

Five Obstacles to the Gospel

by Doug Murren

We talk quite often about the "pre-conversion" or "pre-Christian" state of those we are seeking to reach today. But I am not so sure we are facing some of the obstacles to the gospel in this phase of our post-modern culture. We used to say in evangelism that we would catch them and God would clean them up. There is still a huge degree of truth in that position. We meant by this that conversion would deal with addictions, habits of sin, and attitudes of disbelief. Now many of these post-conversion challenges need attention before faith can do its work.

The great Revivalist Charles G. Finney promoted a position on awakenings that has been a part of my approach to outreach and church life for three decades. He basically said, revival occurs whenever the right means are used in the right place at the right time. His conviction was that since Pentecost God has been pouring out His Spirit and doing His work of awakening, we just don't often see where He is doing it. I agree.

Differing eras do prove past positions either wanting or in need of adjustment. Ours is no different. However, I do believe God is always ready to awake a people in the age of grace. Our job is to find the innovation and pathway to being heard.

I was recently asked, "Why isn't America experiencing an awakening like so many other parts of the world?" They wanted my view as an evangelist not a researcher. I came up with twenty obstacles I have run into. We don't have room to cover that many here so I have chosen the top five for this article. You can get the last fifteen either from a book on the topic a number of months from now or visit my web site about six months from now. I will be posting each chapter as we polish it on my website in 2002 (www.square1.org) so I can get it worked over before publication.

Let's take the Letterman approach and take on the five obstacles to the Gospel in reverse:

AFFLUENCE

I realize I might sound like a cranky old T'd off preacher here, but I am not. This issue is as old as Moses. This was a major theme of the Book of Deuteronomy. God warned that when His people would feel fat and sassy they would not seek Him as fervently. John Wesley reported this factor as one of his chief concerns for continuous awakening in England. And it is a major issue in American spirituality today. People who have plenty to eat and the sense of being able to change their economic, relational or educational status are not prone to feel a "need" to change much in their life.

The truth we know as Biblical people is, affluence can be an illusion. The fact is affluence can leave the deeper needs unfelt and untouched.

So what do we do, wait until everyone is poor? No, we can't. It does require a different look at evangelism and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. I think this is part of the challenge of post-modern evangelism. Affluence requires an evangelism that hits higher up the level of challenges humans face. Like what is an individual's destiny? How can you give your kids spiritually-based self-confidence? How in the world do you know you are spending your time in the best fashion?

We could be seeing in our Warfare Against Terrorism and the frightening events of September 11th 2001 in NYC, a break in the bottleneck. It looks as though the absence of a sense of safety and control could be breaking the hold affluence has had on us as a country.

SEXUALIZATION OF OUR CULTURE

We have lived through a century where the age of puberty has decreased from 13 for girls and 15 for boys to 9 years for girls and 12 for boys. The average age of marriage has increased from 16 to 18 to 28 years old. Any half-witted observer can see the hormonal continuum is driving something. It has driven the "sexual revolution" and built a culture where sales are sexualized, relationships are primarily sexualized and human identity is driven not by family background but sexual acuity.

How does this impede the Gospel? I don't know of any quantitative research done on the connection between sexual promiscuity and openness or non-openness to the gospel. From my own observation, I can say (as Paul taught us in I Cor.7) there is definitely a level of impact with premarital and extramarital sex that impedes spiritual awakening and growth.

I have found that people caught in the maze of sexual entanglements have difficulty breaking into a relationship with Jesus. I have come to see that there may be a pre-conversion freedom from sexualization in many lives. How? The journey is just being discovered for many of us. We have to find ways to discuss this sensitive issue and explain to seekers directly enough to see freedom won.

GOOFY CHRISTIAN MEDIA

What can we do about this? I gasped when I heard Pat Robertson on the news, just days after the Terrorist Attacks of September 11th. I think Mr. Robertson is a quality man but his ideas could not have been expressed in a more out-of-touch way. He motivated people in the opposite direction I am sure he thought he wanted to.

Let's not get into television evangelists or TBN by name. But I am finding the goofy seventies presentations with the talking heads is killing us. The negative fallout is enough to make an evangelist cry.

What can we do? In 1st Corinthians Paul went to great lengths to make certain the church looked appealing. And more so that they did not resemble the pagan religions of Corinth. Paul did not want Christians with shaved heads like the cult prostitutes or matriarchal dominance in spiritual matters.

