



CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN EVANGELISM IS NOT THE PRIORITY, OUR PURPOSE BECOMES CONFUSED

The dictionary definition of “priority” is “Precedence, especially established by order of importance or urgency.”¹

For many years I have thought a lot about Jesus, Paul, and the early Christians. They appear to have made a priority of proclaiming the gospel. The New Testament is awash with accounts of people doing it. We know what their ultimate goal was – to “reconcile people to God”² and “to seek and save the lost”³ for the glory of Jesus. Look what happened when they kept their focus on the priority – the Church grew like wildfire. For example, in the period A.D. 260-300, “Thousands, perhaps millions,” says church historian **John Terry**, “gave up their old gods and accepted Christ.” **Eusebius** (A.D. 275-339) was bishop of Caesarea in Palestine. He is often referred to as the father of Church history because of his work in recording the history of the early Christian Church. “As soon as the gospel was heard,” he reports as he observed the Church evangelising, “men voluntarily in crowds, and eagerly, embraced the

1 *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*. Houghton Mifflin Company, Fourth edition, 2000.

2 Ephesians 2:16

3 Luke 19:10



true faith, with their whole minds.”⁴ It is no fluke that Jesus’ last words were “...you shall be my witnesses”⁵ and “...go into all the world and proclaim the gospel,”⁶ or that the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write the words “...the gospel is the power of God for salvation.”⁷ I propose that Jesus and the early Christians viewed evangelism as the priority not only because it was one of the most potent ways to glorify God (arguably ‘the’ most potent), but also because it was the best way to win the lost world. The results they achieved proved it. In contrast, many modern-day Christians have effectively abandoned the idea of mobilising all believers for personal evangelism. Other approaches have taken over what the early Church considered paramount. Yes, through many of these approaches we have seen souls saved, but nothing to the degree of the early Church. What the early Church kept closely joined together, evangelism and winning the world, we have let drift apart. And look at what has resulted! I discussed the recent decline of the Church in the West in the preface.

The focus of this chapter is to show beyond a shadow of a doubt, that evangelism ought to be the priority of the Christian Church. If we allow our enemy in the battle for souls to mess with this priority, our purpose becomes confused. When our purpose is confused, we have as much chance of success in the war for souls as we have of stopping a tank with a tooth pick.

Knowing the priority is critical for success...

To start with, it is critical to identify the priority in any endeavour. Our goal in golf, for example, is to get the ball in the hole with the least number of strokes. In archery, it is to hit the bull’s eye. For a sprinter, it is to reach the finishing tape in the shortest space



“What the early Church kept closely joined together, evangelism and winning the world, we have let drift apart.”

4 Cited in: John Mark Terry. *Evangelism. A Concise History*. Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994, p.34

5 Acts 1:8

6 Mark 16:15

7 Romans 1:16

of time. Just imagine for a moment if I lost sight of my goal in a major golf tournament and every now and then, decided to hit the



“It is clear that success in any endeavour can only occur when we are clear about the priority and refuse to be side-tracked.”

ball off the tee into the crowd, just for a laugh. Would I win tournaments with this habit? Imagine I was in the archery finals at the Olympics and was about to shoot the final arrow, a gold medal at stake. Suppose

I suddenly adjusted the bow to shoot a bird flying overhead, considering it a more interesting target. Would I win the gold? No. It is evident that success in any endeavour can only occur when we are clear about the priority and refuse to be side-tracked.



To scramble the priorities of the Christian Church...

One of Satan’s most potent devices to stop us evangelising the world is to scramble our priorities. He has worked hard to get us to put personal evangelism in last place because he knows things that are last on the priority list simply don’t get done.



The priority of the Christian Church is – or should be - the evangelisation of the earth for the glory of God. I believe this for seven reasons:

1. Jesus established the idea.
2. Paul and the early Church carried it on.
3. Scripture teaches it.
4. The apostles believed it.
5. Biblical scholarship supports it.
6. Spiritual giants from the past promoted it.
7. Significant contemporary leaders are advocating it.

1. Jesus established the idea....

Take a close look at the start, middle and end of His ministry. It is significant that Jesus quotes Isaiah's prophecy about preaching the gospel just as He starts His ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel" (Luke 4:18). During His ministry, this emphasis does not lessen. For example, in Mark 1:35 Jesus withdraws to pray in a solitary place. When found by Simon and his companions, He announces, "Let us go to the nearby villages so I can preach there also. This is why I have come" (Mark 1:38). It was clearly His plan to ensure His followers maintained this emphasis. In fact, when Jesus appointed the twelve, preaching the gospel is listed first in their job description (Mark 3:14).

Then, at the end of His ministry, His final words were, "preach the gospel" (Mark 16:15). Jesus identifies "witnessing" as the very reason for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). He could have said,



"Paul didn't take his foot off the gospel accelerator for one second. For him, reaching everyone with the gospel was his very reason for being."

"When the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be My worshippers, My pray-ers or My miracle workers." He could have said, "When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be My social action task force, My students of the Bible

or My fellowshippers, My people who build friendships with non-Christians, My demon-deliverers, My light-shiners, My salty ones, My committee members, My tithers and givers, or My cake stall organisers." Without demeaning these activities in any way, none was *the* priority, the main reason, for the coming of the Holy Spirit. He deliberately chose us to be His witnesses.

