

IN RESPONSE - CHURCH-CENTERED EVANGELISM

by Dennis Prutow

Volume VI, Number 2, February, 1997

While in seminary I worked in an army chaplain's office. A young lady came to the office one day with her parents and a young man. The parents were concerned because the young man made no commitment to Christ. I was supposed to remedy the situation. To the best of my ability I presented the gospel to this young man. After presenting the gospel, I led the young man in a prayer. Laughing, the young man then rode away on his motorcycle.

Many of us have had such experiences. We present the gospel and work to elicit a concrete commitment or response. In the example, when I pressed for a response, the commitment registered in prayer was an evasion of the truth rather than a sincere submission to Christ the Lord. I contributed to the sin. In the end, did I do more harm than good?

Steve had been on drugs. He financed his first year in college with drug money. I patiently set the gospel before Steve. I called him to repent of his past and present evil and trust in the sacrifice of Christ. His reaction startled me. "I tried Christ. He doesn't work." Steve had been down the road of "making a decision" for Christ. It was obvious to Steve the decision meant nothing. The promised change did not occur. Christ did not work. At that point, Steve was not inclined to consider Christ further.

These are examples of individualistic, extra-church evangelism which were counter productive. They actually made subsequent evangelism more difficult. Interestingly enough, contemporary evangelism is for the most part both extra-church and individualistic. It is extra-church in that it is carried on either by para-church organizations or with materials provided by para-church organizations. In addition, it is quite common to take people to evangelistic meetings and crusades outside the church sponsored by prominent evangelistic associations or by local ministerial associations which import evangelists.

Contemporary evangelism also tends to be individualistic in approach with the stress on "personal evangelism." In fact, unless individuals in the church

engage in this "personal evangelism," some observers claim no evangelism takes place. The object is to present Christ one on one to elicit immediate response. Even when persons are transported to evangelistic meetings, the approach tends to be individualistic. The evangelist pleads with individuals to register their compliance with the gospel in some outward way such as coming forward. The individuals coming forward then meet personal workers trained in "personal evangelism."

To be sure, individuals are converted through individual and personal presentations of Christ. God saw fit to bring me to Himself by means of the personal initiative of an army chaplain. We must also often begin counseling sessions with a presentation of Christ in the gospel. Let me stress this. *There is a place for personal and individual evangelism.*

When we think of evangelism, however, extra-church individualistic evangelism comes to mind *first of all*. We think in such terms because this evangelism is pretty much normative in the evangelical world. Evangelism takes place outside the church on an individual basis while teaching takes place within the church. The two do not meet.

Should individualistic extra-church evangelism be normative? I do not think so. I will argue for a more church-centered approach to evangelism which I also think is covenantal. I think church-centered covenantal evangelism should be normative, the rule in evangelism rather than the exception.

Extra-church individualistic evangelism views Christian individuals as the primary instrument of evangelism in the world. Extra-church individualistic evangelism views the one on one encounter as the crest of evangelism. Extra-church individualistic evangelism views the decision for Christ as the goal and objective of evangelism. No doubt, we are all to be witnesses. Born again people can testify to the grace of God in their lives. This is important and essential.

Church-centered covenantal evangelism also produces witnesses to the grace of God. In contrast to extra-church indi-

vidualistic evangelism, church-centered covenantal evangelism views the church, the covenant community, as the primary instrument of evangelism in the world. Church-centered covenantal evangelism regards preaching in the covenant community as the God ordained means for converting sinners. Church-centered covenantal evangelism views public profession of faith within the church, along with the covenant sign of baptism, to be the proper way for converts to register their embrace of Christ in the gospel.

Extra-church individualistic evangelism does not take the visible church and the means of grace as seriously as it should. Para-church organizations often begin with a view toward helping the visible church in its mission. Soon that vision fades and the church fades into the background. An active member of the Navigators I know exemplifies extra-church individualistic evangelism. He tells me the church hinders his growth in Christ. He does better sitting at home reading his Bible in private on Sunday morning. This man was a missionary in eastern Europe and did work on a Christian college campus. His example and witness, as a Christian, undermined the evangelical church in our community.

