

“THE CULTURE WE PROMOTE”

FOR THE BILLY GRAHAM CENTER EVANGELISM ROUNDTABLE “ISSUES OF TRUTH AND POWER: *THE GOSPEL IN A POST-CHRISTIAN CULTURE*”

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Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. (Matthew 9:35-38).

This harvest theme of Jesus’ teaching was applied to Israel against the backdrop of 1,500 years of God’s involvement in Israelite history through cultural discipleship.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...(Hebrews 1: 1-2). God’s revelation through the Son was the pinnacle of this discipleship process. “For the Law was our school master to bring us to Christ...”(Galatians 3: 24).

The Great Commission Revisited

We know that God’s involvement in the life of Israel serves to unfold the history of redemption. It is clear in Scripture that God is involved in the life of other nations as well. Israel’s case is a special revelational paradigm of his general revelational involvement in the life of the nations. “Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites?”, declares the LORD.

Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?

(Amos 9: 7).

In my view modern Evangelicalism tends to see God as Lord only within the scope of a Christian culture that is shaped by Americanism. Because of this finite view of God, we have tended to be intimidated by today's challenges.

Much of our evangelism has followed what I call the separational model where we seek to bring those in the world into our narrowly defined scope of Christ's Lordship. Most of the rest of our evangelism has followed what I call the abstractional model where the gospel we preach is void of any reference point in the culture of the hearers. Both these models arise from an inadequate view of the Great Commission.

Jesus told us to make disciples of all nations. There are several words translated Nation in scripture with various meanings, but one way or another they refer to people groups. The distinct cultures of these people groups contain nuggets of truth put there by God. The most effective strategies in discipling people groups involves the use of these nuggets of truth. There are two basic approaches to this strategy. The first involves impacting the individual with the purpose of influencing the culture. The second approach involves impacting the culture with the purpose of influencing the individual. Both approaches are valid and necessary and effective. Unfortunately, we have been flooded with strategies involving the first approach but the second approach is grossly neglected in contemporary evangelism. In essence, our abilities in this area have atrophied. We need to be fully functional in both approaches to cultural discipleship if we are going to be true to the Great Commission.

Keys to Discipleship

There is a difference between a disciple and a convert. A disciple is one who is in the process learning to obey all that Christ commands. A convert is one who has surrendered his or her allegiance to Christ as Lord. Jesus commanded us to make disciples. This is the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). It is Jesus' job to make converts. However, today we try to make converts and expect Jesus to make disciples. This is the Great Debacle.

Evangelism by itself focuses on the conversion event. This is to be expected. But, if the conversion event is our sole focus, we short-circuit the Great Commission. There are discipleship aspects of the Great Commission that are necessary to make effective evangelism possible. Microwave evangelistic expectations are inappropriate in this post-modern era. We need to rediscover the biblical model of discipleship.

When was the moment of conversion for Jesus' disciples? At what point did they get saved? We can formulate various theories but the fact remains that in the Bible itself, the conversion event does not seem to be an issue. All we know is that the discipleship journey began when Jesus said, "Come and see." Three years later the disciples are obviously converted as they preach the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Discipleship begins when we first engage people through practical encounters or conversation. The discipleship process involves wisely applying God's Word to their life issues. It is always best to allow people to reveal their issues at their own pace. Generally, they do not share their deeper issues on first contact. They usually begin with more superficial issues in the early stages of the relationship.

People tend to share issues according to their comfort index. First come the *outer issues*: these are generally related to world and local events. Secondly, *inner issues*: these are directly related to us. Inner issues include, 1) *primary issues*: these are life effecting or life distracting, and 2) *core issues*: these are life controlling or life defining. *Primary issues* are usually revealed before *core issues*.

People are willing to share their deeper life issues as they gain confidence in the relationship. To gain this confidence it is imperative that we are respectful and non-judgmental. As they see how God's Word addresses the issues they reveal, they will be willing to share their deeper issues. This process should continue until they reveal their core issues.

The case of the woman at the well is a good example (John 4:1-42). Hers was a situation of double alienation. Her community was alienated from the dominant Judean culture. She was alienated from her Samaritan community. Her encounter with Jesus got off to a rocky start because she was in pain. But, Jesus was in touch with her pain. He dealt with her issues as she revealed them until she was able to reveal her core issues: her pain and her desire to see the Messiah.

There are three types of core issues, *personal*, *social* and *cultural*. Personal core issues include concerns such as loneliness, anxiety and fear. These tend to be unchanging and universal. Social core issues include concerns such as education, health and family. These are also universal, but they have different manifestations in different people groups. Cultural core issues are directly related to particular people groups.

