

Has the Church Lost Its Voice?

By Bob Young

[Please focus on our need to "make disciples"/tell the story/sow seed/etc. We need to be outward focused rather than inward.]

Introduction

Church has lost its voice. Birds don't sing because they have an answer, but because they have a song in their heart. Birds are made to sing.

Chuck Swindoll tells the story of Chippie the parakeet. He said the bird's problems began when the woman who owned him decided to clean up the seeds and loose feathers from the bottom of his cage using a vacuum.

When the phone rang, the owner turned to pick it up, and you guessed it, with a thud and a whoosh, Chippie was gone. The owner quickly turned off the vacuum and unzipped the bag. There was Chippie. He was stunned but breathing. Seeing that he was covered with black dust, his owner rushed Chippie to the bathtub, where she turned on the faucet full blast and held the bird under the icy water. At that point she realized that she'd done even more damage, and she quickly cranked up her blow dryer and gave the wet, shivering little parakeet a blast. Chuck finished the story by saying, "Chippie doesn't sing much anymore..." Obviously Chippie had experienced some trauma in his life and probably didn't see much to sing about anymore.

What factors have caused the church to lose its voice?

- We have begun to hear other voices, and they sound good.
- We have been too critical of our own voice.
- We have heard more and more people criticizing our voice.
- We have become aware that some people don't like our voice.
- Or that some people can't hear our voice.

How can we recover our voice?

- Know that our voice matters.
- Illus: what the churches of Christ have contributed to the dialogue over the last ½ of the 20th century.
- That's just what we do....re: missions.

I want to think with you about equipping the Church for the Mission of the Church

What is the mission of the church? This is an important question because a church without a mission is a church with nothing to say. The church without a mission does not know how to equip itself for service. The church without a mission does not know who it is or why it is.

What is the mission of the church? Several good answers could be given--fellowship, encouragement, teaching, worship, evangelism, missions. Since the church is the body of Christ on this earth, one answer is to do the will of God. This is the answer in Ephesians, one of the most ecclesiological (church-centered) books in the NT. Our old three-fold definition of the work of the church was evangelism, edification, and benevolence. I tell students the church should do two things—save people, keep them saved. If one is forced to give only one answer, the Bible suggests the mission of the church is salvation. Salvation involves evangelism, missions, saving people, keeping them saved, finding those in need of the gospel, encouraging, sharing, helping, teaching, preaching, fellowship—at the heart of all of these activities must be an awareness that the church is about salvation because Christ is about salvation. That was his reason for coming to this earth; that was his reason for dying; that is the eternal purpose of God.

Evangelism takes many forms--personal evangelism, conversational evangelism, natural evangelism, missions both domestic and foreign, mass evangelism, local evangelism. More recently books have been written with titles such as worship evangelism, small group evangelism.... To say that the mission of the church is salvation or evangelism is not to say how that should be done, only that it MUST be done.

How can one be so bold as to say it MUST be done? The primary argument is that from Scripture. Consider 1 Peter 2:5-10; 1 Thess. 1:6-8. Sharing the saving message of Jesus is natural among those who are the people of God. We have made it unnatural, but it is natural. We have made it the responsibility of a special group when it is the responsibility of anyone who knows.

After we agree it must be done, then we can ask how it should be done, and that is about strategy, is pragmatic, asks about effective methods, and the answer will vary from congregation to congregation. How should this church evangelize? You must decide, explore, test, encourage, pray, even fast.

In general, however, if the local church is to accomplish its God-given mission, it must fulfill four conditions. These are principles for equipping the church for the mission of the church. They are suggested to me in our text. These principles involve the church understanding itself, organizing itself, expressing itself, and being itself. These have to do with the church's teaching, structure, message, and example.

I. [Eph. 1:9-10—KNOW] The Church must understand itself: This is the teaching of the church. What is a biblical understanding of the church?

- At least two false images of the church must be combated: (1) the church as a religious club which leads to introverted Christianity, and (2) the church as having primarily a secular mission which leaves to a religion-less Christianity. The first leads to spiritual navel gazing and a self-serving, selfish view of the church, consumerism, what can the church do for me, internal service. The latter leads to a social gospel which is the opposite of the religion that binds back together as reflected in Eph. 2.
- A correct, biblical understanding of the church will show at least two major identifiers: the church has been called out of the world to worship/serve God; the church has been sent back into the world to serve the world and to witness to the world concerning God, Christ, and God's eternal purpose for the salvation of the world. Because this is so, these two marks of the church, its holiness as a separated people, and its commitment to be a presence in the world as an apostolic extension, lead to what Alec Vidler called a "holy worldliness." Paul called it in the world but not of the world.
- Jesus Christ models this holy worldliness, and the incarnation is the perfect embodiment of it. The church must understand itself as the very presence of Christ in this world as suggested in the last two verses of Eph. 1.

