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Mission and Evangelism
in the "Burnt Over District"

A few hundred miles from here there is an area of New York State referred to as the "Burnt Over District." The first time I heard the term I assumed it was an area prone to drought. I later learned that it acquired the name because it was once so "burnt over" with successive protestant revivals that it had become a religiously peculiar area. It is the original home of Mormonism and several other early American cults. Apparently some people had been saved one too many times.

I have entitled my talk today, "Mission and Evangelism in the Burnt Over District" not as a talk on doing mission and evangelism in a particular part of Upstate New York, but as a metaphor for looking at the culture in which we live and in which we all do mission and evangelism – even when we don't know we're doing it.

A few years ago someone asked me why it should matter to the Church what actions they took in their lives. In typical modern fashion they wanted to know, "What business is it of yours?" I could have answered in a dozen canonical ways, but I suspected this couple was well beyond the reach of the canons at that time. My response was more to the point. "It matters what you do because as a member of the Church, you're raising my children!"

No one in our culture gets a moral free ride. No adult can claim not to be a role model. Some sports figures and other people in the public eye have wanted to plead for their own moral irrelevancy – but it comes with the territory of being an adult. Being an adult means being a role model. There is no moral free ride. I will say the same thing about mission and evangelism. All Churches are proclaiming a gospel, simply by claiming to be a Christian Church. And in proclaiming that gospel, everyone is doing evangelism. No one gets a free ride. So in a manner, it does not matter what any of us think about the subject of mission – we are engaged in it by virtue of being the church – and more to the point today – by being ordained. I wanted to settle the point for us – mission and evangelism are not options. You are doing them whether you know it or not.

But why refer to our culture as the "Burnt Over District?" I want you to think with me about a culture that has heard Christianity in so many forms, with so many twists and turns that the meaning of the gospel, the Truth of God in the God/Man Christ Jesus, is easily lost, or, at best, obscured.

Yesterday, just before our conference began, I stopped in a sandwich shop in Hamlin. A young man behind the counter saw my cassock and began to ask questions. “Are you from that school?” (meaning St. Tikhon’s). I said that’s where I was headed. “Are you Catholic?” I explained that I was Orthodox. “What’s the difference?” I gave a short explanation. “It’s all confusing,” he responded. “It’s hard to know what to believe.”

He is living in the “Burnt Over District”.

This past year our culture was deeply ruffled by the release of the film “The Passion of the Christ.” It’s hard to imagine a film getting more media coverage. Everybody reviewed it – there were opinions galore – Orthodox and non-Orthodox – go see it – don’t go see it – “moving,” “overly violent,” “anti-semitic,” “shallow,” “frightening,” pick an opinion. It made a lot of money – and certainly touched some lives. It revealed a deep antipathy to and confusion about certain treatments of Christianity and a deep and widening culture gulf in our society. It also revealed a jaded side to religion in America. There are numerous examples that could be cited. Political pollsters now note one of the more interesting. The same people who identified “Soccer Moms” and “Nascar Dads” have identified a new significant political subgroup, “Anti-Fundamentalists.” Such a group can easily spill over into simply being anti-Christian or anti-religion.

In such a climate, how do we do evangelism and mission?

There are several suggestions that I will put forward today. The first of them has to do with distortion. Doing evangelism and mission in a burnt over culture means that we speak and live in a culture where the gospel is worse than unknown – it is distorted. The strange cults that arose in upstate New York in the 1840’s did so because a significant segment of the culture was ready to believe certain distortions, no matter how bizarre. The popularity of such works as *The DaVinci Code* (New York Times bestseller) demonstrates something of the same distortion. G.K. Chesterton once said, “When a man ceases to believe in God, it’s not so much that he believes in nothing, as it is that he is willing to believe in anything.”

The distortions of the gospel in our culture are too many to describe. There are those who believe that the God of the Churches is mean, hateful, narrow-minded, angry, or simply institutionalized. There is a growing preference for “spirituality” rather than religion, meaning that the presentation of Christ given by most Churches, or assumed to be given by most Churches is running a distant second to something else.

