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Q&A#23 Why Doesn't Paul Say More About Evangelism?

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Today's question: "Given that Paul is the most prominent evangelist / church planter in the Bible, why are exhortations to evangelize seemingly so rare in his work? In many parts of the evangelical church we seem to foreground the need for evangelism and background discussion of ethics, should we reverse this?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, given that Paul is the most prominent evangelist or church planter in the Bible, why are exhortations to evangelize seemingly so rare in his work? In many parts of the evangelical church, we seem to foreground the need for evangelism and background discussion of ethics. Should we reverse this? Good question.

I think we should begin by making a few observations. First of all, that Paul did not just leave us a body of letters. Paul also left us an example, and we see that example within the book of Acts, and evangelism is an integral part of that example.

Second thing to recognize is that Paul's letters are occasional correspondence to churches. They are letters that respond to specific issues that have arisen within specific contexts, and as a result, they are not a comprehensive system of doctrine. And there are certain issues that achieve great prominence within these letters that are not necessarily as important as other issues that are hardly mentioned at all.

So, for instance, why is it that Paul has so little to say about the Lord's Supper? Beyond 1 Corinthians 10 and 11, what do we read about the Lord's Supper within the teaching of Paul? Very little, if anything, and if those chapters were removed, we might think that Paul gave it no significance whatsoever. I do not believe that's the case, and when we actually look at 1 Corinthians 10 and 11, we can see just how important it was for Paul, and as we look in the rest of the, in the gospels and elsewhere, I think we can get a clearer understanding of its importance. But our danger is to treat the Pauline corpus as a sort of quasi-systematic theology, and the degree to which things are mentioned or not mentioned is an indication of how important or unimportant those issues are.

That is simply not the case. First of all, because we also have the example of Paul, an example that we should follow, an example that is given to us not primarily in the teaching of the epistles, but in the practice of the gospel, in the practice of the book of Acts, but also because Paul is taking theological principles and dealing with concrete issues in the context of churches, and that is not a systematic or comprehensive treatment of doctrine. One of the things that Paul does give us, however, is a sense of the relationship between basic theological principles and concrete practice and community, and that has an important connection.

Paul teaches us how to reason theologically. That does not mean that Paul lays out a complete system of doctrine. What he does do is teach us how to reason theologically, how to reason in the context of the gospel, how to reason as Christians from the basic principles of the gospel, the basic truths of the gospel, to practical application within specific contexts.

And when we learn to do that, we'll recognise, we'll be able to develop a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of doctrine, where certain things assume their proper importance and weight relative to each other, not because we see them mentioned to a certain degree within the New Testament or elsewhere, but because we have a sense of the architectonics of Christian truth, where weight is born within the system of doctrine, and where things... It's one of the reasons why, for instance, the doctrine of the Trinity is so important within the church. The doctrine of the Trinity is so important because it's such a load-bearing doctrine. It's a load-bearing doctrine.

It has the doctrine of who God is, the doctrine of the way that God has revealed himself to be in Christ and in the work of Christ. And once you have understood the Trinity, a lot of the other truths of the New Testament can be seen to rest upon that. Now, Paul does not talk directly about the doctrine of the Trinity.

For the most part, it's something that's hidden within his work. It's a foundational truth. It's not something that's always breaking the surface.

You often see Trinitarian formulations within his work, but these aren't foregrounded. These aren't accented in the way that they would be within the later tradition. That does

not mean that the later tradition has just abandoned the sense of importance that we have within the epistles.

Rather, it's recognised where the weight is borne and it's recognised the basis of a certain sort of theological reasoning. And once we've done that, I think there are many ways in which we can approach the issue of evangelism that do not depend upon its relative prominence within the teaching of Paul. Relative prominence is not the same thing as relative importance.

The foundation of a building is incredibly important, even if it's not something you're always looking at. There are certain things that are prominent, on the other hand, that aren't particularly important. When you look at a building, there are certain prominent features that may not actually matter that much for its structural integrity.

And so, first of all, before we actually begin looking at this issue in more depth, we need to recognise just the manner in which we reason theologically and the way in which Paul gives us an example of theological reasoning. He does not give us a comprehensive systematic theology. Having said that, there are points here that seem to have weight.