When revealing their core issues, people usually begin with the least intimate ones. First, social or cultural, then personal. As they see how God's Word addresses least intimate core issues, they will be willing to share their intimate ones.

Because of our focus on making converts, we often nullify the discipleship process.

As a result we do not take seriously the initial issues people are willing to reveal. Also we may try to jump to personal core issues too fast. This is often perceived as inappropriate and intrusive and leads to a hardening of their resistance to the gospel. This exacerbates the Great Debacle.

The Process

A farmer hired 100 workers to harvest his crop. But, no one planted seed or cultivated the plants. As a result, the yield was almost nothing. What little was harvested had grown wildly. This resembles the way we tend to do evangelism today. It is obvious that this farmer is ignorant regarding the agricultural process.

I would divide this process into five phases: (1) soil preparation, (2) planting, (3) weeding and watering, (4) harvesting, and (5) distribution of the produce. Each of the phases is built on the foundation of the preceding phase(s). Soil preparation (plowing, fertilizing, etc.) is the foundation of the agricultural process.

Planting is dependant on an adequately prepared soil to insure a healthy crop. Weeding and watering maintains optimum conditions for the crops to produce the maximum yield. The harvest specializes in gathering the yield of crops. The distribution phase re-channels the produce into the five phases of the agricultural model. Some of the produce is used as food, some is stored as seed for planting, the non-food portions of the produce is used in soil preparation as fertilizer, and some of the produce is sold at the market with the derived resources being used to facilitate all five agricultural phases.

If our farmer had agricultural savvy, he would divide his 100 workers into five teams of 20 and assigned each team to one of the five agricultural phases, the yield would have been

abundant and fully distributed.

Likewise the discipleship process has five phases, (1) practical application, (2) cultural seeding, (3) consciousness cultivation, (4) calling, and (5) equipping.

Practical application is the foundation of cultural discipleship. It addresses the real issues of people in a concrete way. *Cultural seeding* consists of injecting nuggets of the biblical worldview into the culture. These seeds along with the existing nuggets of truth serve as additional points of contact to support the remaining phases. *Consciousness cultivation* involves (a) affirming the functioning phases of practical application and cultural seeding, (b) linking them together in various combinations within a biblical framework, and (c) demonstrating the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Through consciousness cultivation, the existing nuggets are incorporated into a biblical framework. *Calling* involves confronting people with the choice they must make regarding repentance, faith and obedience.

The equipping phase involves teaching, training and mobilizing those who positively respond to calling to do one or more of the five discipleship phases.

Each discipleship phase not only rests on the foundation of the previous phase(s) it is inclusive of them. In other words cultural seeding includes practical application. Consciousness cultivation includes practical application and cultural seeding. Calling includes practical application, cultural seeding, and cultural consciousness cultivation. Equipping includes all the previous phases.

As in our agricultural example, if our evangelism is done in the context of the other four phases of the discipleship process, our impact will be far greater and more widespread than what we see today.

Thinkers such as Francis Schaeffer often referred to a time in American history when

there was a Christian consensus. They pointed out that the man in the street could articulate the basic truths of the gospel. What made this possible was that the culture itself preformed the first three phases of cultural discipleship, namely, *practical application*, *cultural seeding* and *consciousness cultivation*. In those days the point of contact was the calling phase evangelistic traditions were formed in the days of the Christian consensus. Therefore, our discipleship skill sets generally do not include the pre-calling phases.

Too many of our strategies are geared to the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:23-32). But such cases are rare indeed. Besides, the text does not rule out the preparatory phases, which led to his response, “What must I do to be saved?”

Today, the Christian consensus is long gone. The culture no longer does *practical application*, *cultural seeding* and *consciousness cultivation*. Yet we too often evangelize as if the culture does. This partly explains why those of us involved in the first three phases of cultural discipleship tend not to be supported by the body of Christ. Because they cannot produce a tally sheet of decisions, donors feel they are not getting adequate bang for their buck.

We all cheer when the running back for the home football team scores a touchdown by running through the opposing line of defense. However, we tend not to notice the blocking that takes place to make the running backs breakthrough possible.

Those of us involved in *practical application*, *cultural seeding* and *consciousness cultivation* are like the blockers for the running back.

The Gap

The calling phase is what most think of as evangelism. Given the multi cultural characteristics of our society, this might appear to be a preferable approach. However, it is a

major problem with today's evangelism.

In the present atmosphere of political correctness, diversity has become a popular buzzword. Most of us tend to think that the basis of diversity is cultural *difference*. I see it as a matter of cultural power dynamics. This is much more significant than issues like whether we clap on 1 and 3, or 2 and 4.