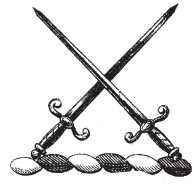


2. Paul and the early Church carried on what Jesus initiated...

"Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news (i.e. the gospel) that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 5:42).

Paul didn't take his foot off the gospel accelerator for one second. For him, reaching everyone with the gospel was his very reason for being:

“I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24). Why was he so committed to this task? Jesus had spoken to him audibly on the Damascus road, telling him to go and proclaim the gospel (Acts 26:16-18). He never forgot these instructions nor did he waver from them. His passion was infectious. Even, when social action begged to take top spot, the early Christians did not succumb (Acts 6:1).



Wait a minute...

Some have interpreted this passage quite differently. They argue this passage teaches that when the group of believers was chosen to look after the widows, social action became *their* main thing. That is, the disciples’ main thing was preaching; the seven chosen believers main thing was looking after the widows. With this interpretation, the whole body of believers works together, each person focusing on what is their strength. What are we to make of this?

Sorting truth from error...

Truth and error are mixed. It is true that the seven who were chosen made care for the widows their main thing, while the disciples’ main thing was preaching. It is also true that the body of believers functioned as a team, each part serving the whole. The error is to think that anyone whose main concern is social action is exempt from the responsibility to evangelise. It is also an error to think that anyone whose main concern is evangelism is exempt from involvement in any social action. Each has a different emphasis, but both have mutual responsibilities.⁸

The radical commitment of the early Church to evangelism ...

Dr Timothy George, Church Historian and Professor of Divinity at Beeson Divinity School, Samford University, Alabama describes how enthusiastically all the early Christians devoted their lives to proclaiming the gospel: “Imbued with ‘glad tidings’ of new life in Jesus Christ, the early Christians fanned out from Jerusalem and

⁸ The next chapter is dedicated to showing how evangelism is the responsibility and privilege of all believers, irrespective of such things as their position in the church, personality type, or spiritual giftings.

Judea to carry this gospel into all the world. They went everywhere – into the arena, the academies of learning, and the marketplace, to



“The last word in the Greek text in Acts is ‘unhindered,’ an adverb used to describe the unstoppable progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome.”

Dr Timothy George

faraway lands such as India and Ethiopia, into every nook and cranny of the Roman Empire. When, in the early fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea set out to chronicle the course of Christian history from the days



of the apostles up to his own time, he described the activity of those heralds of faith through whom the spread of the gospel was first carried out. ‘Leaving their homes, they set out to fulfil the work of an evangelist, making it their ambition to preach the word of faith to those who as yet had heard nothing of it, and to commit to them the books of the divine gospels. They were content simply to lay the foundations of the faith among their foreign peoples. They then appointed other pastors, and committed to them the responsibility for building up those whom they had brought to the faith. Then they passed on to other countries and nations with the grace and help of God.’ The last word in the Greek text in Acts is ‘unhindered,’ an adverb used to describe the unstoppable progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome.”⁹

3. Scripture teaches that proclamation of the gospel ought to have priority...

A key scripture is Mark 13:10. “And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.” The context of this scripture is the second coming, and “first” indicates a priority.

The word “nations” here means “people groups.” This verse therefore teaches we are to make a priority of reaching unreached people groups in the world with the gospel. Most mission leaders define a people group as “reached” when an indigenous church,

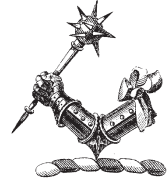
9 Cited in: Ravi Zacharias et al. *This We Believe. The Good News Of Jesus Christ For The World.* Zondervan, 2000, .pp.232-233



“Unless the whole Church is mobilised, the whole world is not likely to be reached. Thus, God’s purpose and the world’s need together bring to the Church the insistent call to evangelise.”

Dr John Stott

able to evangelise the group, is established.¹⁰ This is phase one. Phase two is for the indigenous church to make a priority of reaching every individual in the rest of that people group with the gospel. I discussed these concepts in chapter two. So,



how is the Church in the West going with these two phases?

The majority in the West has not heard the gospel once...


Most people groups in the West are “reached.” Phase one is looking good. But what of phase two? The tragedy is that large percentages of people in the West, and I mean upward of 90 percent of non-Christians, have never heard the gospel even once. Cities in the West are peppered with churches, yet phase two, where the local church makes sure everyone in their neighbourhood or town has heard and understood the whole gospel, has all but collapsed. In the Lausanne Covenant on Evangelism, **Dr John Stott** says that world evangelisation requires the whole Church to take the whole gospel to the whole world. “Unless the whole Church is mobilised, the whole world is not likely to be reached. Thus God’s purpose and the world’s need together bring to the Church the insistent call to evangelise.”¹¹ How are we ever going to achieve this? It will never happen unless we take seriously the command to mobilise and equip the whole Church for personal evangelism. The strategy from heaven of mobilising everyone for personal evangelism is crucial if we want victory in the war for souls. In the next chapter I argue that evangelism is the responsibility of all believers. The more believers we mobilise, the more likely we are to evangelise the world.