II. [Eph. 2:19-21] The church must organize itself: This is the structure of the church. What are the structures of the church according to Scripture?

- For what are we structured? We look at the work of elders, deacons, ministers, teachers. What are we about? What are we trying to do? What do our structures allow, or more accurately what do our understandings of these structures allow? Do we have a way to accomplish decision making, teaching, internal care, keep the membership numbers up, service, holiness (or worldliness), worship, fellowship, mission, evangelism, salvation? If we cannot accomplish what God wants in our current structures, how should we restructure. I use the word structure purposefully, because I do not want to suggest we are discussing a change in God's plan which we usually describe with church organization. I suggest a change in activities and in how we get activities accomplished. I suggest a bottom up model of leadership rather than a top down model—the Jesus model in Luke 22 and parallels.
- Most churches would do well to take a survey, evaluate themselves, ask what is our identity (self-understanding), and ask if what we do reflects our identity. What does our community see in us? What is our identity in our community? Where are the bridges over which the gospel can travel into this community from this church? These are questions we do not have time to consider, but they are questions of church personality, programming, and process.

III. [Eph. 3:8-11] The church must willingly express itself: This is the message of the church. Since the church always articulates a message whether it intends to or not, what is the right message, the relevant message?

- Evangelism is sharing good news. This means the news must be right, and when it is shared it must be good. To understand the mission of the church and have a church ready to accomplish that mission, we must understand and define the good news. The essence of the gospel is Jesus Christ himself.

- A more difficult question is this: how can we formulate and communicate this good news in an increasingly pluralistic society? How can we make it resonate, logically, sensibly in a relativistic, post-modern world where objective truth is rejected by most, and difficult to define at best?
- I see two extremes: (1) total fixity in which we are in bondage to the words, formulas, gospel stereotypes of the past, and (2) total fluidity in which we are totally at the mercy of our culture and context so that the gospel is at the mercy of marketing, consumerism, and selfishness.
- Total fixity emphasized the gospel, revealed by God, received by us, passes on a paradosis, a tradition to be preserved, a paratheke, deposit to be guarded. Such sounds good and is good. Such cannot be discarded, but must be held in tension by the mission of the church.
- Total fluidity says the gospel must be contextualized, communicated appropriately to each person in particular situations. Otherwise it is irrelevant. Such sounds good and is good, but must not be used to change the gospel, or fail to declare the whole gospel.
- These two concerns must be combined if the church is to willingly express its own identity as the body and voice of Jesus Christ in the message proclaimed.

IV. [Eph. 4:1-7] The church must be the church: this is the life of the church. What does the church look like in daily life?

- The church is God's new society, the living embodiment of the gospel, the sign of the presence of the kingdom of God, a demonstration of a human community under the gracious rule of God.
- When the church is itself in its biblical fullness, the good news is sent forth both visually and verbally-- in word and in deed, in word and work.

Conclusion

These four principles suggest four prerequisites for evangelism and missions in the local church:

1. The Mission Revealed: provides a biblical theology of church which gives self-understanding, grasping our double identity as holiness in the midst of worldliness.
2. The Reason for the Mission: requires biblical structures of the church so our organizational understanding equips us to accomplish our God-given mission to carry the message to the world.
3. The Relevance of the Mission: motives a verbal expression by the church to proclaim and articulate the gospel in a way faithful to Scripture and relevant to our contemporary world.
4. The Result of the Mission: is a church that morally and spiritually reflects God's intention for the church; the church must be the church, transformed as a community that makes the invisible God visible to the world.

The invisibility of God is a great problem for faith. The same problem challenges us today as for Thomas in John 20, especially for young people brought up on the scientific method.

God's solution to the problem of invisibility is that he sent Jesus into the world, and that he is sending the church into the world, to love one another and demonstrate his presence and reality. The church cannot proclaim his love with any degree of integrity if we cannot exhibit that love in our own lives.

The exhibition of that love is the mission of the church, and we must continually work toward that goal, Eph. 4:12ff. We must have the mind and spirit of Jesus to develop a healthy body responsive to the head. This kind of healthy church builds spiritually healthy members who increase the health of the body, the church. God calls us to know that love through the gospel, respond to that love in obedient imitation of Jesus Christ, beginning in our immersion, and continuing in our holiness in an unholy world, and culminating in our influence through the message and life we live. We are love in an unloving world, we are hope in a world without hope, we are life in a world of death, we are truth in a world of lies, we are the presence of Jesus with the power of Jesus.