

Beyond the Comfort Zone: Evangelism as Parabolic Witness

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." – Acts 2:1-13

Remembering the Church's Origin

What do you picture when you hear the phrase "speaking in tongues"? According to Acts 2 the people speaking in tongues were speaking in known languages. The miracle was that life-long Galileans were speaking like native Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Egyptians, Jews and Arabs. From our current vantage point, the greater miracle may be that Jews and Arabs were worshipping God together in the days of the church's birth!

So many languages were spoken at one time in common cause that passers-by assumed these Galileans were drunk with new wine, never mind the fact that it was still early in the morning. Do you see the insult here? They were accused of being filled with "new wine," - not the "good stuff", but cheap wine. Who else but the riff-raff would drink the cheap stuff so early in the morning?

Pentecost is really the great reversal of the tower of Babel. At Babel they all spoke one language, but they worshiped human ingenuity and human achievement, and so was scattered. Pentecost is the new story of the historic enmity and distrust among peoples being overcome by the power of God's Holy Spirit sweeping over a people, however diverse their backgrounds may be. Can a diversity of peoples truly witness to the power of the one God? Can Pentecost begin to reverse the pattern of the human proclivity for seizing power, building monuments to its own grandeur, and competing with God for the rule of God's own creation?

Pentecost is thus the birth of the church, the birth of a movement, the birth of a new people. This is the fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham. God's plan was to anoint and bless a particular ethnic group not for its own sake, but that by the example of God's covenant faithfulness, the world may know of God's loving intention for all humanity. Through the messiah, all the nations would enter into this covenant community and be blessed. Pentecost opens up a dramatic new era in salvation history.

The Church Today

We now fast-forward the story two thousand years and to the other side of the globe. The United States is the most ethnically and culturally diverse nation the world has ever known. It is probably more diverse than the Roman Empire, or any empire in history. In light of this staggering reality, a critical question must be raised: Why do we see diversity in the church as a threat and a problem to be managed rather than as an opportunity to live out the Pentecostal vision of constructing a Kingdom community? Why is the church divided by race, ethnicity, culture, class, or education if in Christ there is no Gentile or Jew, slave or free, male or female, Greek or barbarian? How is it that the church reflects so closely the divisions of the social structures of our nation? More than 40 years since the passage of the Civil Rights Act, why is 11:00 on Sunday morning still the most segregated hour in America?

One thing we can say confidently is that we Christians are all too human. Every person on earth is born into some group, whether that group is ethnic, linguistic, political, religious, or geographic. Consider the people of the Korean peninsula, my ancestral home. Koreans may appear to be a homogenous group, but upon closer inspection one understands that the people strongly identify with their geographic origin. Politics, economics, and religion are all driven by provincial loyalties. YoungNak Presbyterian Church in Seoul, the largest Reformed congregation in the world, with over 60,000 members, was founded by a North Korean refugee, and its culture is still dominated by that legacy. Korean churches are just as likely to be divided along provincial and class lines as American churches are divided by race.

We all are guilty of wanting to be with those we feel most comfortable with and avoiding those who make us uncomfortable. I confess that I am more comfortable around second-generation Korean Americans because of our unique and shared experience. Because we do not need to explain this huge reservoir of shared experience, we can move immediately to building a personal relationship. With others, we need to explain the background of our *ethnos*, which significantly shapes our *ethos*. Frankly, that's a lot of work.

We are geared toward homogeneity because (1) we were born that way, (2) we fear that which we do not understand, (3) our core identity is shaped by our "group," (4) disloyalty to the group is costly, and (5) crossing boundaries is hard! The homogeneous unit principle developed by Donald McGavran and his acolytes in the Church Growth Movement works everywhere, including in the church, but does that make it right? Does might make right? Is a thousand-member homogeneous church more "successful" than a hundred-member multicultural church?

The Homogeneous Unit Principle and Church Growth

I think most of us know that a large membership does not necessarily make a church successful, but there is a part of us that envies the big churches and wonders why our congregation is not successful in that way. At the same time, many of us know of individuals who are joining mainline Protestant churches not because these churches are successful but because they have been called to do so. The church moves toward reconciliation not because it will lead to numerical success but because the church has been called to faithfulness. As part of this faithfulness, the legitimacy of the homogenous unit principle needs to be questioned. I believe

this “principle” has given theological justification to ancient tribalism and the idolatry of division. It does not call us to be a new creation but entrenches the old.

