

EVANGELIZING CHRISTIANS

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First Things 246 (October, 2014), pp. 19-21

See also [“This Time Will Not Be the Same”](#)

If baptism isn't just a symbol of initiation, but an initiation, then Zack was already a Christian. God's seal had been impressed indelibly on his soul. The inky divine thumbprint declared, "Mine." He was adopted into God's family, inducted into the knighthood of worship.

Not that anyone would have known. If he was a knight, he was an errant one, a wanderer in search of adventures, mostly the kind that can be had in women's beds. Though he "thought of himself as a Christian," he lived like any hedonist, taking his beliefs about living, dying, God, good, and evil from the nonbelieving world in which he lived.

One day when he visited a new church, the desert of his heart was strangely moistened. Looking back on the experience, he said that he had never "heard" the Gospel of grace until that day. Familiar story?

Yet there is something wrong with it. Every Sunday in his own church, Zack had sat through lections from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the Epistles, and the Four Evangelists. His eardrums were intact. His auditory nerves functioned. He even claims that he paid attention. So he "heard" in the mechanical sense; the problem was that he did not "hear" in the spiritual sense. He had not grown the right kind of ears, and that story too is familiar.

What keeps people from hearing? The obstacles come in three main varieties, but they can be overcome.

I

The first variety of obstacle lies in the listeners.

I can't hear because I have my fingers in my ears. Certain sins have become morbidly commonplace among us. If we seem deaf to conscience, the problem is not that it has lost its voice but that we cannot bear to hear it. We shut up our ears so

tightly against the bad news of sin that we cannot even hear the good news that sins can be forgiven. Some years ago, a literate and intelligent man whose life was in a mess told me that he was literally unable to grasp the meaning of any passage of Scripture whatsoever. My explanation of the principles of exegesis couldn't have missed the point more. The problem wasn't that he couldn't interpret the text; he couldn't take in God's word because he wouldn't allow himself to.

Christ didn't make this mistake. When He spoke, He sharply called attention to whether his listeners could hear Him: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." We should do that too. Pastors should ask their flocks, "What part of this message are you blocking out? What sin or resentment or cherished conceit are you clutching so tightly that you cannot open your hands to God's grace? In order to hear the Gospel, what do you have to let go?"

I can't hear because of all the racket. For most of human history, silence was a familiar companion. Now noise is. Even on those rare occasions when we pull out our earbuds, disconnect from social media, and walk into the sanctuary, all those chattering, jingling, crooning, thumping incantations ring on in our minds. The liturgy of the world drowns out the liturgy of the Word.

What is the solution? To have better noise? No, there is enough noise already on some of the Christian radio stations. God commands recourse to the abyss of silence so that we might hear Him in it: "Be still, and know that I am God." Much has been written about the need for better Church music, and rightly so. Yet greater is the need for better silence. The best times to press this need are the penitential seasons, especially Lent. Our shepherds should urge us to emulate our ancestors, who knew the importance of fasting not only from food and drink but also from noise and babble.

I'm not listening because I have heard it all before. A young woman approached me after an adult catechesis class to say, "I wish I were a convert like you. It is so much harder for those of us who were raised in the Church to see how wonderful it is." She meant it well, God bless her, but I found it unsettling. Immersed in grace, it should be easier for those raised in the Church to see how wonderful she is. How can we be jaded by God Himself?

The answer is that we can't -- but we can certainly be wearied by not having more of Him. We speak blithely about fulfillment in Christ as though complete fulfillment should occur in this world, and as though if it doesn't, there is something wrong with us. St. Paul knew better: "We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan

inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” The torrent of grace he experienced only whetted the longing for more.

What then should we say to the people in the pews? Never to “settle”! Does it seem to us that we must tamp down our longing for God? No, we must long for Him even more! In one sense we are saved, but in another sense we are still being saved, and in another our salvation is yet to come. If in this life even the very reminders of God’s presence make us sorrowfully aware that He is present to us only in part, then rejoice! He is so great that He uses even the sense of His absence to draw us more closely to Himself. Let Him focus the eyes of our faith. Here we see Him dimly, but there we will see Him in glory.