It is one thing to agree that we are to prioritise reaching every

10 Dr John Piper. *Let The Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy Of God In Missions*. Baker Books, 2003, p.194

11 *Making Christ Known. Historic Mission Documents From The Lausanne Movement*. 1974-1989, p.29

people group with the gospel¹² and then every person within each group. It is another to argue that Mark 13:10 teaches this ought to be the priority of the Church.




“Jesus teaches in Mark 13:10 that we are to make a priority of evangelising the world.”

How do first-rank scholars and leaders interpret it? Does the word “first” in the verse refer to one thing needing to be done before another can take place, i.e. the world must be evangelised before Jesus comes again? Or does “first” mean making a priority of getting it done?

Listen to what Christian scholars and significant leaders say...

Commenting on Mark 13:10, **Dr Morna D. Hooker**, Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University, writes: “This saying [of Jesus] becomes a reminder to the disciples that their primary task is that



“The more believers we mobilise, the more likely we are to evangelise the world.”

of evangelising.”¹³ Citing the same verse, **Dr William Lane**, chair of Wesleyan and Biblical Studies at Seattle Pacific University, says, “The proclamation of the gospel to all men is an absolute priority.”¹⁴

Missionary statesman **Oswald J. Smith** asks: “Why did Jesus use the word ‘first’? Why did He not just say, ‘The gospel must be proclaimed among all nations’? That would have made sense. That I could have understood. But that is not what He said. He injected the word ‘first.’ He wanted to say that before we did anything else,



we were to evangelise the world.”¹⁵ From Mark 13:10 then, we could conclude Jesus is saying to His disciples: “Of all the things I have taught you, make a *priority* of proclaiming the gospel to everyone

12 Some would protest by saying ‘How can we possibly reach every person in the world with the gospel?! What about babies, the infirm, those with disabilities who are not capable of hearing and understanding the gospel!’ By ‘every person’ we mean everyone who is capable of hearing and understanding. At judgment, we are going to be held responsible before God for achieving what was possible, not for the impossible! The impossible belongs to God alone.

13 Dr Morna D. Hooker. *The Gospel According To Mark*. A&C Black Publishers, London, 1991, p.310

14 Dr William L. Lane. (General Editor Gordon Fee), *The Gospel Of Mark*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974, p.462

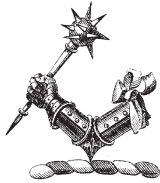
15 Oswald J. Smith. *The Passion For Souls*. Marshall, Morgan and Scott. London, 1950, pp.48-49

everywhere. Start by targeting people groups who have never heard. Then, once you have reached a people group, go on to evangelise everyone in that people group with the gospel.” Conclusion? Jesus teaches in Mark 13:10 that we are to make a priority of evangelising the world.

Other than Mark 13:10, are there any other scriptures which indicate we are to make a priority of gospel proclamation?

Jesus’ last words, our first priority...

These are the last words of Jesus just before He ascended into heaven: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Commenting on this scripture and Matthew 28:19, **Dr Millard**



Erickson writes: “The one topic emphasised in both accounts of Jesus’ last words to His disciples is evangelism... this was the final point Jesus made to His disciples. *It appears He regarded evangelism as the very reason for their being.* The call to evangelise

is a command. Having accepted Jesus as Lord, the disciples had brought themselves under His rule and were obligated to do whatever He asked. For He had said, ‘If you love Me, you will keep My commandments’ (John 14:15); if the disciples truly loved their Lord, they would carry out His call to evangelise. It was not an optional matter for them.”¹⁶ Conclusion: these last words of Jesus remain the priority of the Church today.



“*[Evangelise]..This was the final point Jesus made to His disciples. It appears He regarded evangelism as the very reason for their being.*”

Dr Millard Erickson

Paul’s challenge to us today to proclaim the gospel...

Then there is Acts 20:24, “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.”

In this verse, which summarises Paul’s entire ministry, we notice:

- Paul’s task came directly from Jesus.
- This task was to proclaim the gospel.
- Paul had many aspects to his ministry, but he never lost sight of his priority.
- Paul’s *goal* was to proclaim the gospel.
- He called it *the* task.



It is as if Paul were saying, “In my other letters I taught you about



“Can we honestly say that we are regularly proclaiming or spreading the gospel as we go about our daily activities? Or have we never quite made it to the task of proclaiming the gospel?”

family, love, intercession, service, ethics, church government, end times, dealing with conflict, prayer and fasting, caring for the disadvantaged, letting your light shine, being salt, living lives of honesty and integrity, and so on, but if, after all that, I have not proclaimed the gospel, then my efforts have been in vain.”

Don’t waste all the good works being done. See them as a means to an end.

These scriptures challenge us too. If all our conferences, Bible College training, worship, church services, prayer meetings, home groups, studies, missions, relationships, outreach events, mothers’ groups, men’s groups and so on, do not end in our proclaiming the gospel (the priority), then we have fallen short of reaching God’s planned and commanded end.

Can we honestly say we are regularly proclaiming or spreading the gospel as we go about our daily activities? Or have we never quite made it to the task of proclaiming the gospel? Can we say that all the excellent programmes and activities we run in our churches have resulted in all our members flourishing in personal evangelism?