Two thousand years ago the church was small, renegade, and countercultural. Local congregations were radical communities of love and compassion. Their very existence as a community defied the claim of imperial sovereignty. These congregations overcame the prevailing social barriers of race, class, and gender and showed compassion to the rejects of society. The early church posed a serious threat to Roman hegemony and social order. It was its witness as a Kingdom-oriented community that had a powerful effect on the empire, not the size or political connections of the church. The early church was not so much about church growth as about parabolic witness. How does a band of 10, 20, 50 people demonstrate the power of God’s redemptive love by example? How do these individuals live the Christian life together as a living parable? How do they serve as a parabolic witness to the world? That was the fundamental evangelical question.

The eventual conversion of the Roman Empire has been a mixed legacy. The new status of Christianity as the state religion gave it legitimacy and power but also forced compromise as it had to serve God and empire, church and state.

The Multicultural Opportunity

It’s time to ask ourselves what kind of impact the church in America could make today if we actually took advantage of the diversity in our midst. In our local congregation, the Church of All Nations, we use the term multicultural as opposed to multiethnic or multiracial. Not all churches can be multiethnic if the geographic context does not allow for it, but every church can be multicultural if we understand the term culture to encompass different generations, socio-economic backgrounds, education levels, etc. A local congregation ought to reflect the full diversity of its particular geographic community. I would go further and say that, in accordance with our call to discipleship, every local church in the world has a mandate to be as multicultural as possible.

We must contend with the unsettling fact that the most ethnically and culturally diverse country in the world with a strong Christian heritage seems incapable of producing ethnically and culturally diverse churches. Researchers estimate that only 6 percent of churches are multiracial, and only 2 percent are intentionally multiracial (as opposed to the cause being neighborhood demographic shifts). Instead of seeing this as a golden opportunity, we see it as a threat to our safe and secure homogeneity. We succumb to our primitive need to be surrounded by members of our “group.” Is this not a form of ecclesial tribalism?

Authentic Evangelism

The meaning of evangelism is the proclamation of good news to the world. How can we continue to exclude and avoid those with whom we are not comfortable and live into our evangelical calling at the same time? If we do not shed this primitive tendency, and yet heed the call to be evangelical, do we not risk exporting our ecclesial tribalism far and wide? How can we say we are evangelical if the good news is not good for the *whole* world? If the gospel is proclaimed

under the rubric of the homogeneous unit principle, I would argue that this is distorted news, even false news. The acid test of evangelism must be: Is this good news for the poor?

But the church has largely forgotten the poor, instead focusing on the perceived poverty of individual rights driven by debates over human sexuality and ordination. What about plain old poverty driven by the historic legacy of racism, a politics seemingly motivated by a preferential option for the rich, and the exploitation of the newly arrived on American shores?

I don't believe that the church's mission is to broker the competing claims of "rights" among various factions. In our local church context, the power brokers are the Korean Americans since the Church of All Nations emerged from the Korean immigrant context. As we moved at increasing speed toward embodying the multicultural vision, the collective response I seemed to get from that group was: "We work for Dow Chemical, 3M, General Mills, and the University of Minnesota. Although we have well-paying jobs we are not really leaders in these places; we still have to live and work under the overarching White power structure. Now we come to a Korean American church, the one place where we have power, where we have leadership, where our culture is affirmed, and you want to take that cultural hegemony away from us? You want to take away the one last refuge where we can be ourselves?"

My answer is "yes." Yes, we lay down our lives for our friends. Yes, we love our neighbors as ourselves. Yes, we care for the widows, orphans, aliens, and strangers in our midst. Although we have painstakingly constructed foxholes and bird nests for our security, we choose with our Lord Jesus to be homeless wanderers on this earth, to have nowhere to lay our heads (Luke 9:57). I have compassion for my fellow 1.5- and second-generation English-speaking Korean Americans who must choose between comfortable and affirming spiritual fellowship and the daring work of the ministry of reconciliation. I myself have worshiped and worked in the Korean church context all my life. I understand the need for the church to be a place of comfort; surely that is one of the roles of the church. But is God calling us to something higher than religion for our particular group? Can the Korean Americans be evangelists who, having achieved majority status and cultural dominance in the local congregation, willingly lay that down so that other cultures may be lifted up and affirmed? Can we be a mosaic of believers that witnesses to the God who reconciles all things to himself?

