

Marketing the Church

By Santiago Lange



One of the big issues in Christianity today is the concern to "market the church". The idea is that God's people need to better place their product – the Gospel. There are some positive benefits that we can glean from this idea. It is certainly important to find new and more effective techniques for communicating the Gospel. Most Christians would agree. When we find that people don't understand us because of the words we use we should be willing to carefully translate the truth into a language that is understood. Removing language and cultural barriers to understanding God's truth is vital to our outreach. In this sense we can listen with interest to potential insights provided through "church growth experts".

However, the notion that some have when they plead for a total overhaul of our "product" is highly questionable. We do not have to make the Gospel more relevant to modern ears. The gospel already IS relevant. There is nothing more relevant than how to be cleansed from sin and how to find life beyond the grave and we ought to be careful that as we seek to promote the church we are in fact promoting a healthy church and not a watered down, cheap imitation. Social pressure continues to increase today towards removing what some see as "offensive doctrines" like "the cross" in order to make the Gospel "more attractive".

Here then are some "strategies" that would surely make the church "more palatable" to the world:

- Use the Bible sparingly. There are things in the Bible people will find offensive (things like sin and absolute truth). Keep the people away from these unpleasant subjects.
- When quoting the Bible just focus on the passages that talk about the personal benefit of following Christ. People like these things.
- Throw out any songs, readings and prayers that are theologically deep. These things expose people to those difficult aspects of our faith like sacrifice, trials, and responsibility. Instead focus only on experience oriented songs, prayers and readings. Find things that will help people feel good about their experience without ever having to encounter the true and living God.

Hopefully we can agree that the strategies just mentioned are NOT really the way we want to present the church to the world. We should be more concerned about proclaiming God's truth than being concerned about becoming more "attractive".

In *John 12: 20-23* we read...

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip

went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. (ESV)

The Greeks who had heard about Jesus came here to Philip with this request probably because they recognized that the apostle Philip had a Greek name and therefore they felt "connected" to him. They also might have heard that Philip was from Bethsaida which apparently was more Greek tolerant than some other Jewish cities at that time. Be it how it may, these Greeks wanted to see Jesus.

We don't and can't know for sure what was meant by this request. Surely these Greeks could "see" Jesus just by watching for Him as He walked about. Did they want to discuss faith issues with Him? Were they looking for spiritual counsel? Perhaps all they really wanted was to be introduced to Him. Jesus was a prominent rabbi, a man with a growing popularity. Jesus was, so to speak, a rising star on the scene and they wanted to be able to tell people that they had met Him.

When Jesus was asked if the Greeks could meet Him He gave one of those "non-answer answers". He said:

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me. (John 12:23-26, NIV)

The response we might have initially to this statement may have been: "So, does this mean you will meet with them, or won't you?"

Jesus understood that these men saw Him as someone who was up and coming in power and/or influence. Christ knew that these Greek, as well as His disciples, did not understand at that time what His "mission" was. Jesus wanted the disciples and the Greeks to know that this was not the time for Him to become a celebrity or a military conqueror, it was the time for Him to die, it was time to proclaim the message of the cross, a message that applied to Him as well as to His disciples.

To underscore this point Jesus used here an agricultural illustration. It's a picture we can all grasp. One of the first things we need to do if we want to raise a garden is to put some seeds in the ground. We must bury the seeds. We can't dig the seeds up every day to check on them, we must bury them and leave them there. The seed is abandoned (as it were) to death. Only then can the seed eventually make the harvest possible. In like manner, Jesus had to die in order to bring many to faith in Christ. His death became our means of salvation. The apostle Paul wrote: *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God". (2 Cor. 5:21)*

The words that followed Jesus' sacrificial illustration of a seed dying are words that are not popular to the ears of the world. But these are words repeated by Jesus throughout the Gospels. In *Matthew 19:29-30* it says..

“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. 30 But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first”. And in Luke 9:23-26 we read...

“Then he said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels”. And in Matthew 20:25-28 it says...

“Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for man”.

What every one of these verses are trying to say is this: CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP IS DYNAMIC NOT STATIC. Jesus wants us to understand that "being a Christian" is not about sitting on a chair at church or saying a prayer. It is about a life commitment, a change of heart, a new orientation for living.

We ought not enter into discipleship without understanding what it involves. Today some have given the impression to the world that all what they need to do is say a prayer, proclaim "I believe in Jesus" and their salvation and responsibility will be taken care of. But we don't see that anywhere in the Bible. Yes, we are promised that if we "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ we will be saved." But, "what does this mean?" Is it a matter of saying "I believe", taking the gift, signing on the dotted line and then considering the transaction to be over? Surely not.

To be clear, we are NOT saved by what we do. We are saved because of what Christ has done on our behalf. We cannot earn salvation. Our only hope is to clothe ourselves in the work of our Savior. Our salvation externally and internally depends on our union with and in Jesus Christ. We must not waver in what the Bible clearly teaches.

