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A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 8 • Number 2 • SPRING 1999

MOTIVES FOR EVANGELISM

Tom Wells

Motives are tricky things. There are two pitfalls in looking too closely at them. First, there is the danger of unhealthy introspection. Take the man, for instance, who thinks he has discovered a bit of pride in his heart that he was not previously aware of. How will he react? Well, he might say, "Yes, I can see that it was pride that led me to take the course I took, but at least it's humble of me to admit it." C. S. Lewis has told us:

There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which every one in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves The vice I am talking of is Pride or Self-Conceit

If Lewis is right—and I think he is—our friend might seem to have good reason to congratulate himself on ferreting out his pride before it poisoned his entire life.

But this kind of introspection is endless. Yes, he was humble in admitting his pride, but then he was more than a little proud of his humility. Of course, he could then humbly admit his second bout with pride and pat himself on the back. But that would call for another rebuke, *ad infinitum* and *ad nauseum*. Soon our friend would drown in his obsession with the purity of his motives. Better to have said, "I was proud" and gotten on with it.

The second pitfall is closely related to the first. If we become obsessed with our motives we may be paralyzed into inaction. Our friend above ran that risk. Had he kept up his pursuit, some critic would no doubt have accused him of navel-gazing. And there would have been more than a little truth in the accusation.

In speaking of motives for evangelism we are speaking to those who want to get on with the job of telling men about Christ. They are the people who need to ask simply, "Why do I want to do this?" The answers they give to that question will reveal whether or not their evangelism is pleasing to God.



But motives are immensely important. There is a sense in which they are the only things that are important. The Puritan, Richard Sibbes, has been quoted as saying, "God takes the intention for the action." In other words, if the movement of the heart is right, God is pleased with what we do.

I suppose that someone will remind me of the proverb that says, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." And so it is. But the proverb does not address the same situation we are thinking of. It is a rebuke to those who intend to do nothing now. Tomorrow, Yes; but today, No. In speaking of motives for evangelism we are speaking to

those who want to get on with the job of telling men about Christ. They are the people who need to ask simply, "Why do I want to do this?" The answers they give to that question will reveal whether or not their evangelism is pleasing to God.

The question, "Why do I want to evangelize?" has three kinds of answers. There are (1) bad answers, (2) at least one insufficient answer, and (3) one fully satisfactory answer.

Can there be a really bad reason to evangelize? Let me tell you a story, and you can be the judge. We'll pretend that I made this story up, since it has been some time since I read this man's biography, and I can no longer vouch for every detail. Think of it only as an illustration; the effect will be the same.

Years ago a pastor who was later to become famous was about to be voted out of his church. I don't remember the reason, but it is not relevant to my story. What to do?—that was the question.

It wasn't long before he had the answer. Why not evangelize, bring new people into the church? Then when it came time to vote, his new converts would vote for him and he could keep his pulpit. He may have reminded himself that his enemies would surely turn up a good crowd of members who no longer attended to vote against him. Wouldn't it be a case of wisely fighting fire with fire? There couldn't be anything wrong with that, could there? In any case, his plan worked. Many made professions of faith in Christ and they helped him retain his pulpit. He went on, as I said, to become a famous leader of men.

We may say of this story what Paul said of some preaching in his day, "Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice" (Phil. 1:18). Apparently Paul held that Christ could be glorified and men won to Him, even when

the motives of the preachers were corrupt. If so, since he wrote by inspiration, we must agree with him. But he did not commend corrupt motives. A bad motive is wrong, even if good comes from what is done. Pleasing God with our motives is a chief business of Christians. So Paul laid his finger on the sore spot: "false motives." And we must listen to what he wrote.

"But, after all," someone may say, "this kind of thing can't be very common. How many preachers go out to preach the gospel in order to keep from being voted out of their churches?" The point is well made, I imagine; surely this does not often happen.

