

19 September 2021

What's Good about the Church? Eyes Turned Outward

Romans 10:13-17

We read from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 10, verses 13-17:

¹³For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' ¹⁴But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? ¹⁵And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' ¹⁶But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' ¹⁷So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

This might be a familiar passage of scripture to many of you. It is frequently used in evangelistic and missionary settings, because here the Apostle Paul proclaims the importance of carrying the “good news” to the world. And what is this “good news”? Well, it is the message that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that he came to earth as a man, died, and rose again, and in that way reconciled God and humanity. That is good news. Telling that news isn't really how I heard this scripture used when I was growing up, though: what I heard was that we had to be busy telling that good news to others, because that salvation was only available to those who had believed in Christ and joined the Christian church. All others, even those who had never heard of Jesus, were doomed to an eternity of torment if we didn't get to them in time with the chance to join Christ.

This belief that only our group could be reconciled to God, and the rest would burn forever, was part of the air I breathed, growing up. I never questioned it. But now I have one question: How is that “good news”? I mean, sure, it's nice to believe that horrible torment doesn't wait for me, but doesn't it feel a little strange to say that “God is Love” and wants all people to be reconciled, but is still planning torment for most of humanity? If you have a mother who plays favorites – who treats some of her children like little princes and princesses who can do no wrong, but who beats the others mercilessly – I *guess* it's better to be one of the favorite children than one of the abused ones, but that's still not very reassuring. How do you trust that mother? Or that God?

Fortunately, that last bit about hell for those who believe differently is not really biblical. Yes, Jesus talked about hell, but look at what he said: he talked about hell for people who ignored those in need or, especially, who harmed children. Not people with wrong beliefs. Paul does talk about the need to believe in Jesus, but Paul never talks about hell. Which is interesting. If the reason that Paul the missionary wanted people to believe in Jesus was because otherwise they faced eternal torment, then it was remarkably careless of him never to mention that detail, wouldn't you say? Feels like that ought to have come up at some point. But no, Paul wants everyone to believe in Jesus because Jesus had changed his life. Paul's most frequently repeated evangelistic message is some form of “Do you have any idea how much of a jerk I used to be? Let me tell you what Christ has done for me.” Paul's message wasn't “Do this or burn.” Paul's message was, “Dude, you got to try this.” And *that* – coming back to our original point – *that's*

good news again.

So, I reject the kind of evangelism that I grew up with – the use of an eternal threat as a form of marketing and recruitment. But, having said that, I also reject doing what many Christians have done instead, which is nothing. Too many of us have rejected the “turn or burn” evangelism and adopted instead a “turn inward and feel superior” approach. Paul may not have said that we have to hurry out and save people from our apparently unstable and sadistic God, but he did say to turn our eyes outward to the world. That’s what he’s talking about in our passage from Romans 10. We have a beautiful message that people need to hear: that the forgiveness and the faith of Jesus Christ changes lives. But if we keep that to ourselves, those lives are not changed.

This month, my sermon series is called “What’s good about the church?” So far we’ve talked about how the church is supposed to follow Christ’s example and welcome all people, regardless of walls or distinctions, and we’ve talked about how the church is to see itself as a body of different but equal and interdependent parts. We exist as a community, not as individual heroes. Today we turn our eyes outward and make a radical statement: the church is about those outside the community even more than it is about those inside. The Swiss theologian Emil Brunner wrote, “The Church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning.” Take away the burning, and the fire ceases to be fire. Take away our mission to others, we cease to be the Church. Or, as the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, “The Church is only the Church when it exists for others.”