That individualistic extra-church evangelism is the rule in the church rather than the exception was emphasized to me in an encounter several years ago in an evening worship service. I pointed to Westminster Confession of Faith 25.2:

The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, *out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation* (italics added).

My parishioners reacted violently to the words I put in italics. "That's a Roman Catholic position," they exclaimed. Is it?

'In Response' is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 1997 by Dennis Prutow.

IN RESPONSE - CHURCH-CENTERED EVANGELISM, PART 2

by Dennis Prutow

Extra-church individualistic evangelism has a low view of the church, the corporate body of Christ, as an instrument of evangelism in the world. This is due in large part to the failure of the church to properly understand her mission. This failure has contributed to the proliferation of para-church organizations and in individualistic evangelism.

Church-centered covenantal evangelism holds the position of the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Confession speaks of the church *out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation*. Robert Shaw comments as follows:

There is no ordinary possibility of salvation out of the visible church. This is widely different from the doctrine of the Romish Church, which affirms that the Roman Catholic Church is the ONLY church, and that there is no salvation out of that Church.... Our Confession, in terms remarkably guarded, only asserts, that "out of the visible church there is no ordinary possibility of salvation." There is, then, a possibility of salvation without its pale; for a person may, by some means, such as by perusal of the Scriptures, be brought to a knowledge of the truth, and have no opportunity of joining himself to the Church; but such cases are extraordinary: and, as God usually works by means, there is no ordinary possibility of salvation out of the visible church, because those who are out of the visible church are destitute of the ordinary means of salvation.¹

The Confession holds that the visible church is the ordinary instrument of salvation in the world because God uses *means* and the visible church is the God ordained repository of the *ordinary means* of salvation.

A. A. Hodge also comments on the Confession of Faith.

These sections teach that out of the bounds of this universal visible Church there is no ordinary possibil-

ity of salvation.... [O]ur Confession intends in these sections to teach ordinarily, where there is the knowledge and the opportunity, God requires everyone who loves Christ to confess him in the regular way of joining the community of his people and of taking the sacramental badges of his discipleship.²

Confessionally speaking, the ordinary instrument God uses to bring people to Himself is the visible church.

Individualistic extra-church evangelism has a low view of the means of grace within the church. Individualistic extra-church evangelism, in many cases, views the gospel much like a sales pitch. You can present it best one on one. Church-centered covenantal evangelism, on the other hand, views the church as God's covenant community in which the means of grace are present to fulfill God's covenant promises in God's actual presence and under the blessing of God's Spirit.

Question 88 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, What are the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption? Answer 88:

The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

Thomas Watson comments,

If the word preached does us no good, there is no other way by which we can be saved. This is God's institution, and the main engine he uses to convert souls.³

Westminster Shorter Catechism 89 asks, How is the word made effectual to salvation? Answer 89:

The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of

building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation. "[W]e notice that preaching is essential. It is the primary means."⁴

Yes, *preaching* is God's primary means of convincing and converting sinners. The apostle Paul indicates this in 1 Corinthians 1:21,

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

Paul adds in Romans 10:13-15,

"Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? And how will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!"

The preaching of the Word of God is particularly effective within the church, the temple of the Spirit. The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into *a dwelling of God in the Spirit* (italics added).

The assembled church is the special dwelling place of the Spirit. Preaching in the church blessed by the Spirit is a powerful tool for converting unbelievers. Sinners sitting under God's Word in the church are therefore more likely to be converted than anywhere else. Church-centered covenantal evangelism takes this point very seriously.

'In Response' is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 1997 by Dennis Prutow.

² A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), p. 314.

³ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), p. 216.

⁴ G. I. Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism for Study Classes, Volume 2* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970) p. 92.

¹ Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Confession of Faith of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Inverness, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1980), p. 265.