Let the story stand, however, for all the false motives that move men to preach Christ. Are there no pastors who preach Christ with the hope of having more converts to boast of than others have? Are there no evangelists who preach with the idea of making a name for themselves and their ministries? Are there no Sunday school teachers who are prompted to greater efforts by the prospect of winning a contest and receiving recognition for themselves and their class or department? You will see here, I think, the possibility of endless wrong motives for preaching and teaching the gospel of Christ.

But let's turn now to an insufficient motive, a reason that is good in itself though not powerful enough to sustain the work of Christ over lifetimes and centuries. Let's think of the motive of concern for the lost. Here we are dealing with a motive that is good and right and necessary.

A man without concern for lost men and women around him has no business calling himself a Christian, much less thinking of himself as doing the work of an evangelist. Do the cries of the perishing mean nothing to you? May God have mercy on your soul! Have you received forgiveness and yet care nothing that others receive it too? Then you are an ungrateful wretch, deceived about the par-

don of which you boast. But that is not the whole story.

Concern for the lost is an insufficient motive because in itself it would not have sustained the work of even one generation. The reason is this: many of the men for whom Christians are concerned will do all in their power to repel our witness. To put it bluntly, they will tell us straight out that they want none of what we have to offer.

Now of course I do not mean that every person to whom we speak of Christ will respond in that way. But the fact remains that many will do so. Sometimes they will do so as individuals, sometimes as ethnic groups and sometimes as adherents of false religions. And when this happens, the Christian will need more than a feeling of concern for such people to keep him going. It is very difficult to maintain a concern for people who tell you to "get lost!" or who threaten to kill you if you do not relent. When you add to that the fact that entire populations often take this position—think, for instance of the so-called "closed" areas of the world—you will see that this work of Christ has always needed something more than concern for the lost to keep it moving ahead.

In the last analysis the only sufficient reason for evangelism is God.

Michael Green, in his book *Evangelism in the Early Church*, wrote:

There can be little doubt that the main motive for evangelism was a theological one. These men did not spread their message because it was advisable for them to do so, nor because it was the socially responsible thing to do. They did not do it primarily for humanitarian or agathistic utilitarian reasons. They did it because of the overwhelming experience of the love of God which they had received through Jesus Christ (p. 236).

In writing this, Michael Green has come to the heart of Christian motivation. "The main motive . . . was a theological one." That is, it had to do, not with men and their needs, but with God.

First, it is God who sends us into the world. We will not deny the power exercised over the church by the awful need of the world, but at the end of the day when we are weary and men have made it plain that they do not want us we must fall back on the command of God.



Let's look at this more closely. We will find that it is true in at least two ways.

First, it is God who sends us into the world. We will not deny the power exercised over the church by the awful need of the world, but at the end of the day when we are weary and men have made it plain that they do not want us we must fall back on the command of God. Christ has said, "Go!" In thinking on Him we say with Thomas, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). And then we go.

If the world cares little or nothing for our witness, Christ cares a great deal for it. Just prior to ascending to heaven He promised the church His Holy Spirit and closely tied the Spirit's presence to our evangelism, an evangelism which would—as we now know—take centuries to accomplish. Listen: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit

has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

What precisely is the nature of this connection between the Holy Spirit's coming and the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth? The answer is complex, but one part of it is clear from elsewhere in the book of Acts. The Holy Spirit granted them power to be obedient to their Lord's command. After Peter had told the leaders of Jerusalem that "we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20), he joined his fellows in praying for boldness to do that very thing (Acts 4:29). The result? "And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31). When Peter was later called on to defend their action he said simply, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

God has spoken; that's sufficient. As Michael Green wrote, their reason was a theological one. Obedience to commands is not thought of very highly in our culture. Individual freedom has become for many the value against which all other values must be measured. But it was not always so. More importantly it will not be the measure by which we will be measured at Christ's return. The returning King will want to know what we have done with the goods with which He entrusted us. Perhaps He will remind us of His earlier words, "You are My friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:14).