One major problem has developed in how we understand the concept of "believing" or "trusting". It is to this issue that Jesus' words apply.

Here a couple of simple statements summarizing what Jesus is saying:

- Being a true follower means a willingness to trust Him completely. It means we are not only willing to trust Him to provide for our salvation, but we trust Him for the future. We trust Him when we don't know where He is leading us. We trust Him when we don't understand where He is leading us. We trust Him when we don't like where He is leading us. It means trusting Jesus' commands even when they are unpopular in a hostile society. It means trusting the Kingdom values when the society is "values neutral" (or worse). Being a true follower means FOLLOWING! It's not a one time act, it is a change of heart, a change of direction.

- Being a true follower also means being unwilling to be distracted from our goal. Jesus tells us that He who puts his hand to the plow but looks back is not a true disciple. True disciples constantly remind themselves that they are living for a future Kingdom.

The Christian walk is something that develops over time. God's Spirit changes us gradually. But He does change us. We are not recommending that we legalistically try to determine who has a genuine profession of faith and who does not. That's not our call. Our job is to make sure that we have counted the cost and that we are willing to follow Christ without reservation. Christianity is not about taking a gift that is offered and then walking away. It's about entering into a relationship that is extended to us by the gracious hand of the Savior. It's a relationship that impacts every element of our life. Yes, we will stumble. At times we will seem to stop. The key however is whether or not we keep struggling forward toward the goal.

One main key to the effectiveness of the Church has been the willingness to change and adjust in ways that best would minister to the changing community. This is a precious and wonderful characteristic.

As we begin a new chapter in our fellowship's history it is time for us to take stock once again of what our purpose is and how best to fulfill that purpose in our present time. Since God's grace is our salvation, our joy and our basis for hope it seems only right to make GRACE a key concept for our ministry.

Jesus gave His followers a simple command, "*go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*" (Matthew 28:19-20).

It's fairly straightforward. We usually have two common ways of responding to the clear command: First, we respond by WAITING. We build our churches and put ads in the paper and on the Internet. We may get involved in some other advertising campaign. We announce our service times and then we wait for people to come to us. These efforts may bring some fruit but Jesus doesn't tell us to wait for others, we should be in the process of GOING to them.

The second way of handling this command is to SEND others. The most common approach of the church is to hire "full-time ministers" so they can go to the lost and hurting and minister. But this is not really the Bible's concept of the pastoral ministry. In *Ephesians 4:11-12* we read, "*It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until all reach unity in the faith . . .*". The role of a pastor is to equip the people for ministry.

Much of contemporary ministry is like a football team. Each week the trainers work to prepare the team. They study films, design plays, push the players to get in the best shape possible. What would happen if on game day the players stood on the sidelines and the coaches went out on the field? They would get stomped! The coaches would be exhausted, they can't do everything. They would be at a severe disadvantage and no matter how hard they worked they would not be able to overcome the opposition. This is a common picture in the church: the pastor works long hours, feeling guilty for work not finished.

The members of the church are called to be the ministers of the church. The pastors are to help in the equipping. In GCI we want to move increasingly toward this Biblical model.

The PERSONAL DIMENSION of "going" comes from us learning to recognize the world we live in as our mission field. The people we see at the restaurant, the people who work with us, the salesperson we encounter. All these people are our mission field. By the way, if you are a "stay-at-home mom" then your mission field is your children, your children's friends, and the parents of your children's friends. No matter who we are, God brings people into our life every day who become our mission field. These are the people we must "go" to.

In addition to recognizing our current mission field we also need to work at expanding that mission field. We should be looking to make contact with non-Christian people. What about the people we encounter regularly at the post office? What about those people we work with but never talk to? What about our neighbors? We are called not to wait for them to come to us, OR to wait for somebody else to go to them - WE are to go. This commission goes beyond any cultural boundaries.

Jesus spent much time of his time with unbelievers. In fact, Jesus spent so much time among non-Christians that He was called, "*a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and 'sinners'*" (Matthew 11:19). He was, so to speak, found "guilty" by association. As Christians we have been called to go into the world looking for a way to demonstrate Christ by our service or declare Christ in our conversations.

There is also the CORPORATE DIMENSION of an outward directed church. If we are truly conscious of the unchurched in our community we will want to make sure that our worship and other gatherings are places where we can bring our non-Christian friends without being embarrassed. What does that mean?

We need to plan our worship services with the visitor in mind. There are two extremes we want to avoid at all costs. First, WE MUST NOT COMPROMISE THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL. We cannot omit talk about sin, repentance, absolutes, the cross, simply because people find that kind of talk uncomfortable or unpleasant. If we compromise these truths we are no longer a church! Second, WE MUST NOT SEEK ENTERTAINMENT OVER WORSHIP. There is a tendency to want to entertain, to please the crowd. We want everyone to have a "good time". However, entertainment is geared toward the audience; worship is geared toward God. Do we see the difference? Our methods may change but our purpose should be the same-- we want to draw people into a vital, genuine relationship with God.

