

THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: The first of the Great Ends of the Church

If one were to pick up the Book of Order, part of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and begin to read it as one would a novel, the very first section one would encounter is entitled the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity. Polity is one of those archaic and arcane words that we Presbyterians seem to delight in using. It might be better to use government or governance, but we don't. We persist in using a word that reminds the rest of the world of politics, and that isn't a good thing.

Towards the middle of the first chapter of this foundational document, which is entitled The Mission of the Church, one will find as sort of a subsection of a section called The Calling of the Church. That subsection is The Great Ends of the Church.

This is what you will read if you seek it out:

The great ends of the Church are:

The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;

The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;

The maintenance of divine worship;

The preservation of the truth;

The promotion of social righteousness;

And

The exhibition of the kingdom of Heaven to the world.

This statement of the Great Ends of the Church came from the United Presbyterian Church of North America, which united with the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1958. It was adopted in 1910, and became a part of the Constitution of our Presbyterian Church (USA) following the reunion of 1983, which brought the Northern and Southern streams of the Presbyterian Church together, healing a rift that had existed since the Civil War. Or the War Between the States, to use the Southern terminology.

Each week during Lent, we will focus on one of the Great Ends of the Church.

Today, that end is the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.

The primary purpose of the church has often been defined as evangelism. And what is evangelism except the proclamation of the gospel for the purpose of the salvation of humankind.

Lying behind this great end of the church is the Great Commission which Matthew records at the end of his gospel. As Jesus is about to ascend into heaven, He charges His followers to:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

How do we proclaim the gospel? How do we make disciples? How do we teach them everything that Jesus has taught us?

The first thing that comes to mind is preaching. We preach the gospel. We proclaim the gospel from our pulpits.

But I must wonder: in the year 2015, how many people come to church who have never encountered Jesus Christ somewhere else? How many people wander in off the street to get out of the cold and rain, and find salvation?

For a hundred years or so, the mass evangelism of preachers like Sam Jones, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham, led millions to Christ.

Most of you have never heard of Sam Jones. But I'll bet you've heard of the Grand Ole Opry. And I'll bet you've heard of the Ryman Auditorium, which used to house the "Opry". It was built to house the evangelistic services Sam Jones led in Nashville, some of the first mass evangelism meetings.

Billy Sunday was a professional baseball player turned evangelist. He used to slide into the pulpit like a runner sliding into second base!

My favorite Billy Sunday quote is that going to church doesn't make a man a Christian any more than going to a garage makes him a mechanic.

In the last fifty years, television has become the medium that reaches into homes and proclaims the gospel. And the Graham organization was a pioneer in that.

Years ago, I heard missionaries tell of how they led people to Christ by showing them films of Christian life produced by the Billy Graham association. And there are hundreds, thousands, of Christian movies, videos, from short commercial length spots to feature films to mini-series that proclaim the gospel.

Over the last decade, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association has turned its focus from mass evangelism to individual evangelism, to training people to be effective witnesses to the gospel one on one.

In one on one evangelism, one does not preach. One witnesses. And one witnesses by living out the gospel, by living according to the teachings of Jesus, by following the teachings of Scripture, by being a friend to the one in need of salvation to introduce that person to the one who is their best friend, their Savior, Jesus Christ.

To do this, one must be like the Apostle Paul, who said that he must be all things to all folks so that he might by all means save some.

Well, I've disagreed with the Apostle Paul a time or two, and here is one of those points: we don't save anyone. I despise to hear a preacher tell how many souls he has saved over the years of his ministry. He's a liar and the truth is not in him! No preacher ever saved anyone. And neither did the Apostle Paul. Jesus Christ is the Savior, and our task as the church is to proclaim the gospel in such a way that people will come to know Him as their Lord and their Savior.

One final thought, a quote often attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi: preach the gospel at all times and in all ways, and when all else fails, use words.