Paul does not seem to give the same weight, the same centrality to evangelism that we would seem to give, or the same place at least, to the evangelicals. It's not something that is constantly a focus for him. Now, that does not mean that evangelism is not important for him, but if you imagined a modern evangelical writing the Pauline epistles, you would expect to find evangelism on pretty much every page.

Now, how do we account for that? I think, first of all, we need to recognise our context, and the way that evangelicalism is often an accommodation to, or in certain other cases, a capitulation to our context. So, our context is one of fairly atomised and detached individuals, not a very dense and viscous society, but a society where people are spread out, where they have their individual lives, and where Christian truth is articulated within such a social framework. And so, our social framework is very much one of having a church that you go to, that you call people to often, and that church is a site where a group of fundamentally individuals get together to hear teaching.

Now, we speak about the church as a community and things like that, but for the most part, that does not have much weight in our lives. It can seem more like a theological notion than a concrete reality when we talk about the church as a community, the church as a body, the church as a family, these sorts of organic metaphors. Because for us, the church is mostly teaching that's designed as a sort of spiritual petrol station, gas station for Christians on the road of their pilgrimage.

But on the road of our pilgrimage, we're all in our individual cars driving along. We're not wandering in bands together. This is a very modern sort of pilgrimage.

And when we approach evangelism in such a framework, often evangelism becomes a message that is tailored around and to the individual and within a structure of individualism. It's one of the things that we've seen intensified in recent years. The way that people will talk about their Christian faith takes on the character of our self-reflexivity that you have within modern society, the emphasis upon choice as the fundamental value of society.

So we'll talk not about the objective truth of the gospel. Rather, we'll talk about I personally believe that or I choose to believe that or I prefer to see God as whatever it is, even if these are even after those introductory statements, we have fully orthodox notions. Those orthodox notions are so qualified and compromised by those initial introductions that they can collapse into something that's lost all integrity altogether.

Because the truth of the gospel is not primarily something that is grounded upon our individual choice, our volition or our apprehension of the world, our subjective apprehension. Rather, it is an objective truth of reality. Christ is Lord whether you make him Lord of your life or not.

The question is are you going to bow the knee to him? One day you will. Will you do it now voluntarily? And these are the sorts of ways of viewing the Christian gospel that we have often forgotten within the West. Christianity can be treated as a sort of religious system for individuals, a means of dealing with your problems, of your problems of guilt, your problems of a sense of alienation from the divine, whatever it is.

Christianity is a religious system that answers that individual need. Rather than Christianity being the proclamation of something that has happened in history, an objective truth that is the fulfillment of God's redemptive purposes and which takes the whole cosmos into its scope. That this is about the restoration of all things, about new creation and about us being taken up into that.

Now that's a very different sort of way to think about the gospel. It's a very different, leads to a very different way to think about evangelism I think. Because one of the things that becomes central in Paul's understanding, which is very much focused upon this objective reality of Christ working in history, is the church.

The Christian gospel is not primarily about saving individuals and dealing with their problems, but it's about God forming a new humanity in the middle of the cosmos. That this is the way he's going to restore his creation and he is forming this humanity and we are called to be part of this new faithful humanity in Christ. And that gives us a very different set of accents and a very different weighting of certain teaching.

It gives us a sense of the importance of the objective realities of the gospel, a lot more than you have within modern understandings. And these modern understandings which are rooted upon reaching individuals for Christ, speaking to individuals and telling them

about how they can have Christ into their life and what difference that will make to their personal lives, that's an important message. But it's a very limited message in terms of what Paul was saying, where Paul goes around from city to city and proclaims the gospel, which is that Jesus is Lord, that something has happened in history, that God has raised his son from the dead, he has vindicated his son and the son has ascended into heaven, seated at God's right hand and will come again to judge the living and the dead.

The gospel is the sort of message that we see proclaimed in the creed, not primarily a message of individual salvation, but a massive message of historical redemption. And once we've seen that message of historical redemption, we will see that it's a public fact, not just an objective fact out there in the world, but a public fact, a fact that has to do with societies and nations and communities and families. It's something out there in the social world, not just in the individual world, in my private religious apprehensions of my relationship with God.

It's far deeper than that, far greater than that, far broader than that, as out there in the public world of relationships. And the church is a new humanity formed within that realm. And as such, it's something that has weight within that sort of world.