4. The apostles believed the proclamation of the gospel was the priority of the Church.

The apostles of the early Church were commissioned by Jesus to carry on the work after He ascended into heaven. He told them how to grow the Church, establish the Kingdom and expand Christianity. Their instruction should be our template.

As **Dr Michael Green** explains: “The essential qualifications of the twelve apostles of Jesus were that they should be with Him, and that He should send them forth to preach. They were apparently given a ‘trial run’ during the ministry itself¹⁷ but after the



death and resurrection of their Master, preaching the

gospel became their *main concern*. We learn from Acts¹⁸

how they found themselves becoming choked with administration, and deliberately delegated this work so they could give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.”¹⁹ **Eusebius**,²⁰ the third century church historian, describes what happened: “By the power and assistance of heaven, the saving Word [i.e. the gospel]²¹ began to flood the whole world with light like the rays of the sun. At once, in accordance with the divine

Scriptures, the voice of its inspired evangelists and apostles went forward to the whole earth and their word to the end of the world. In every city and village arose churches crowded with thousands of men like a teeming threshing floor.”²²



“After the death and resurrection of their Master, preaching the gospel became the apostles’ main concern.”

Dr Michael Green



“The devil knows full well that the first thing to drop off a busy schedule will be personal evangelism.”

17 Matthew 10

18 Acts 6:4

19 Dr Michael Green. *Evangelism In The Early Church*. Highland Books, 1970, p.200.

20 Eusebius of Caesarea (c263 or 265 to 340). As a Church historian, Eusebius spent much time espousing the Old and New Testaments as inspired writings that were commented upon by the successors of the apostles. He also wrote much about the canon of the New Testament in his *Eccelesiastical History*. It was Eusebius of Caesarea who was commissioned to make fifty copies of the Scriptures following the Council of Nicea (325AD).

21 The words in brackets are mine.

22 Cited by Michael Green. *Evangelism In The Early Church*. Highland Books, 1970, p.201



“How could the gospel have ‘flooded the whole world’ if every believer had not made it a priority?”

We can flood the world again with the gospel...



How could the gospel have flooded the whole world if every believer had

not made it a priority?²³ If the proclamation of the gospel was the chief concern of the apostles and documented by Eusebius, what reason could we possibly have, as leaders and pastors in the apostolic line, not to make it ours? Just imagine, for a moment, if today’s Church leaders were the first group to return to the pattern set by the apostles. For one thing, churches would re-structure so that administrative tasks were delegated to others.²⁴ Then leaders would not succumb to the business and busyness of church life. They would be seen out and about in the world of the non-Christians, giving the gospel just as Jesus, Paul and the apostles did. If you were to drive through the town of this new breed of leaders, it would not be uncommon to see them peppered around the streets, engaging non-Christians, giving the gospel. Seeing unfamiliar faces in the staff lounge of the church during the week would not be a rare thing. “Hey, guys,” the pastor would announce with a beaming smile, “this is Jimmy. We just met down the street. I have invited him back for lunch.” Pastors couldn’t, of course, be out there all day. To expect this would be folly in view of their many and varied responsibilities. The point is, this vision for the renaissance of a new breed of pastor evangelist is entirely possible, but only if we are willing to return to the pattern and priority for personal evangelism set by Jesus, Paul and the apostles.

5. Christian scholars and leaders support the idea that the proclamation of the gospel ought to take priority.

This whole concept will at first seem alien and so lets you think

23 This is not merely hyperbole being used here. Later in this book, I show how the early Church literally evangelised the entire known world.

24 Those to whom administration tasks were delegated would have ‘release time’ built into their job descriptions so that they too could take time out for the priority.

it's just my interpretation, I want to show you the opinions of a sample of first-rank scholars and leaders. They have formed their views after a careful study of Scripture and history. Read carefully what these great minds have to say.

First rank scholars...

Dr Derek Prince said, "The *supreme purpose* of every true Christian church, the *chief duty* of every Christian minister, the *main responsibility* of every Christian layman, is to present to all who may be reached, in the clearest and most forceful way, the basic facts of the gospel of Christ, and to urge all who hear to make the definite personal response to these facts which God requires. *To this, the supreme task, every other duty and activity of the church must be secondary and subsidiary.*"²⁵ **Dr John Stott** put it like this: "Our first duty is to communicate this gospel, to use old ways and seek fresh ways



"Our first duty is to communicate this gospel, to use old ways and seek fresh ways of making it known throughout the whole world."

Dr John Stott

of making it known throughout the whole world."²⁶



Historian **Dr Michael Green** is another scholar who contends evangelism

ought to be our priority: "In these first two centuries of the Church's existence...we find evangelistic zeal and effort exerted by the whole broad spectrum of the Christian community to bring other people to the feet of their ascended Lord and into fellowship of His willing servants. This is a permanent reminder of the Church's *first priority*... 'Day by day, the Lord added to their number those whom He was saving' (Acts 2:46-47). It could happen again, if the Church was prepared to pay the price."²⁷ **Dr William Abraham**²⁸ writes: "Consensus is emerging that evangelism must become a top priority

25 Dr Derek Prince. *Foundation Series. Volume 1.* Sovereign World Books, 1986, p.145

26 Dr John R.W. Stott. *Guard The Gospel. The Message Of 2 Timothy.* Inter Varsity Press, 1973, p.47


27 Dr Michael Green. *Evangelism In The Early Church.* Highland Books, 1970, p.339

28 Professor of Evangelism at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.

for the modern Church.”²⁹

The Anglicans are adamant...