IN RESPONSE - CHURCH-CENTERED EVANGELISM, PART 3

by Dennis Prutow

We are contrasting extra-church individualistic evangelism with church-centered covenantal evangelism. Extra-church individualistic evangelism emphasizes the individual, he is God's primary instrument. Church-centered covenantal evangelism, on the other hand, views the gathered covenant body as God's primary instrument of evangelism.

Further, extra-church individualistic evangelism emphasizes the personal work of the individual in presenting the gospel one on one. In contrast, church-centered covenantal evangelism sees the preaching of the word within the covenant community, the temple of the Spirit, as the primary means of convincing and converting sinners.

Finally, extra-church individualistic evangelism emphasizes the personal work of the individual in not only presenting the gospel one on one *but also seeking immediate response*. Church-centered covenantal evangelism holds that public profession of faith within the covenant community, with the covenant sign of baptism, is the biblical way men and women ought to register their submission to Christ in the gospel.

After serving in the army as a chaplain, I was received into the Orthodox Presbyterian Church as a ministerial member of the Presbytery of the Dakotas. The sermon I prepared for this occasion was based upon the words of Jesus in Matthew 16:19. "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

My emphasis was simple. The elders of a church have the responsibility to examine men and women and young people for membership within the visible church. The requirement is a credible, a believable, profession of faith. When the elders embrace those making a credible profession of faith in Christ, they utilize the keys of the kingdom. The opposite is also true. When members are found in sin and refuse to repent, excommunication may take place. This too is a use of the keys of the kingdom. On this occasion, if my memory serves me well, my sermon, in God's Providence, answered the loose

and low view of the church set forth in the sermon of another man being examined at this meeting of Presbytery.

There is a significant difference between extra-church individualistic evangelism and church-centered covenantal evangelism. The former type of evangelism may lead to no tie with the visible church in baptism. Some converts may even spurn the church. This is entirely unbiblical. Christ commanded baptism. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). The apostles followed the directions of their Lord as Acts 2:41 indicates. They added to the visible body of believers in Jerusalem those converted under the preaching of the word by means of baptism. "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls." Here is an example of church-centered covenantal evangelism.

In this context we once again look at Westminster Confession of Faith 25:2.

The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world *that profess the true religion*; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation (italics added).

According to the Confession, following Acts 2:41, the kingdom of Christ, which is manifested in the visible church, "consists of all those throughout the world *that profess the true religion*."

The Confession teaches [t]he truth also that since the Church is rendered visible by the profession and outward obedience of its members; and since no class of men are ever endowed with the power of discriminating with absolute accuracy the genuineness of Christian characteristics, it necessarily follows that a credible profession, as a presumptive evidence of real religion, constitutes a person a member of the visible church. By a credible profession is meant a profession of true religion

sufficiently intelligent and sufficiently corroborated by the daily life of the professor to be credited as genuine. Every such profession is ground for the presumption that the person is a member of the true church and consequently constitutes him a member of the visible church, and lays an obligation upon all other Christians to regard and treat him accordingly.¹

A credible public profession of faith accompanied by baptism sets individuals apart from the world in a visible way. Acts 11:22-26 and the formation the church in Antioch confirms this.

The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

God blessed the preaching of converts from Cyprus and Cyrene in Antioch (Acts 11:20). The Jerusalem elders sent Barnabas to Antioch. He also preached and "considerable numbers were brought to the Lord." Barnabus brought Paul to Antioch. This pair taught the people and formed the band of converts into a church. Did they baptize? Yes! Christ commanded it. They made disciples by forming a church. The baptized disciples were then recognized by the community as Christians. This is an example of church-centered covenantal evangelism. In Response' is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 1997 by Dennis Prutow. Articles may be reproduced for use in church school classes.

¹ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), p. 313.

IN RESPONSE - GOD'S HIGHER THOUGHTS (ISAIAH 55:8)

by Dennis Prutow

In order to do justice to the transcendence of God, we often take Isaiah 55:8 out of context. God contends in this text, "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways." The text is taken to mean that God's *way* of thinking is far above our *way* of thinking.