It's a realm where this new body of people are being formed, not just a lot of individuals who are in principle in some mystical way joined together in one body, but concrete communities that embody that reality, that in concrete forms of life, they express this new humanity. And Paul, within his letters, gives a lot of attention to the building up of a body, to the building up of the church. And within a society that's not individualistic, a society that's very communitarian, built around highly viscous families and with a context of strong nations and all these sorts of things, Paul's gospel is about a new humanity being formed in their midst, a new humanity that is not just another humanity alongside them, another humanity that is somehow in competition with them on the same level, but these are people taken from all different characters of life, all different forms of life, rich and poor, male and female, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, and people from all parts of the empire, all parts, barbarians, Scythians, slave free, all these people are brought together in one body.

And this body is not defined primarily by tongue, not primarily defined by race, not primarily defined by gender, not primarily defined by any of these other things that define our social groupings. It's defined by Jesus Christ, and it's a new humanity that bears witness to all the different groups within the old humanity that something has happened, that something remarkable has happened in history. And this community is something that is proof of that event.

And Paul's concern in evangelism was very much about the formation of churches. Evangelism is about the proclamation of a message within the public realm of human social life and historical life about what God has done in his son in history. And then in

that same realm, that social, historical, and cultural realm, these churches are being formed, these bodies of believers who are cities set on a hill that bear witness in each of their contexts to what Christ has done, who manifest within the form of their life the form of Christ.

And so when we think about evangelism, when we think about evangelism, often evangelism is about giving people a certain religious ideology or a set of teachings that are sort of way of dealing with your individual problems. And that has limitations. It's a message that is very much built around the individual.

It's a message that is not just about the individual, one that shapes our understanding of evangelism as a sort of, it can often be a sort of marketing thing where the religious subject is treated as if consumer, and you're trying to give them the appeal of this particular, explain the appeal of this particular product. And that is not quite what Paul does. Paul is not building his whole gospel upon the principle of choice and individual consumption.

Rather, he's speaking more in terms of the language of his day, which is the language of empires and rulers and the language of social community and historical events where something has happened within that realm and people have to change in terms of it. People have to take on board what has happened and they need to act in terms of what God has done in Christ. Now, this is a very different thing from a message that is very much focused upon individual choice.

Now, this does not mean that the individual response is not one that should be a willing one. It should be a willing one, but that does not mean that we are, there's a difference between a response that occurs under coercion and a response that is a response to an obligation. And Paul presents his gospel in the form of an obligation, and you can willingly respond to an obligation, but that response is a very different sort from the way that we often see the gospel as an offer to individuals that's primarily ordered around choice.

And when you see also this community at the heart of Paul's message, this community is a representation of the truth of what God has done in Christ. It's a manifestation of this new life of a people formed by the spirit, and that people formed by the spirit is a people that overcomes the divisions and the structures of value of the old order. It manifests a very different form of ethics from the old order.

Now, ethics as we tend to think about it can be a very individual and privatized thing, whereas ethics within the ancient world and ethics more generally, I think, are primarily a matter of, they are bound up with community. So you cannot truly live the ethical life in isolation from everyone else. Ethics is a communal activity.

Ethics is something that we do together, a form of life that we practice together. And this

is what Paul is seeking to create. The other thing that you find within Paul is an emphasis upon discipleship.

Much of evangelicalism is focused upon this constant movement out to speak to people and give them the gospel message directed to them as individuals. And it's directed towards the event of conversion. But yet, so often people are left at that point and not really built up and enabled to grow.

And so what we have is constantly trying to bring people into the church but relatively little building up of the church and not just building up. And it's not even if we have the building up of individuals that much, but even less so do we have the building up of a body of people in communion with each other and in the exercise of many different gifts so that through the exercise of all these gifts, we would all be built up. And as a result, I think what we have is a very attenuated understanding of the church.

The church can often be focused, it becomes a sort of gas station to refuel along the way of your individual pilgrimage. But it also becomes something that's focused upon ideas, an event just on a Sunday morning, and it can be seen as something that has no focus of its own. I mean, people say often the church is the one organization that exists for the benefit of outsiders.

No, no, no. The church exists for the purpose of the worship of God. The church exists to be a new humanity in Christ's image.

The church exists to be the temple of the Holy Spirit, not primarily for the benefit of outsiders. Now, as it exists in that particular way, it will be something that attracts outsiders. And also as it exists in this way, it will have a mission into the world as it goes out and it reaches others and it proclaims a new form of life that is manifested within it.