Canadian Anglican heads concur. At *The Essentials* conference in Montreal, 1994, they



“This evangelistic work of declaring the gospel is the primary ministry that the Church has towards the world.”

Dr Wayne Grudem

affirmed: “The task [of evangelism], which is thus a matter of priority,



calls for personal training and a constant search for modes of persuasive outreach. We sow the seed, and look to God for the fruit.”³⁰ In 1948, the Anglican bishops of England circulated a letter which affirmed that the “supreme task of the Church today is... to take the Good News to those who have not heard it.”³¹

And eminent theologians...

Theologian and teacher **Dr Wayne Grudem**³² wrote: “This evangelistic work of declaring the gospel is the primary ministry that the Church has towards the world.”³³ The late **Dr Francis Schaeffer**, founder of L’Abri International Study Centre and Christian Community, wrote: “Because we love the Lord Jesus Christ and know Him personally as our Saviour, we must, through God’s grace, love our neighbour as ourselves. And if we love our neighbour as Christ would have us love our neighbour, we will certainly want to share the gospel with our neighbour... [therefore] evangelism is primary.”³⁴

The Puritans and the Baptists ...

Puritan leader **Richard Baxter** (1615-1691) was unyielding. “The work of conversion is the first and greatest thing we must drive

29 Dr William J. Abraham. *The Logic Of Evangelism*. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002, p.12

30 <http://www.stpaulshalifax.org/Essentials.html#11>

31 Cited in: John Stott. *Our Guilty Silence. The Church, The Gospel And The World*. IVP, 1997, pp.63-64

32 Former Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and now Research Professor of Bible and Theology at Phoenix Seminary.

33 Dr Wayne Grudem. *Systematic Theology. An Introduction To Biblical Doctrine*. IVP, 2003, p.868

34 Dr Francis Schaeffer. *The Great Evangelical Disaster*. Crossway Books, 1984, p.39

at,” he insisted. “After this we must labour with all our might.”³⁵ The Puritans knew that the gospel was the most powerful weapon given to us from heaven in our war to save lost souls. For them, evangelism was primary. The late **Dr Lewis Drummond**, President of the

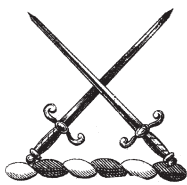
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and former Director of the Billy Graham Evangelism Centre, wrote: “There is no excuse for anyone not giving evangelism first place in individual covenant church life.”³⁶

And Ray Comfort, of course...


Evangelist **Ray Comfort** has noted: “Right from the beginning of His ministry, Jesus made it clear that His supreme mandate was to reach lost humanity with the gospel.”³⁷

The Assembly of God: the Spirit was given for witness...

In a review of the history of the Assembly of God movement in the world, **Dr William W. Menzies**³⁸ wrote: “From the beginning of the Pentecostal movement, reaching the lost of this world for Christ




was the central passion. Early leaders recognised that the baptism in the Holy Spirit was an empowering for witness - not merely an experience for personal enjoyment.”³⁹



“Early leaders recognised that the baptism in the Holy Spirit was an empowering for witness—not merely an experience for personal enjoyment.”

Dr William W. Menzies



“There is no excuse for anyone not giving evangelism first place in individual covenant church life.”

Dr Lewis Drummond

35 Richard Baxter. *The Reformed Pastor*. Reprinted in Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1979, p.94

36 Dr Lewis A. Drummond. *The Word Of The Cross*. Broadman, 1992, p.293

37 Kirk Cameron and Ray Comfort. *The Way Of The Master. How To Share Your Faith Simply, Effectively, Biblically, The Way Jesus Did*. Tyndale, 2003, p.47

38 Long time educator with the Assemblies of God, and Chancellor of Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, Baguio City, Philippines.

39 http://www.ag.org/enrichmentjournal/199904/084_lessons.cfm

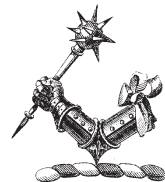
And the great Charles Spurgeon...

Charles Spurgeon argued in the same way. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 9:22 (“I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some”) he said:

“Paul’s great object was not merely to instruct and to improve, but to save. Anything short of this would have disappointed him; he would have men renewed in heart, forgiven, sanctified, in fact, saved. Have our Christian labours been aimed at anything below this great point? Then let us amend our ways, for to what avail will it be at the last great day to have taught and moralised men if they appear before God unsaved? Paul knew the ruin of man’s natural state, and did not try to educate him but to save him; he saw men sinking to hell, and did not talk of refining them but of saving them from the wrath to come. To compass their salvation, he gave himself up with untiring zeal to telling abroad the gospel, to warning and beseeching men to be reconciled to God... this was the crown for which he strove, the sole and sufficient reward of all his labours and self-denials. Dear reader, have you and I lived to win souls at this noble rate? O that the Lord would saturate us through and through with an undying zeal for the souls of men.”⁴⁰ “In those early days,” writes church historian **Herbert Kane**, “the Church was mission. The missionary programme of the early Church was based on two assumptions: (1) The chief task of the Church is world evangelisation. (2) The responsibility of carrying out the task rests with the whole Christian community.”⁴¹

And Church Growth experts...

