

Confronting the “E” Word
(1 Peter 3:13-16 and Matthew 28:16-20)

What comes to mind when you hear the word *evangelism*? Webster’s College Dictionary defines *evangelism* as the “preaching of the Christian gospel; the work of an evangelist.”¹ So what comes to mind when you hear the word *evangelist*? Do any of you remember this man?



Jimmy Swaggart is a once famous televangelist now considered infamous. His infamy came as a result of his inability to stay away from prostitutes.² Or perhaps your mind congers up the image of this familiar face.



Jim Bakker is another televangelist who also shares some infamy with Swaggart.

Following a 16-month Federal grand jury probe of his ministry, Bakker was indicted on eight counts of mail fraud, 15 counts of wire fraud and one count of conspiracy. In 1989, a jury found him guilty on all 24 counts and he was sentenced to 45 years in federal prison and fined \$500,000. In early 1991, a federal appeals court upheld

Bakker's conviction on the fraud and conspiracy charges, but voided the 45-year sentence and the fine. In November 1992, Bakker's sentence was reduced to eight years.³

Unfortunately, the word *evangelism* is often considered by some Christians to be an offensive “four-letter” word, primarily because of the actions of a few people like Jimmy Swaggart and Jim and Tammy Bakker. As students of the New Testament, however, we know that evangelism is not a “four-letter” word. Fortunately our knowledge and understanding extends to other more reputable evangelists – like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – the authors of the Christian gospels and more contemporary evangelists like the Rev. Billy Graham. Whether we like the word or not, evangelism is the heart of Christianity. Evangelism is the hands of Christ in the world today. Please pray with me.

Gracious and loving God, by our baptism you have called us to the ministry of the priesthood of all believers. You have commissioned each of us to be evangelists – to spread the gospel message of your Son, Jesus, the Christ. Teach and equip each of us to go into the world as true evangelists – lovers of Jesus. Through him we are

¹ Webster’s College Dictionary. Copyright © 1995, 1991 by Random House, Inc.), page 462.

² <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20098413,00.html>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Bakker

called and through him we pray.
Amen.

Whether or not we are offended by the ideology of evangelism, it remains the heart of Christianity – the cornerstone of our faith. By our baptism we are called to Christian ministry, to the priesthood of all believers. When Jesus sent his disciples into the world he commissioned them to “... go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” [Matthew 28:19] This we know as the Great Commission. This is also *our* commission go out and make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

In the early days of the Christian church the apostles did go out into the world. They preached the gospel message telling their corner of the world about Jesus Christ: from Jerusalem to Alexandria to Rome to Macedonia. Thomas even made it as far as the country we know today as Pakistan.

The Great Commission and the apostles’ travels to far off lands formed the beginning of what we have come to know as evangelism. In later times evangelism continued much in the same way as missionaries were commissioned to go to those places where the gospel message had never been heard. In those days mission was tied directly to evangelism. Mission was evangelism. This seems not to be the case today! We will hear more about that later.

It may be difficult to hear and even more difficult to accept, but the early church was built on the ideology of evangelism. The early church grew because of its evangelistic efforts to take the gospel message to those places where Jesus was not known.

Without evangelism the church could not have grown. Without evangelism the church will not continue to grow.

In fact, without evangelism we would not be here today. If someone had not cared enough that each one of us know the love of God, we would not be here this morning. If someone had not cared enough to make sure that each of have the love of Christ in our hearts, we would not be here this morning. If someone had not cared enough to meet our needs, we would not be here this morning!

It is regretful that the hollowness and insincerity of the Swaggarts and Bakkers of the world have given evangelism a bad name. And it’s certainly okay for us to be disappointed by their lack of sincerity. At the same time, let’s not toss the baby out with the dirty bath water. Like it our not, without evangelism the church will not grow. Without evangelism this church will not grow!

Church growth is our number one concern. I hear it from most of you every day. Why don’t we have more kids? Where are the young singles? Why aren’t we growing? The answer to those and other questions is: “We aren’t growing because we are not taking the gospel message outside our four walls. We aren’t growing because we are not actively engaging in evangelism!

If you think evangelism is just a buzz word, here’s another buzz word I hear almost daily: “outreach.” It seems like we are constantly looking for ways of “reaching out.” The word “outreach” must seem more user-friendly – softer, less threatening and not as bad as “evangelism.” “Outreach” doesn’t remind us so much of the Swaggarts and Bakkers of the world. While it may be a more gentle term, the ideology of

“outreach” is just a watered down effort to avoid evangelism – the spreading of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Evangelism is more than reaching out. Evangelism is meeting people where they are at and helping them to know the love of God and the redemptive qualities of Jesus Christ. Evangelism is meeting people’s needs – their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs!

On August 15th we gathered as a church family to discuss our future. We made a list of things we affirm about our church and congregation. We inventoried our resources – those things we are already doing well. Then we listed and prioritized the things we need to be doing better.

On August 25th we gathered again to revisit our work and to decide what we need to do to begin to move forward, to move in a different direction. Someone took stock of the tasks at hand and asked the question, “How are we ever going to all this by ourselves. We need help, we need training, we need someone to teach us how to accomplish these things.”

Jesus said, “Ask and you shall receive!” Well, I am here this morning to invite you get that training – to attend the Northern Illinois Conference School of Evangelism. The help you asked for is available. The keynote speaker at the school this year will be Bishop Scott Jones of the Kansas episcopal area.

As the director of the Center for the Advanced Study and Practice of Evangelism at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, Bishop Jones has developed a list of “The Twenty Components of an Evangelistically Effective Congregation.” This year, the NIC School of Evangelism will offer workshops that will elaborate on these components to help us redirect our efforts at becoming more effective at evangelism.

I have a video clip of Bishop Jones. He briefly points to the problem that we must all address in the institutional church if we are to survive into the future. Please listen to what he has to say.

[\[Click here to play video clip\]](#)

I hope we can take a carload of people from our church on October 17th. The school is being hosted by the Hilltop Ministry Center which is a new faith community started by Roscoe United Methodist Church. I realize that the Rockford area is a hike from West Chicago, but I am sure it will be worth the time investment as we learn how to confront the dreaded “E-word” and become more effective at responding to our call to be evangelists for Jesus Christ.