

The Church: Asset or Hindrance to World Evangelization

*...that they may all be one... so that the world may believe....
(John 17:21)*

Jesus told his followers to make disciples of all nations. The mandate was nothing less than a call to change the world. But how? Most who try to answer this question focus on methods and strategies. This is well and good. But in all our talk of methods, let's not overlook what is perhaps our most effective tool for reaching the lost; I'm talking about the church, the body of Christ, the community of faith.

In the Book of Acts, it wasn't just the Gospel message that drew men and women to Christ. It was the fellowship of believers that offered inhabitants of the Roman Empire an alternative community, the likes of which they had never seen. The family of God transcended barriers of race, class, gender, age and education. It existed not for its own sake, but for the sake of those who did not belong! This had enormous appeal to those living in a world where alienation and loneliness often defined human existence. It spoke powerfully to a culture that was marked by divisions based on ethnicity, economics, social status and politics.

Written early in the 2nd century, the anonymous *Epistle to Diognetus* is the reply to a pagan's request for more information about the Christian faith. The author speaks of the irrationality of idolatry and outlines basic Christian doctrines, but it is when he speaks of the community of the church that he makes his strongest case for the Gospel.

The difference between Christians and the rest of mankind is not a matter of nationality, or language, or customs.... They conform to ordinary local usage in their clothing, diet, and other habits. Nevertheless, the organization of their community does exhibit some features that are remarkable, and even surprising. For instance, though they are residents at home in their own countries, their behavior there is more like that of transients.... For them, any foreign country is a motherland, and any mother-land is a foreign country. Like other men, they marry and have children, though they do not expose (kill) their infants. Any Christian is free to share his neighbor's table, but never his marriage-bed. They show love to all men and all men persecute them. They are misunderstood and condemned.... They are poor, yet making many rich; lacking all things, yet having all things in abundance. They are dishonored, yet made glorious in their very dishonor; slandered, yet vindicated. They repay calumny with blessings, and abuse with courtesy. For the good they do, they suffer stripes as evildoers; and under the strokes they rejoice like men given new life.

No evangelistic strategy for changing the world is more pregnant with possibilities than the mere fact of the existence of the true church of Jesus Christ! This was true in the 2nd century and it is equally true today. The question is not whether the church is a factor in world evangelization. Rather the question is: Does our communal life help or hinder the advance of the Gospel?

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