Church growth expert **Dr Peter Wagner**: “I would love to see membership declines in the mainline denominations bottom out and begin to soar upward. But I am afraid they will not unless and until the evangelist mandate is restored to its biblical position *as the top goal*.”⁴²



What does he mean by “the evangelist mandate”? **Wagner**

40 December 7-Evening Reading. Cited in *Morning and Evening Devotionals* by C.H. Spurgeon www.esword.net

41 J. Herbert Kane. *Christian Missions In Biblical Perspective*. Baker Book House, 1976, p.65

42 Dr C. Peter Wagner. *Leading Your Church To Growth*. Regal Books. California, 1984, p.34



“If you lead a church, your first goal should be to enlist the help of gifted evangelists to equip the congregation to proclaim or spread the gospel.”

refers to certain people (listed in Ephesians 4:11-12) who are “gifts” to the Church. One of them is the evangelist, who is given to the Church to equip and motivate other members to evangelise. One reason most Christians don’t proclaim the gospel is that they don’t know how. If you lead a church, your first goal should be to enlist the help of gifted evangelists to equip the congregation to proclaim or spread the gospel. To do so is to tap into another of heaven’s battle strategies in the war for souls. How can an army expect to win a war without thorough training? All churches must put training programmes in place to ensure everyone in the church who is capable of presenting or spreading the message can do so, and that each is accountable to someone else for doing so. Furthermore, a leader is called not just to facilitate. A crucial part of your mandate is to lead by example and to see that your church’s goal of evangelism is maintained. As a caterpillar metamorphoses into a magnificent butterfly, so we are to persevere with these goals until the very DNA of our organisation metamorphoses into something magnificent – an evangelistic church, Bible College, men’s or women’s group, youth group, sports team, or missionary organisation.



See how far we have drifted...

For many believers today, the thought of making personal evangelism a priority, imagining ourselves giving the gospel as we go about our normal day, will stimulate negative feelings. “Just imagining myself doing this makes me feel ashamed and fearful,” you might say. “I would be so embarrassed!” Such a reaction shows just how far we have drifted from the precedent set by Jesus, Paul, and the apostles. I can understand how you feel, for that’s how I felt when I first became a Christian. A few of the new Christians in the church at Rome felt similarly. This is why Paul the apostle exhorted them not to be “ashamed of the gospel”

(Romans 1:16). But I didn't stay ashamed. I knew that if I wanted to really know Jesus, and be used by Him, and mature as a believer, I had to move on from fear, shame and pride and get active in personal evangelism. This book, empowered by the Holy Spirit,



“Take a man out of the slums, heal his body, give him decent clothes, provide him a home in the country, then let him die and go to hell? Really, it is not worthwhile.”

William Booth

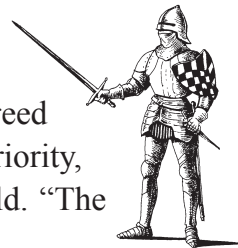
is exhorting you to do the same. In most Western churches, something other than proclamation has become top priority – usually social action, prayer, worship or teaching. Without in any way devaluing the necessity of these aspects of our Christian witness and service, the scholars and leaders who met at Lausanne in 1974 concluded that if anything other than evangelism was the priority, it ought not to be. The covenant they wrote concluded: “In the Church’s mission of sacrificial service, *evangelism is primary*.”⁴³

Listen to William Booth, the king of good works. He considered evangelism primary...

Social action, for example, is vital. But it should not be our number one focus. **William Booth**, Founder of the legendary Salvation Army, declared: “Take a man out of the slums, heal his body, give him decent clothes, provide him a home in the country, then let him die and go to hell? Really, it is not worthwhile.”⁴⁴ For Booth, social service was a critical and indispensable part of his mission, but winning souls through evangelism was the ultimate end of all his work.

A great missionary speaks from experience...

Missionary to Asia **Dr K.P. Yohannan**⁴⁵ agreed social action should not be the number one priority, despite the appalling poverty in much of the world. “The



43 Dr John Stott. *Making Christ Known. Historic Mission Documents From The Lausanne Movement, 1974-1989*. Paternoster Press, 1996, p.29

44 Cited in: Norm Lewis. *Priority One*. OM Literature, 1988, p.99

45 Please take the time to read Dr Yohannan’s excellent commentary on the interplay between evangelism and social action in appendix two.

trouble with the social gospel,” he said, “even when it is clothed with religious garb and operating within Christian institutions, is that



“The accent must first and always be on evangelism and discipleship.”

Dr K.P. Yohannan

it seeks to fight what is basically spiritual warfare with weapons of the flesh. A spiritual battle fought with spiritual weapons will produce eternal victories. This is why we insist upon restoring a right balance to gospel outreach. The accent must first and always be on evangelism and discipleship.”⁴⁶

Prayer and proclamation must go together...

Prayer, too, is absolutely critical. The place of prayer in the battle for souls cannot be over-emphasised; the current rise of the 24/7 prayer movement around the world is timely and exciting.

But prayer should never be a substitute for active participation in evangelism.

