

## What's the Point?

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Please don't be alarmed, the title of this passage is not a ranting string of cracked pearls springing from the mouth of a disgruntled pastor. I'll do that tomorrow (just kidding). Rather, I want to ask, "What's the point" with regard to the "why?" of evangelism. As in, "Why are we evangelizing?" Attached to this question is one that I think is almost as important, "What outcome do we want to happen through our evangelizing?"

Yes, here I am asking, "Well, duh?" questions again. I can't help it, it's in my nature. I'm not sure I actually can quit asking them, it appears to be a calling of sorts. So why am I asking these obvious questions this time? Well, I'm starting to wonder if perhaps we've not chewed on them enough given our accepted language regarding the subject.

For newer readers of my blog, let me assure that I have a firm conviction that evangelism is at the core of the Christian Faith - a faith that doesn't spread the "Good News" of the Gospel is not the Christian faith. Yet, I have wondered if perhaps there might be better paths to walk on which evangelism might take place - that wonder led me to write a devotion study-guide on the nature of evangelism. You can e-mail me if you want a printed copy (and yes, that's a shameless plug). So, evangelism itself is not what I'm questioning. Helping people encounter Jesus is what the faith is all about. What I want to know is, "What do we do with these people who happen to get broken by the scandal of Jesus and believe?"

I ask this because of the way Christians have been trying to differentiate themselves from non-Christians over the last twenty years or so. In the era where people are attempting to temper language and make it more "inclusive," many evangelism-minded Christians felt we needed a new way to differentiate between "believers in Jesus" and "not believers in Jesus." After all, "heathen" seemed rather harsh, "infidel" was too militaristic (and I'm not sure was ever used by the Church anyway), "pagan" had so much baggage, and "unbeliever" assigned people in the civil realm to an almost second-class state. One thing recent evangelists have figured out is that calling people names at the start is not usually the best way to get people to listen to your message. I applaud that realization - it's a good thing.

What we came up with to replace this language, however, may have ended up doing more long-term harm than good. Instead of labeling people with the negative "unbeliever," "heathen" or "pagan" - Christians started identifying non-Christian people as "unchurched." Now, I see the appeal, there isn't any sort of automatic moral stigma in not being "churched" in this culture. People will happily say how they don't get "organized religion" or the odd patterns of church life. The label "unchurched" caught on, and there haven't been many complaints about it.

Yet, do you see how this might have shifted our thinking on what we do with people who fall into belief? The opposite of "unchurched" after all, is "churched." The problem is, to be "churched" means that you are part of an institutional movement rather than a breathing community of disciples in pursuit of a mission. Labeling someone "churched," after all, is often the Christian code phrase for saying that they are part of the "club." Is that our goal? Are we simply trying to get people "churched" when we pursue evangelism? Did the Lord of Creation become flesh, die on the Cross, and rise from the dead simply so John and Jane could be on the deacon board, join a Sunday school class, and help out with potlucks? That's it?

I don't know about you, but as much as I love pot-lucks, see the value of Christian Education, and am constantly searching for servants in our congregation - being "churched" as an aim for Evangelism seems to be aiming awfully low. I'm not saying that "churched/unchurched" language can't be helpful in any circumstances. I'm just wondering if that's really what we should be aiming for.

I want to bring back an idea of discipleship in our language of evangelism - something that the institutional language of "unchurched" just seems to be lacking. After all, we're not trying to fill our trustee board, add to our Sunday School roster, or up our membership rolls when we pursue evangelism. Rather, evangelism is about introducing people to a mighty, compassionate, and transforming Lord - who will screw up people's lives more often than not, and leave them wanting him to do it more. That's the "what purpose" of evangelism that I can get swept up in. Maybe these people will become part of the Church and transform its community, rather than simply getting "churched." Who knows, it's a dream I have.