And as you look at the history of the church, this becomes clear. It is when we have been the church for others that we have been truly ourselves. In the Roman Empire, it was *that* church that stood out. At that time, there were various home remedies to end an unwanted pregnancy, but none of them were safe, so women who did not want or could not care for a child would have the baby and then abandon it in the streets. This was so common it had a specific term: it was called “exposing” a child. Christians became known as the people who picked up the exposed children and took them home. By the year 251, the church in Rome was supporting fifteen hundred widows and poor people. In 252, Carthage, in Northern Africa, was struck by plague. Everyone who could afford it fled the city, leaving the poor to fend for themselves – except that the Christians stayed to care for the sick and dying. The pagan emperor Julian noted that while some groups stayed to care for their own, the Christians took care of anyone. Julian, who didn’t like Christians and wanted to turn the population against them, was frustrated: “Who *are* these people?” In the Dark Ages after the fall of Rome, when Europe was a chaos of competing warlords, the Church was almost the only candle in that darkness, as they invented monasteries, which became hotels, hospitals, soup kitchens, schools, and tiny islands of peace. Who else shall I name? There were Francis and Clare of Assisi, joining the poor in their poverty, caring for their needs, and changing the world. Or Lottie Moon, the Baptist missionary to China who gave all her food away in a famine; or Father Damien, spending his life caring for lepers; or Teresa of Calcutta; or ... or ... you get the idea. We hear these people’s stories and we know instinctively that they got it. This is who we are.

Yes, I know. The Church has its other history as well, a history of greed and violence, a history of self-serving and empire-building. I have on my office wall a photo of a church in Southern France where Christian crusaders massacred thousands of people who had sought

refuge there. I keep that picture up as a reminder of what happens when we forget that we exist for the sake of others. And it still happens, but when it does, when the Church has that particular amnesia, then she ceases to be the Church. We are the Church only when we exist for others.

Furthermore, everyone knows it. Even those outside the church know that this is who we're supposed to be. In 2007, a pollster named David Kinnaman did an extensive study of young adults and their attitudes toward Christianity. His results, found in the book *Un-Christian*, are not pretty reading. Briefly, young Americans know what Jesus was like, and they don't see it in the Church. In 2015, a sociologist named Josh Packard did a study on people who are *leaving* church. Packard expected to find, like Kinnaman, that it was primarily young people, but it wasn't. His "Church Refugees" as he called them, were more often middle-aged, but leaving for the same reason. They knew what was good about the church, but they weren't finding it there. One story from Packard's book illustrates today's theme.

One member of a city church had an idea. That church was in a changing neighborhood – once middle-class but now mostly short-term tenants, many of them new immigrants. This member, who was an art therapist by profession, noticed that after school the streets around the church building were filled with unsupervised children. So she took a plan to her church council: she wanted to run an after-school art program for children in some of the church's many empty rooms. The council considered the plan, then turned it down, because most of the immigrant children in that area were from Muslim countries, and they couldn't see any way that running such a program would increase their membership. Remember what Bonhoeffer said about the church not existing for its own sake? Well, the story has a happy ending. That woman left the church, started the program on her own, and went on to help hundreds of children and win multiple community awards, so the Church of Jesus Christ, as represented by that Christian, was alive and well. As for that other organization – I'm not sure what to call it, except not the Church – I don't know what happened to it, but I don't much care, either.

In a time of decreasing numbers and influence, it would be easy to be anxious and to start obsessing over refilling the pews (and the offering plates). But if we go that route, we risk going into a vicious tailspin, because the more we focus on our own needs, the more we are like every other institution, and the more we are like every other institution, the less reason there is for us to even exist. We are not supposed to be like other organizations. We are supposed to be the people who pick up the unwanted children that everyone else just stepped over. We are supposed to be the ones who reach out and care for people who will never join us or add to our statistics, just because those people need care. We are supposed to be the ones that the other institutions look at and say, "Who *are* those people?"

That church is still around, and *that* church doesn't need to worry – remember who we follow; we're in good hands. And *that* church has very good news: Christ has changed us and can do the same for you.

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A personal word as we close. One of the great gifts that I've been given is to have been appointed to Lake Street United Methodist Church. I continue to marvel at my good fortune, because you get it. This is a place where we nod approvingly at good financial reports but break into spontaneous applause at a report about a huge load of clothes taken down to help Afghan

refugees at Fort McCoy. This is a place where a large, unexpected financial gift comes in, and the Church Council says, “This is not to be used for operating expenses, but only to support ministries to others.” This is a place where we initiated a special monthly worship service – IM Church – for people with disabilities, and no one asked, “But will this increase our membership?” This is a place where we ended last year with a budget surplus, and the chair of our Finance committee asked, “How much of this can we designate for the missions fund?” I’ve never heard of a church even asking that question, let alone doing it, as you did. You get it. We’re not here for our sake, because this is a *Church*, by God. I am humbled by you. Thank you. Amen.