What we DO want to do is make our presentation of the Gospel relevant. Some people seem to feel that the Gospel is boring. Hear this: the Gospel is never boring, it's how we present it that might be boring. Our challenge in the years ahead will be to present the true Gospel, in an attitude of worship in creative and interesting ways.

In our desire to make contact with and serve our community we ought not forget our primary purpose – to make disciples. It is easy to become so involved in serving our community that we can forget our primary calling. We are to be more than a social services organization (though our Christianity should have practical expression).

The apostle Paul says it well, *"from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation' the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us". (2 Cor. 5:16-20)*

There are GREAT reasons for sharing the Gospel:

- The Gospel is Good News. The Gospel tells people that there is a way to start over, there is a place to find forgiveness from our past.
- The Gospel tells us how to know God intimately.
- There is no more affirming words we can give than the great news that our friends and relatives are loved by the Father. No matter who alone or unknown you feel, the Creator of the universe knows YOUR name.
- We talk about all the woes of our society. There is nothing that will bring change to our community, area, country, world than a revival. There is no medicine more powerful than the Gospel.

In light of all of this, what are we to do? Here are some thoughts:

- We need to be prepared. We are told to *"go be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."* (1 Peter 3:15). We must think through the message of the Gospel so we can present it simply and accurately.
- We need to be open to everyone. We must work and pray that we might see others through the eyes of Christ. We must not only notice those people who seem like us. We must come to notice everyone who comes our way. Each one is a potential resident of The Kingdom.
- We need to be alert. We each have many opportunities every day to give expression to the hope that is ours in Christ. We should not afford to miss these opportunities.

There are certainly Christians who will resist anything that smells of change. Worldviews tend to be deeply entrenched. Some may say, "But, I like things the way they have been". To those voices we should point out that we can't always tell ahead of time that we won't like things after they change. Let's not make the mistake of thinking that we no longer care about traditions. Our concern is not to overthrow tradition, our goal is to make traditions more relevant.

In *1 Corinthians 8:9* Paul gives us a timeless principle: *"Be careful, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak."* We are certainly entitled to structure things the way they are most comfortable to us. But as believers we should also be willing to give up some of our comfort if it means we will be more effective in reaching others with the Gospel.

Paul also wrote,

“To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some”. (1 Cor. 9:20-22)

Few like change, but if change is what it will take to present the Gospel more effectively to our target community, then change we should.

In many countries around the world we are having trouble reaching and ministering to those who are in the younger age brackets. Someone has said that the extinction of the church is always just one generation away. We want to have a heart for the younger generation while not neglecting the older members in our spiritual family. We want to reach and minister to young people at this critical time of their life just as we want to keep ministering to everyone already here. It should not be an either/or situation, either young or old. All people are important to God.

Change can be fun if we view it as an adventure. Yes, there will be ideas that won't work. There will be ministries that are no longer necessary and others that perhaps need to be developed. There will be things we do that we will wish we had not done. But there will also be ideas and ministries that are effective. Let's pray that God would guide and motivate us. Let's pray that He would work through us to make a difference in our community.

For all of this to work, we must work together. If we are going to be an outer-directed church we will need ALL the ministers of the church serving Jesus Christ. Age, gender, background are not barriers to anyone being used by God.

Be willing to LEAD:

- Look for opportunities to share Christ with others.
- Encourage non Christian Friendships.
- Acknowledge that the unconverted matter to God.
- Demonstrate and declare your faith whenever you get the opportunity.

God has asked us to go into the world and to reach the world with the Gospel. Some seem to think that these two statements are the sum total of what we are called to do. This is not the case. To LEAD is an essential beginning but it is not the end. Jesus called us to "make disciples" not "to get decisions" (to use evangelical jargon).

It would be a tragic thing to give birth to a child, hug them, kiss them, and then place them on a street corner and then walk away feeling we had done our part. And yet that is what we often do in the Christian life, we introduce people to Christ, we nudge them towards the experience called "being born again" and then we walk away. As a child needs to be involved in a family so do believers. And that family is called "the church".

Someone has said, "To begin our Christian life we must commit ourselves to Jesus Christ, to grow in our Christian life we must also commit ourselves to other Christians." That's what the church is: a group of people who are committed to each other because of Christ.

We might be able to learn about hope and peace by ourself but we cannot learn about love in isolation. We can't learn about forgiveness, dealing with anger, or becoming compassionate in isolation. We need to have people around us. The church gives us a learning community of people to "practice on".

The church is not a building, it is a people, who have been irrevocably changed by God; who have joined together to bring honor to the one they call King and a community of believers committed to live and share the Gospel.

May God help our family grow and may He be honored in all that we do. □