This distortion, I believe, is a major source of atheism in our culture – in many cases, the atheism being an effort not so much to reject God, as to reject a false God. Whenever I have conversations with those who profess no belief in God, my first question is, “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in. I may not believe in that one either.”

If the gospel is distorted in the culture around us, then the first task of mission and evangelism is to struggle with the distortions within our own walls. To be Orthodox is to profess “right glory,” “right worship.” It requires that we be always and foremost a Church of repentance, emptying ourselves of the delusions that replace God and crying out that God create in us a clean heart.

Virtually every service of the Church ends with the reminder that God is a “Good God, who loves mankind.” The fullness and the depth of that message need to be engraved on our hearts. Our own minds need to be renewed with the knowledge of the True God. When priest or Church act in such a way that the “Good God who loves mankind” is replaced with something else, then the gospel has been distorted.

To do mission in a culture where the gospel has been distorted, it is also necessary for us to be teachers. There are certain basics of the faith that cannot be taught too often or known too well. Working in the deep South, I have found it important to teach and re-teach the Orthodox understanding of salvation. “Are you saved?” is almost a way of saying “Hello,” in the South. The little book, “How Are We Saved?” by Bishop Kallistos Ware – short, simple, straightforward, is an absolute staple in my parish. Not that there isn’t more to be said on the subject. But the distortions that have to be cleared up are profound – they function on the level of worldview. To correct such deep distortions it is necessary to emphasize certain basic things and to emphasize them again and again.

For a congregation to understand that we are saved by *union* with Christ and not by the fulfillment of quasi-legal requirements is a huge leap. I frequently repeat the words of the Baptismal interrogation in my sermons, “Do you unite yourselves to Christ? Have you united yourselves to Christ?” Finding different ways to say the same thing to help people make connections is essential as we correct the distortions of a gospel too often twisted beyond recognition.

My ministry is as a *missionary* in the South, an area that knows little of Orthodoxy apart from an annual Greek Fest in most of our larger cities. A glance inside an Orthodox Church makes most people assume that it’s “something like Roman Catholic.” There are a number of evangelical Churches in the South that put nearly their entire creed on the Church sign. Usually it’s some sort of small pentecostal sect that will style itself as “Fire-Baptized, Fundamentalist, Pre-millennial, etc.” all on one sign. Of course there’s not a sign large enough to hold the Orthodox faith – even if it could be reduced to words. Archbishop Dmitri, who has been a pioneer among Orthodox missionaries in the South, gave me a simple directive on evangelism – “never turn down an opportunity to share the faith.”

That simple directive sets the primary task of evangelism in the “burnt-over” culture of America. Its essence is the practice of hospitality. Asked to speak, we politely accept the opportunity and we politely present the faith. The world will have its judge - that is sure and certain. But our task in the world is *not* to judge, but to offer the hospitality of the Kingdom of God.

As a child I frequently went fishing with my Dad and Papa. It was Southern-style “pan fishing,” the science of baits and hooks and patience. At the same time I was taught in Church that Jesus wanted us to be “fishers of men.” I assumed this meant that we needed to learn how to bait the hook and reel in people for the Kingdom of God. It is an image well-suited to the American distortion of the gospel. Making Christians becomes one more thing you can “learn,” one more technique to be mastered. In Christ’s parables, however, it is quite clear how we fish. The Kingdom of God is like a net. It is not a bait or a hook. It is cast into the sea and all kinds of fish

are drawn into the boat. And in one parable we are told that when drawn to shore, the “angels” sort them out.

Our task is to cast the net, to offer the hospitality of God’s Kingdom. God will do the sorting. When asked about evangelism “techniques” in my parish I often have to respond, “I answer the phone.” The hunger for the truth of the faith brings inquirers to the Church. They come from every conceivable background with every conceivable question. Patience, love and the gentle truth of the Good God who loves mankind is the answer.