II

The next variety of obstacle lies in the proclaimers.

Adding to the proclamation. When the proclaimers go beyond the Gospel and insist on the soundness of prudential and scientific judgments which they are not equipped to make, they weaken the authority of their witness. For example, the Church does not know whether the planet is getting warmer, whether such change would be good or bad, or whether human activity is the cause; nor does she know whether minimum wage laws do more good to the poor by increasing their income of those who work, or more harm to the poor by throwing those with marginal skills out of work. Moreover, her ministers are naïve about the pressures toward conformity which often operate in scientific communities just as strongly as in the political world. When those who speak for the Church pretend to expertise which she does not possess, they blur the Christian message and undermine confidence in the charism she does possess.

The solution is to stop doing that. To be a faithful minister of the word of God is not the same thing as to peddle fallible judgments about its remote implications concerning matters about which others are more knowledgeable. Let holy lay people figure those things out.

Subtracting from the proclamation. So often we underestimate the desire for truth and meaning. How often have you heard the pastor tell jokes on Trinity Sunday about why he never preaches about the Trinity and isn’t about to begin? When was the last time you heard a homilist name the congregation’s favorite sins and explain exactly what is wrong with them? How many catechists fail to explain what God has

done for us? How many who do teach what He has done leave out what we must do?

The solution is to stop dumbing down Christian doctrine and to teach it all. We seem to think that the starving desire only a morsel, that the thirsty long only for a sip. I suggest that in the long run, the very opposite is true, for the mind, like the stomach, desires a meal. True, a mind that is starving may gladly devour even a morsel, but the morsel may come back up -- for just as some foods are palatable only in combination with other foods, so also some truths are plausible only in combination with other truths. In order to stand firm, they must have context, as the single stone requires the arch. We must serve the full meal, not just part of it.

Substituting a different proclamation. There is a false Gospel for every taste and budget. A Gospel of wealth proclaims a Jesus who will give us any greedy thing we want if only we ask for it with enough confidence; a Gospel of cool sophistication proclaims a “historical” Jesus who might be anyone but who the saints and martyrs say He is. A social Gospel maintains that we are saved not by personal repentance but by social revolution; a Gospel of positive thinking maintains that we are saved by warm feelings and “be happy attitudes.” Eventually the sheep catch on that the voice they are hearing is not the Shepherd, and they stop listening.

It might seem that if teachers of the faith avoid the substitutes, that is enough. It isn't, because false teachers will go on proclaiming them, and a good many people in our own pews are suffering post false Gospel trauma. To them we should say, “We understand that after hearing so many untruths you may be suspicious of truth claims in general, and we respect your caution. Ask any questions you wish. We also understand that you may feel burned and desire some healing peace. You are welcome to be peaceful with us. We will not crowd you. But there is a God, who is the Truth, and He desires to be known. Give Him a chance.”

III

The final obstacle lies in the condition of Christendom itself. We are divided. Christ's Body is torn.

But wait. We have been discussing evangelization, not ecumenism – the cause of the Gospel, not the cause of Christian unity. Isn't the end of the essay a bad moment to change the subject?

I am not changing it. The two causes are joined. To suppose we can spread the word of God without unity in that word is arrogant folly.

You don't have to take it from me. Christ's last plea to His Father at His Last Supper with the disciples was "that they may become perfectly one," and the reason He gave was "so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." The moral is plain. If we are not one in proclaiming Christ, the world will not recognize Him. If we are not one in proclaiming the Gospel, the world will find the Gospel very hard to hear.

What part of *this* message have we been blocking out? What sin or resentment or cherished conceit do *we* clutch so tightly that we cannot open our hands to God's grace? In order to hear the whole Gospel, what must *we* let go?