We can add Psalm 139:6, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is too high, I cannot attain to it." The reference is to God's omniscience; He knows all in one act of intuition. However, some interpreters insist on drawing a line between God's knowledge and human knowledge which we cannot breach. The Barthian calls God wholly other. This means the creature is wholly different. There is no rational means of communication between the two.

The Kantian sees this same scheme in the distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal. The phenomenal world is the world around us. It is filled with observable phenomena; the rain falls, the grass grows, the flower fades. The noumenal world is "[t]he real world as opposed to the appearance [phenomenal] world. Kant said of the noumenal realm that it cannot be known."¹ This noumenal world is the real world of things-in-themselves. This world includes God. There is no possible way by the use of human faculties for us to breach the divide between the phenomenal world of appearances and the world of things-in-themselves, the noumenal world.

We find this type of distinction in very interesting places. In discussing the incomprehensibility of God, a committee report given to the Twelfth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church references certain Scriptures.

His thoughts are not our thoughts [Isaiah 55:8]. His ways are past finding out [Romans 11:33, King James Version]. The secret things belong to the our God [Deuteronomy 29:29].²

The report gives these references to Scripture to underscore the transcen-

dence, the incomparability, of God's knowledge. The report then urges,

If we are not to bring the divine knowledge of his thoughts and ways down to human knowledge, or our human knowledge up to his knowledge, we dare not maintain that his knowledge and our knowledge **coincide at any single point** (emphasis in original).³

There is a great divide between God's thoughts and knowledge and human thoughts and knowledge. The two cannot and dare not meet at any single point. God's thoughts are not our thoughts!

This use of Isaiah 55:8 is the worst kind of eisegesis, imposing an interpretation on Scripture. Isaiah 55:8 not only does not affirm an impenetrable barrier between God's knowledge and human knowledge, it declares the exact opposite. Isaiah 55:6-9 reads as follows.

Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," declares the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.

There is a disparity between the *ways* of fallen human beings and the *ways* of God. There is an obvious difference between God's *thoughts* and human *thoughts*. What is the problem with the *ways* of sinners? They are wicked. What is wrong with fallen human *thoughts*. They are unrighteous. God's *ways* are holy and righteous. God's *thoughts* are pure and upright. There is a huge *ethical* and *moral* gap present.

Here is what Matthew Henry says as he comments on this passage.

If we look up to heaven, we find God's counsels there high and transcendent, his thoughts and ways infinitely above ours, v. 8, 9. The wicked are urged to forsake their evil ways

and thoughts (v. 7) and to return to God, that is, to bring their ways and thoughts to concur and comply with his; "for" (says he) "my thoughts and ways are not as yours. Yours are conversant only about things beneath; they are of the earth earthy: but mine are above, *as the heaven is high above the earth*; and, if you would approve yourselves true penitents, yours must be so too, and your affections must be set on things above."⁴

How can we bring our ways and thoughts into compliance with God's ways and thoughts if God's ways and thought and our ways and thoughts cannot coincide at any single point?

Paul intones, "But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). Where do we find the mind of Christ our Lord? Do we have the mind of Christ in our heads and between our ears? We have the mind of Christ in Scripture. Our thoughts are unrighteous and sinful. We need to repent. We need to bring our thinking into compliance with God's thinking. Can we do this? We cannot if God's thoughts and our thoughts cannot coincide at any point.

Our text does not intimate this at all. In fact, the implication is just the opposite. When God says, "Honor your father and mother," we know and understand these words and comply with them. When we do so, we put these words between our ears and practice them daily. We follow the exhortation of Paul.

We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). God's meaning for the Fifth Commandment and our understanding of these words *must* coincide at some point or we lose all possibility for obedience. We deconstruct Isaiah 55:8. We turn the text into its exact opposite.

'In Response' is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 1997 by Dennis Prutow.

¹ Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (Totowa, New Jersey: Littlefield, Adams and Company, 1979), p. 215.

² Minutes, page 14.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Bible*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), vol. IV, p. 320.