To be fully fair to Green, however, we must step back one step further in finding the motive for the early church's evangelism. When he spoke of their motive being a theological one, he was looking beyond their obedience to something that lay behind it, what Green called "a sense of gratitude."

Man is a complex being. You are a complex being. You do not act from a single motive. Your life moves forward under the stimulus of many and varied impulses. Of these, one of the most powerful is gratitude.

It is possible for you to be obedient for more than one reason. If you cringe in fear as you go about your duties you are technically an obedient man, but your obedience will have very little to do with real Christianity. Slavish fear is no part of gospel motivation. Gratitude, on the other hand, lies very near the heart of it.

Someone may ask at this point, "Doesn't the Bible tell us we must fear God?" Yes, it does. But it is evident that "fear" in such contexts means to stand in awe of God. We must "fear" Him in the sense of having reverence for Him, a reverence that makes us take seriously both His promises and His commands. Then His goodness and greatness will move us to wonder and admiration, but that is a far cry from terror. "Perfect love," John tells us, "casts out [slavish] fear" (1 John 4:18).

In starting the second major section of his letter to Rome, Paul appealed to his readers to act out of gratitude for God's goodness to them: "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God which is your spiritual service of worship" (Rom. 12:1).

This appeal is "in view of God's mercy." He might have written, "in view of God's judgment," but he didn't. Later he reminded them that "we will all stand before the judgment seat of God" (14:10). But at this pivotal point he chose the mercy of God as his rallying cry. A motive was wanted to move Christians to sacrificial living. Paul found that motive in gratitude to God.

Didn't Paul's Lord teach us the same thing in Luke 7? There Jesus went to eat at the home of a Pharisee named Simon. While they were at the table "a woman in the city

who was a sinner . . . began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet, and anointing them with the perfume" (Luke 7:37-38).

This was a bit too much for the Pharisee who saw in it an evidence that Jesus was not a prophet. After all, a prophet would have known what kind of woman she was!

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What becomes clear, however, is this: Jesus knew both the woman and the Pharisee. So He made a comparison between them, a comparison based on the levels of their gratitude:

He said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears, and wiped them with her hair. You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. For this reason I say to you, her sins which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:44-47).

Simon comes out poorly when compared to this sinful woman. Why? Because gratitude moves men and women to go to heroic lengths in serving those to whom they are grateful. The lesson is not that the woman's great love led to the forgiveness of her sins. Not at all! Just the opposite was true. The forgiveness of her sins—which took place prior to Jesus telling her about it—led to her magnificent act of love. Simon, on the other hand, had no sins forgiven. As a result, he did not act like a man moved by gratitude.

What has all this to do with evangelism? A great deal! Gratitude for God's mercy does not confine itself to acts of love toward the physical body of Jesus. If it did, there would have been no such acts in the last 1950 years. But gratitude is both creative and responsive.

The sinful woman who dropped her tears on Jesus' feet had no command to do so. But she created acts of love to show her devotion to our Lord. The Romans, on the other hand, had the command of an inspired apostle to respond to. And gratitude would lead them to yield their bodies as living sacrifices because it was the will of God.

We have the command of our Savior to make disciples of all nations. A sense of gratitude for His many mercies to us will lead us to seek to carry out His command. It is clear that the command itself cannot be carried out by only one individual. Therefore it bears on us as individual Christian believers to do one part of it in concert with others. Our part may be small, but gratitude to God will move us to take that small part.

God's greatness is reason enough to do what He tells us to do, including evangelizing, preaching the gospel. But when we think that we who have been saved know the greatness of God primarily as goodness, then we cannot waver in our dedication to the task. We should not be slow to respond to the need of a dying world. But a great God, best known to us in a dying Savior, has bound us to Him-

self by cords of mercy. Can we say less than Isaiah said when he experienced the forgiving love of God?

No, his words are our words, "Here am I. Send me!" (Isa. 6:8).

Author

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