In my own conversion to the Orthodox faith, I began to visit an OCA mission in Columbia, S.C. Fr. Peter Smith welcomed me, and always made me feel at home. I was an ordained Episcopal priest at the time. For seven years my family and I visited in that Church whenever I got vacation time away from my parish (in the Episcopal world that meant at least 4 times a year.) After a while some members of the Church assumed we were just so-so Orthodox, attending Church about four times a year. But as the years went on, and my journey home came closer to its end, I asked Fr. Peter, “Why did you never try to close the sale?” Here I was, a fish on the line, and he never tried to set the hook. His response has stayed with me.

“I believe that everyone who comes through the door of the Church is meant to be Orthodox,” he said. “And because that’s true, it’s God’s problem how it happens. My job is to practice hospitality.” He is now my Godfather and a dear brother in Christ.

The Kingdom of God draws people into the Church. It is of its very nature and character. It is what the Kingdom of God is “like.” For us, though, it means that we must be about the Kingdom. I have a good friend in a nearby town, a pastor in a protestant church. He knows a little about Orthodoxy, and is curious about even more. But this summer his primary pains have flowed from the disordered discipline of yet another denominational meltdown in the face of same-sex unions. He drops by the Church from time to time. Sometimes it’s even late at night when I’m ready to go home. But what is needed when he comes is the hospitality of the Kingdom. I know he comes because he knows that here, within the walls of Orthodoxy, the truth abides. He also comes because he knows that I won’t judge him. That doesn’t weaken the truth. It allows for ministry. I have no idea what he may eventually do with Orthodoxy, we have discussed what conversion means and what it takes. But all of that is in God’s hands not mine. Evangelism in our burnt over culture frequently means a kind hospitality, an oasis for broken and bewildered souls, a hospice for those suffering from the fire damage of confusion and delusion.

There are other parts of hospitality that need to be practiced. People need to be welcomed – not overwhelmed, but welcomed. We teach at St. Anne that every person who comes through the door of the Church, was sent for our salvation. It is virtually a parish slogan – it is one of those things I repeat a lot in sermons. It’s a basic point, something everyone must understand. Everyone who comes was sent for our salvation. Not us for them – that may be – but surely they were sent here for our salvation. It puts the horse in front of the cart.

Among the converts in our parish are two autistic teens. Their presence has been as unquestionably part of the salvation of St. Anne’s as anything I can imagine. As we have learned

to be patient, to make room, to be family for someone who has such unique struggles and gifts, we have learned to make room for the Kingdom of God.

None of what we do – teaching the Truth – practicing hospitality – remaining visible and present – none of this works if what waits behind the doors of the Church is somehow not authentic Orthodoxy. I don't believe that this means that ethnic customs will be abounding, or that the typicon will have been mastered to the last jot and tittle, or that a careful strictness over headcoverings and dress lengths is scrupulously enforced. Rather, it means that when the question, "Have you united yourself to Christ?" is asked in that Church, the answer is, "Yes. I have united myself to Christ." The life of prayer, the care for every person and all of creation is made manifest in the love of Christ.

If we understand that everyone who comes to us, comes as a gift from God, then we can begin to approach them properly, marveling at the wonder and mystery that is the life of every human being. Every person we meet is as much a mystery as God Himself. "For who knows the things of a man, except the spirit of the man that is in him?" (1 Corinthians 2:11). That includes every member of our parish, those who love us and those who drive us crazy.

Understanding this helps us to see that mission and evangelism are themselves extensions of the great Eucharistic life of the Church. God has told us in the letter to the Ephesians, that he has "purposed to gather together into one all things in Christ Jesus." The practice of the hospitality of the Kingdom of God is a great ingathering. It is gathering the world like prosphora so that we may offer God "Thine Own of Thine Own."

Our new Church building is within walking distance of my home. Some Sundays I like to leave early and walk to the Church. I think of it as beginning the proskomedie early. As I walk, I pray – for members, for neighbors, for the trees and the streets, for all of the life that surrounds our Church. Everything will become an offering to God. Everything is for our salvation (1 Corinthians 3:22-23).

We have nothing to offer the world other than Christ himself and if our lives are not united to His than there will be no evangelism, no mission, only the distortions that already fill the world. As St. Herman said, and I can think of no better words with which to conclude: "From this day forward, let us love God above all else." This is our mission and our task of evangelism. Thank you.