Every society has a dominant culture and at least one sub-dominant culture. Our society is no exception. Each of these has a corresponding cultural agenda and an intra-cultural consciousness. All in the sub-dominant culture are exposed to the dominant cultural agenda. Few in the dominant culture are even aware that there is a sub-dominant cultural agenda. Therefore to them, the concerns of the sub-dominate culture tend to be marginalized. Marginalization happens when something or someone is relegated to a position of insignificance, devalued importance, minor influence, and/or diminished power.

The biblical gospel covers the totality of human issues, whether from a dominant or sub-dominant cultural perspective. With Gods Word, there is no marginalization. Every society has a system which attempts to deliver societal resources and address human issues. However, there are some things the system cannot deliver; meaning in life, peace of mind and eternal life to name a few. When we limit our gospel to the issues not addressed by the system, we end up with what I call the gospel of the gap. This gospel is woefully inadequate, especially if it is based on dominant cultural realities. Among other things, it leads to a severe case of welfare dependence on the system.

The system delivers its best to the dominant culture. It seldom, if ever delivers as much to the sub-dominant culture. In many cases the system addresses issues in the dominant culture

while not addressing the corresponding issues in the sub-dominant culture. When we try to minister our gospel of the gap in the sub-dominant culture, many legitimate issues unaddressed by the system remain unaddressed by our gospel.

In most cases, these unaddressed issues are of more immediate concern than the lofty issues such as meaning in life, peace of mind and eternal life. This is why our gospel is seen as irrelevant to many in the sub-dominant culture. It does not connect with their motivational themes.

In the African-American context for example, there are two sets of unaddressed cultural core issues. The first set emerged in the 1700s. They are related to empowerment and change and include 1) dignity, 2) identity, and 3) the divine significance of the African-American experience. This last issue seeks to answer the question, Why are we here? Immigrants don't ask that question?

The second set of issues emerged in the 1970s. They are related to dysfunctionality and include 1) pain, 2) rage, and 3) remasculation; in other words, a quest for manhood.

These issues are within the range of *cultural seeding* and *consciousness cultivation*. They are all addressed by the biblical gospel, yet they remain unaddressed by today's evangelical gospel. Could it be that we have been peddling the gospel of the gap? Can we say we have reached African-Americans if all we have is this inadequate gospel?

We need to rethink the content and range of the gospel we propagate. But where do we begin? First, we must do cultural discipleship around these unaddressed issues and needs. Next, we need to rediscover the fullness of the biblical gospel that addresses the full range of human issues.

If we only do cultural discipleship in the dominant culture, we will exacerbate the marginalization of the sub-dominant culture. This would be an affront to the biblical gospel of Christ. The Great Commission will not be fulfilled until there is a fully functioning, five phased, cultural discipleship in every culture.

Bi-cultural

We all live in a matrix of interlocking cultures. These cultures are determined by ethnicity, family, language, geography, profession, etc. Some of these cultures have *dominant* status and others have *subdominant* status. These cultures interact with each other through us. This accounts for bi-cultural dynamics.

Whether or not we are functional in the dominant and/or subdominant cultures has a direct bearing on evangelism. Those who are isolated in the dominant culture will tend to be ineffective in communicating the gospel to a person in a sub-dominant culture. Likewise, those who are isolated in the sub-dominant culture will tend to be ineffective in communicating the gospel to a person in the dominant culture. The gospel is best communicated by those who are perfectly functional in both cultures. However, only Jesus himself fit that profile.

If we are going to burn through the walls of cultural isolation, we need to be bi-cultural in our proclamation of the gospel. We need to address core issues and use appropriate paradigms. However, just being bi-cultural is not the only consideration. One's perspective must be factored in. When dominant cultural ministries seek to minister to the sub-dominant culture, they will tend to only reach those who are bi-cultural. In this situation, a person from the sub-dominant culture would have to be bi-cultural in order to hear the gospel. Without the development significant sub-dominant cultural based ministries, those isolated in the sub-dominant culture

will never be reached.

Partnership

There is a lot of excitement today about reaching unreached people groups. This is a positive development in the life of the evangelical church. However, there are numerous examples of people who hear our proclamation yet receive a message that contradicts the biblical gospel. I call them the dis-reached. If we are going to rediscover the fullness of the gospel, we must make it a priority to clean up this toxic waste. The only way to do this is to address core issues of the dis-reached biblically through cultural discipleship.

Individual ministries cannot be all things to all people. We need several ministry models working in partnership to rediscover the Great Commission and fulfill it effectively in our post-modern context.