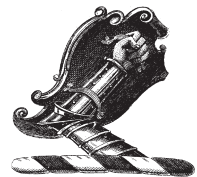
As pastor and author **Dr John Piper** wrote, caution is needed. “I sense the danger of overstating the role of prayer in relation to the Word of God and the preaching of the gospel. I am not

comfortable, for example, calling prayer *the* work of missions.⁴⁷ The proclamation of the gospel is *the* work of missions. It is the weapon that God designed to use in penetrating the kingdom of darkness and gathering the children of light from all the nations (Acts 26:16-18). His whole redemptive plan for the universe hangs on the success of His Word. If the proclamation of the Word aborts, the purposes of God fail.”⁴⁸ **Spurgeon**, too, warned: “Prayer and means [i.e. proclaiming the gospel] must go together. Means without prayer – presumption. Prayer without means – hypocrisy!”⁴⁹



“The proclamation of the gospel is ‘the’ work of missions.”

Dr John Piper



46 Dr K.P Yohannan. *Revolution In World Missions*. Gfa books, 2004, pp.105-129

47 Dr John Piper. *Let The Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy Of God In Missions*. IVP, 1993 2nd ed 2003, p.63

48 *ibid*. pp.64-65

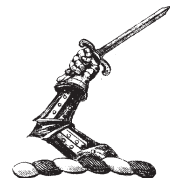
49 Charles H. Spurgeon. *The Soul Winner*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1948, p.140

Pastors who are leading the way...

It is so exciting when modern-day pastors catch on to what Christian statesmen through the ages have been saying. Here and there key churches are beginning to make proclaiming the gospel their number one priority. Mark Conner is one such pastor. He leads the 5000 strong Waverley Christian Fellowship in Melbourne, Australia. He writes: “If evangelism is heaven’s priority, then it must be the passionate priority of the Church here on earth... our top priorities can easily be replaced by other seemingly urgent or pressing matters. As we become busy with so many things in church life, we can begin to drift from our mission. That’s why the work of an evangelist also involves keeping the evangelistic passion of a church community alive and bright hot”.⁵⁰ **Bill Hybels** is another pastor making evangelism the priority in his church. Hybels is rightly ‘big’ on Christians demonstrating love through acts of kindness. Willow Creek Church is renowned for this. Yet, he calls giving the gospel to a non-Christian ‘the ultimate act of goodness.’

From the discussion so far in this chapter, there would seem to be ten reasons why Christian scholars, leaders and historians give evangelism priority:

1. It is the greatest way to express love for our neighbour
(**Dr Francis Schaeffer**).
2. Jesus gave evangelism priority. We are modelling Him and so we are to do the same (**Dr Millard Erickson**).
3. The gospel is our most powerful spiritual weapon
(**Dr K.P. Yohannan**).
4. Words and works (i.e. social action) ought to be bracketed together. Winning souls for the glory of God ought to be the ultimate end of all our Christian activity. The gospel was given by God for this purpose (**General William Booth**).
5. It was Jesus’ supreme mandate (**Ray Comfort**).
6. A careful study of history shows how the early Christians made evangelism the priority (Church historian **John Terry**).
7. It is a key to church growth (**Dr Peter Wagner**).



50 Cited in Bronwyn Hughes and John Bellamy (Editors). *A Passion For Evangelism: Turning Vision Into Action*. Open Book Publishers, 2004, pp.154, 161

8. Gospel proclamation was the hallmark of everyone in the early Church. Their example is our template (**Dr Michael Green**).
9. The gospel is the weapon that God designed to use in penetrating the kingdom of darkness and gathering the children of light from all the nations (**Dr John Piper**).
10. Evangelism is heaven's priority (**Mark Conner**).
11. Evangelism is the 'ultimate act of goodness' (**Bill Hybels**).

There are other reasons that are just as important. Evangelism is one of the greatest ways to give glory to God.⁵¹ It is one of the most potent sources of Christian joy, pivotal to becoming fully mature as a Christian.⁵² It is one of the highest forms of worship.⁵³



"The gospel is a supernatural seed. As a general principle, if we do not sow, we will not reap."

Gospel proclamation is pivotal to so much in Church life...

There is one further reason why evangelism ought to take priority. So much of the rest of church life depends upon it and relates to it.



"If we don't evangelise, the Church will begin to implode."

The gospel, you see, is a supernatural seed. As a general principle, if we do not sow, we will not reap.⁵⁴ If there is no reaping, there will be no one to baptise. If there is no one to baptise,



there will be no one to disciple. And if there is no one to disciple, there will eventually be no one to perform ministry, except those who are the products of biological growth. The Great

51 See chapter 21.

52 See chapter three.

53 See chapter 21.

54 I recently met a businessman who said he had led many families to Christ through relationships without proclaiming the gospel. I discuss the debate about how people can be 'saved' without hearing the gospel in chapter 11.

Commission will shrivel and the Church will begin to implode.⁵⁵ As I outlined in the preface, there are early signs this has already started to happen in the West. It all started when personal evangelism was not given priority. Herein lies another battle strategy from heaven: get back to making evangelism the priority in your own life, and then focus on mobilising everyone in your church.

Being part of the solution...

