say, to do the Lord’s work in the Lord’s way, not in the way the world does its work.

Separation

The fourth response of many Christians to our ungodly society is personal separation. We insist that we must keep ourselves and our children set apart from personal relationships with unbelievers. We want to be pure, holy, separate from sinners, and we think the only way to do this is to keep ourselves away from them. We retreat into our churches and all the relationships and institutions associated with them, so that the world will influence us in a minimal way. Then, we think, we will be secure and safe from contamination. But, if we want to keep ourselves separate, then, says Paul, we would have to leave the world altogether (1 Cor. 5:9-13).

What do we find to help us in our understanding of this subject when we turn to the gospels? We do not have to look far before we discover that Jesus frequently received criticism from His “righteous” contemporaries. They judged Him because He made Himself a friend of sinners (Lk. 7:39; 15:1-2; 19:7). Jesus answered these accusations by arguing that this was the very reason that He was sent into the world, that is, to be a friend of sinners (Luke 15:1-32; Matt. 9:10-13; 11:19). The commandments of God are not about personal separation from sinners, they are about being merciful and loving to sinners and, at the same time, living in personal holiness and purity.

Jesus came into the world to seek and to save “that which was lost,” that is, you and me (Lk. 19:10). He calls us to do the same. We all need to ask ourselves some challenging questions: “Who are our unbelieving friends? Who are the ‘sinners’ whom we give ourselves to love? Who are the ungodly who welcome us gladly and enjoy being with us?” There is no other way to be obedient to Jesus’ command.

Yet, the reality all too often is, that along with fear and condemnation, separation and retreat characterize too many of us as believers. We retire into the “haven” of the church for our own protection and for the protection of our children. This makes genuine outreach almost impossible. How can we have true communication with people about a Gospel of love, self-sacrifice, and the Word made flesh if we distance ourselves from those who need to hear the message? A friend who is not yet a believer put it this way: “The trouble with you Christians is that you wrap yourselves in a cocoon. All your close friends are other Christians. What about pagans like me? Who is going to reach me?”

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