And again, this is important because when we have an emphasis upon building a body primarily and preaching should primarily, and the teaching within the church should be primarily about building the body, not primarily about evangelism and bringing people to conversion. It should be about building the body. And as that body is built, one of the things that a healthy Christian church will want to do is to reach out, to communicate to others the good news of the gospel, which will, as it has been built up, be something that is manifested within its life.

And so often what we have, I think, in evangelicalism is a very attenuated life of churches and churches existing just to teach people outside and to bring people to the point of conversion. But yet there's no clear manifestation of the transformation of life, of the transformation of society wrought by Christ and the Spirit. There's no manifestation of what it means to be a people that live together as brothers and sisters because we have one Father, or to live together as the temple of the Holy Spirit in the communion of the Holy Spirit because there is one Spirit.

Well, there's very little manifestation of what it means to live a faithful form of life in service of one Lord. And the lack of the oneness of the church, the fact that we just have our atomized lives and we don't have a unified existence, that hamstrings our evangelism. It hamstrings our witness to the world because in the place of this concrete manifestation of the truth of God, in the place in public human life, we just have privatized ethics, privatized religion and the positioning of the person who hears the gospel as a consumer rather than as someone who has been called to repent, someone who's been given the obligation of the gospel, the gospel being the proclamation that Jesus is Lord.

And that comes with an obligation to respond in faith, to respond in repentance and to seek forgiveness. But yet when we have a form of the gospel that's very much shaped around modern values, that gets lost. Now, how does this relate to the significance of ethics? First of all, within Pauline theology, ethics is not primarily individual.

Ethics is about the church and the form of life that's manifested within the church. And this form of life is not posed to evangelism. Rather, it's a means by which we'll be far better equipped to engage in evangelism.

As we have transformed lives, our lives will have a gravitational pull upon the people around us. They will see something different about us. It won't just be about us as individuals.

It will be about us as a community. And I think for many of us, this is the way that we ourselves came to an understanding of the faith, not through some abstract teaching, but through concrete witness to the truth of Christ, seen in the lives of people who manifest its fruits. And that makes a huge difference.

And particularly in the age that we have today, an age of primarily words and very shallow communities, the internet is a place of words. It's not a place of living together. It's not a place of community.

The idea that Facebook is a community is a complete lie. The idea that Twitter is a community is a complete lie. It's not a community.

It's an ersatz reality that substitutes for our lack of a deep, concrete community. The church is called to be a community, to be a place that manifests a transformed form of life. And in that form of life, to show, to shed forth the light of the gospel, the light of that transformation that Christ has brought about.

And that will be expressed as Paul did within his practice in the actual work of evangelism, a work of evangelism that is not detached from the works of mercy, from reaching people in poverty, from going to visit people in prison, from being with the sick and the elderly and the lonely. It will be a form of evangelism that is embedded within a

form of life. And I think this is a way that we can learn an awful lot from Paul.

But he will take a careful use of both his example within Acts and his teaching within the epistles and bringing those together. The focus of the epistles on building churches, on building bodies that are strong and effective, that have the worship of God at their heart and the manifestation of the life of Christ within community as the chief goal. That, I think, will lead to a far more effective and powerful and truthful form of evangelism.

The one that merely focuses directly upon evangelism all the time and misses the means by which we strengthen a body suited for evangelism. And if you don't have a body suited for evangelism, you can flail around as much as you want within the actual work and you won't actually bring people to the sort of reality that evangelism is supposed to bring them to. Evangelism is to bring people into something.

And if you're not developing that something, that body, then there's nothing to bring them into. There's nothing to really attract them to apart from a religious system that you can try for yourself as a religious consumer. This is a constant danger that we have.

Now, evangelicals are often people who do very well in their practice, a lot better in their practice here than they do in their theory. But I think we need to work with our understanding and work with our actual practice of church to become people who are better and more and more truthful in the way that we approach evangelism, more faithful in the way that we do it. And maybe this might require stepping back from our focus upon being effective, upon being people who have efficiency as the primary value, which is the modern value.

Efficiency may not be the best way to go about it. Rather, we should focus upon evangelism, first of all, by focusing upon building up the church as the body of Christ. And once that is done, we will, and as that is being done, we will become a people who are suited for evangelism in a way that we will not be otherwise.

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Thank you very much, and hopefully see you in the next day or so.