With everything within me, I believe that through the power of the Holy Spirit, the generation of Christian pastors and leaders alive on the earth right now possess the calibre and character to beat the devil and his devices. However, as I said at the beginning of this chapter, our success depends a lot on whether or not we are clear about our priority.⁵⁶ In this respect there are basically three categories of pastors and leaders:

1. *Those who know the priority but have been sidetracked.*
2. *Those who have never known the priority.*
3. *The few who know and are making evangelism the priority.*



Let's look at these briefly.

Satan often sidetracks us away from the priority with the busyness of good, wholesome Christian programmes and activities. He knows that when we immerse ourselves in the sea of church activities, evangelism will likely become difficult to start, let alone maintain, and we will give up on making it a priority.

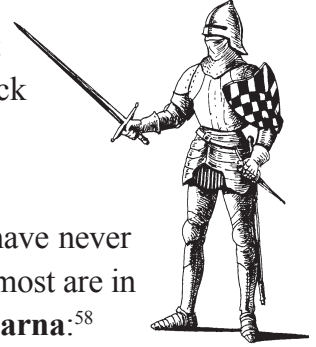
On this subject, **Pastor Mark Conner**, after growing a church of

55 Yes, we could all throw our hands up in the air and just say, "Well, that will never happen. God is in control. He is sovereign. So let's just rest and see what He does." Such an attitude is hardly that of a committed disciple who loves his Lord, and the Lord's purposes.

56 I need to explain how 'making evangelism a priority' works. Take Christian pregnancy clinics for example. Their 'main priority' is saving babies from abortion. That is the reason they exist. Such organisations do not have to lessen their *raison d'être*, but just make sure that the spread and proclamation of the gospel is in their programme, and vital to it, and that they set up accountability mechanisms inside their clinic to make sure it is happening on a regular basis. When evangelism becomes the priority, we will view it in much the same way as we view prayer. Let me explain. Prayer, as indispensable as it is for the success of every ministry, is, theologically speaking, not the priority of the Christian Church. Yet, I cannot think of a fruitful ministry in the church not under girded by serious prayer. We just know 'our ministry' will not succeed without it. When evangelism is restored to its rightful place as the priority, ministries will view it like they do prayer - "indispensable to success."

5000, gives sound advice to other leaders:

“We must decide that [evangelism] is a priority and begin taking steps to make it a reality. Over time, if we do not give up, a wonderful momentum will be created where the vision [of creating an evangelistic church] starts to stick and then become a reality.”⁵⁷ My prayer is that this book will help pastors and leaders get back on track.



Recovery is going to take time...

There are, however, leaders and pastors who have never known the priority. There is strong evidence that most are in this category. According to research by **George Barna**:⁵⁸

- 90 percent of American adult church attendees cannot accurately define the meaning of “The Great Commission.”
- Nearly 70 percent of American church attendees have no clue what the term “John 3:16” means.
- Barely 30 percent of all church attendees know the meaning of the expression “the gospel.”
- Another 30 percent described it inaccurately.
- Just 4 percent can accurately describe the meaning of the gospel, John 3:16, and the Great Commission.

If the people in the pews don’t know, who is not telling them? It seems, from this research at least, that if we, pastors and leaders, don’t know what the priority is, how are we going to articulate it to those who follow? We can’t convey what we don’t know. Maybe many leaders have never asked the question “what *is* the priority?” **Dr John Piper** said: “It continually amazes me how few people [in Christian leadership] ask and answer with conviction and passion the most important questions – ultimate questions.”⁵⁹

What next?

57 Dr Bronwyn Hughes and Dr John Bellamy (Editors). *A Passion For Evangelism: Turning Vision Into Action*. Open Book Publishers, 2004, p.162

58 Dr George Barna. *Evangelism That Works*. Regal, 1995, p.35

59 Dr John Piper. *Let The Nations Be Glad. The Supremacy Of God In Missions*. IVP, 1993 2nd ed 2003, p.204

In this chapter we have cited Jesus, Paul, Scripture, apostolic precedent, Eusebius's observations as a church father, academic scholarship, and the opinions of past and contemporary spiritual leaders as the basis of authority for the claim that evangelism ought to be the priority of the Christian Church. However, the devil does not stop at confusing our priorities. Even when Christians *know* what the gospel is, and when they know evangelism is the priority, Satan's next device to hinder us in the battle for souls is to suggest that not all Christians are commanded to make it *their* own personal priority.

"Very soon," the devil realises in consternation, "many Christians will know what the priority of the Church should be. To stop them proclaiming or spreading this message, I'll sow a thought into their minds that the Bible doesn't teach that it ought to be the priority of *all* believers. I'll persuade them it's only those with 'the gift' of evangelism who are commanded to do it and make it a priority. I'll persuade them that what they are doing now is *their* priority, and therefore evangelism would be a distraction. In this way I'll immobilise a whole army of potential evangelisers and my life will be preserved indefinitely. I know that the only hope the Church has of making sure all non-Christians hear the gospel is for *everyone* in the Church to begin proclaiming or spreading it."

In the next chapter I will show from Scripture how the duty to proclaim or spread the gospel to people everywhere is the mandate of all Christians, regardless of their giftings, talents, calling, personality type, abilities or position in the Church. Stay with me. I am going to take you right behind enemy lines. You are about to see some scenes I pray you will never forget. The war for souls is about to get hotter...