Speaking the Truth in Love

Just as the goodness of God is reflected in every people group, language and culture, so does evil pervade all things human. Even as we affirm the gifts inherent to each culture, so must we correct the idolatries inherent to each culture. But recognizing the cultural idolatries that prevent people from true worship is about as easy to do as pushing a wheelbarrow while you're in it. I don't know how many times as a child I heard my parents say, "Don't you know that the Bible commands you to honor your father and mother and obey them?" Not once did they quote Jesus who said, "If you do not hate father and mother, brother, sister, husband, wife and children for my sake, you are not fit to be my disciple". When Jesus and Confucius agree, all is right with the world. But I have seen time and again that when they disagree, Confucius usually has the upper hand in an Asian church. I'd argue the same about the influence that Plato has in the Western church.

If East and West and North and South do not interact together, how can we see our idolatries and reductionisms? Two thousand years of church history demonstrate amply that the Christian mind is rather easily co-opted by pre-Christian philosophical paradigms. Was not the Reformation in part Luther and Calvin's recovery of Augustine as a corrective to the excessive influence of Thomistic scholasticism in the Roman church? Was not Augustine's neo-Platonism used to counter Thomas's Aristotelianism? I believe that every theological venture confined to a narrow philosophical construct will end up in a theological cul-de-sac.

South African theologian David Bosch wrote, "Our entire context comes into play when we interpret a biblical text. One therefore has to concede that all theology...is, by its very nature, contextual" (from *Transforming Mission*, 1991, p 423). This in no way means that all theology is relativistic, or that there is no ultimate truth, but the way that we approach the ultimate truth of Jesus Christ depends on the context. So I wonder if "systematic theology" remains a valid organizing principle for all theology in the global, multicultural, ecumenical, contextual world of the 21st century. Is it time to let go of this rationalistic drive to systematize the Bible that was originally written as history, poetry, prophecy, letters and parables? This has always seemed to be a strange project to traditionally non-systematic, non-linear thinking people like Asians, Africans and other ancient peoples.

We Can Do Better

The gospel can no longer be reduced to a verbal exercise. Evangelism must truly be about parabolic witness. It must be about the harder task of creating community, of generating first a counterculture, and then a Kingdom culture. Of course, none of us has any idea what Kingdom culture is, but reflecting on the apophatic tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church may offer us a way. Apophatic theology is not about asserting who God is but who God is not. This seems to me a humbler approach and one that retains the mystery of God.

Constructing a Kingdom culture is not about erecting a structure with Kingdom parts. It is about navigating a narrow path that can only be walked in faith. In our journey of faith together as "resident aliens" we constantly adjust our direction by saying out loud to ourselves, "But surely it can't be this way, and no, it can't be that." The journey of the multicultural church is an apophatic journey. We constantly speak painful truth in love that we cannot go only in the way that one culture wants. Out of the mutual "no" to the will to power of any one culture is a slowly emerging "yes" to a new culture forged by the best of each tradition.

The apophatic journey will be difficult for the typical Western church to grasp, for the Western impulse is "faith seeking understanding" without limit, even attempting to expose those things that are meant to remain mystery. Especially in the United States, everything must in the end be turned into a program. We don't, however, become a Kingdom community programmatically. When Job was suffering, the greatest ministry he received was when his friends sat down with him and wept with him for two weeks. It was when his friends started to make prescriptions to Job's problems that the situation deteriorated for all. This is a lesson for us in the West. We become a genuine community, a parabolic witness, when we sit with one another and weep with one another without looking at the clock.

I say all this not because I think that the church in the West is any worse than any other church in the world but because I truly believe that the church in America can do better. My contention is that we have not been ambitious enough to have our local churches model the Kingdom of God. Our fragmented world is ready for a church with new evangelical energy that proclaims the gospel primarily through its parabolic witness. This is offered as a word of hope and not as a word of judgment. May God inspire and equip the church to live into this Kingdom vision.

Amen.