Today, I really think the bizarre Christian media presentations are a major challenge to being heard. We have differentiate outreach churches from the giddy fanfare on the tube. I suppose the only way to combat this obstacle is to build a grass roots force in our churches that are authentic, informed, and believable witnesses.

THE SPECTER OF ADDICTION

Addiction is as old as mankind. But I know most in the field of addiction today recognize the virility of the drugs and habits we encounter today has grown immensely. Drug addiction is now so prolific that any church reaching outside its walls will run into a whole new drug education.

Evangelism today requires networking with twelve step groups, clinics, and psychiatrists. This addiction world is way beyond pastors and lay leaders expertise. Many people will have to get free of addictions to make even the initial steps toward the Gospel.

The growing impact of alcoholism has tremendous impact on a person's openness to the Gospel. Although the use of drugs has dropped among high school students, it is still very high in our society. An awakening will require skill and spiritual power to break many people from the grip of chemical sorcery.

Leading my last pastorate in which we saw 17,000 decisions for Christ in 14 years, we had to take this hurdle on. We found that easily one of five people our congregation reached out to were in deep deep trouble with chemical addictions that blocked the pathway to Christ.

Today, we have to be able to preach about it. Be willing to do hand to hand combat for people caught in the illicit spirituality of drug addictions. We found we had to help families of addicts see the issues. We had to build hope for freedom most often before the persons would step through the threshold to Christ's freedom.

CONSUMER DRIVEN CHURCHES

The trends toward felt-needs based-churches has worked on one level, but has clobbered us on many more. When surveyed, only 3% of believers ever shared their faith once in the last three years. And only 5% of pastor-leaders have shared their faith in the last three years. Where is the sense of mission? It's gone.

I recall thirty years ago hearing a missionary every other month and having to buy new offering plates to contain the offerings for them. And evangelists were so busy helping churches reach lost folks you could hardly book one. Now evangelism is a missing element in most church experiences. And today churches really are not interested in spending any time or resources on something that doesn't build their thing.

I am coaching a fairly good number of churches around the country now on building an evangelism component to their churches and how to develop outreach and contemporary services in traditional churches. But, frankly we could probably stand to see 400 churches started in every major city simply on the basis of the need for mission and outreach.

There is just too much energy spent on maintaining a nice show for the convinced. It will require brave and courageous leadership to face the heat to make the changes necessary. Frankly, I don't see a lot of courage out there. And competent creativity hasn't exactly been encouraged either.

Somehow we have to go from being consumer driven and in competition with one another, to disciple-based outreach-driven gatherings or frankly, we are done in my lifetime.

There are just not enough contact people available in most cities aware enough to include and bring people into the faith. The expert just isn't going to get it done. The conversion rate in U.S. churches now is one half person per church per year. Hmm, at that rate our "half-life" is killing us slowly.

Teaching several of Christ's parables that deal with not forgetting from whence you came has become a regular prescription I want to present to the churches I am coaching. The excuses are plenty for why these churches dance so long at the altar of getting our needs met, but the real reason is it is much more appealing to people to help them than to give them skills to help others.

I see a definite change in the two generations chronologically behind my own (baby boomers). I see a growing willingness to see a Christianity that focuses on personal growth and personal responsibility to help others. I only hope it isn't just due to a life stage phenomena. I am hopeful

an aging boomer generation will respond to a new active Christianity. I doubt we will see an awakening until the religion of "felt need" is replaced by a spirituality of responsibility.

In my last book, Churches That Heal I presented the real need for new paradigms other than sheep, sheepfold, body life etc...for our time. We are going to be far more effective in our time training "soul doctors" on all levels operating off the paradigm of healers. And one thing is certain the "consumer of spiritual experience" had better go lest we wake up to find we are in fact not what we claim.

We can learn all kinds of tricks and miss the mark if we don't address the above. We can even call our efforts Gen-X churches, outreach churches, contemporary churches, seeker churches or new breed churches, but unless we address these obstacles to the gospel we are just the same old same old, with a different wrapper.

I have a feeling that simplicity of good clear communication to the points of real spiritual conflict is an art we will have to master. I have noted those who have found new and joyous effectiveness.



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