

Winning the World...At What Cost?

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This paper is presented to reveal the self-centered motivation that underlies much of the current effort to "teach the world for Jesus."

*And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you.
For the children ought not to lay up for the parents,
but the parents for the children.
—2 Corinthians 12:14-15 —*

A RECENT ARTICLE IN *WORLD MAGAZINE* STATED: Numerous studies confirm that the most wanted children are the most likely to be abused.... Perhaps the higher the (unrealistic) expectation, the deeper the disappointment. A cuddly bundle of joy in the delivery room may not be so wanted at the age of Terrible Two, or five, or fifteen... (August 12, 1995, p.30).

The Bible teaches that Jesus is our Father and the Church our mother (John 14:9; Galatians 4:26). This means that evangelism and consistent church growth ought to be the natural, normal result of a loving and intimate relationship between Jesus and a local congregation. According to Peter, we should expect to be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:8). According to Jesus Himself, we have been chosen and ordained by Him to "glorify and bear fruit" and that our "fruit should remain" (John 15:16).

The seemingly contradictory information reported in *World Magazine* shows us that some couples have an out-of-balance perspective on child-bearing. Rather than seeing it as the fruit of an intimate relationship, they have become obsessed with the idea of having a child. Undoubtedly the underlying reason they want children so badly is to fulfill their own inner need, be it a deep longing to be loved, to be appreciated, or perhaps to be in control over someone else. But having children ought to be viewed as the natural and normal consequence of two people loving each other and being intimate with each other, not the solution to a problem.

While there is certainly nothing wrong with a couple wanting to have children, an obsessive, all-consuming desire for children is unhealthy. The problem is, no child can satisfy those deep inner needs for very long. And when the parents realize that

their child is not the solution they were expecting and is actually a lot of hard work, the situation is ripe for abuse.

Just as some parents are absolutely desperate to have children but for the wrong reasons, so it is in the church. There are those pastors and churches among us who want their congregations to grow so they can get more money. There are those who want them to grow so they can receive the acclaim of their peers. There are also those who want their churches to grow because they think that having a large church will give them that feeling of inner fulfillment they so desire. But even though the desire for growth is proper and good, each of these motivations is wrong and potentially harmful. They are all self-serving.

There is really only one legitimate reason why we should want to see our churches grow: because we love Jesus, love people, and don't want to see anyone suffer eternal destruction. Or better yet, because Jesus loves us and loves people and He doesn't want to see anyone suffer eternal destruction. But if we strive for growth because we are secretly hoping for prosperity, prestige, or acclaim, we may very well end up abusing the people who come into our churches.

Back in 1992 a book was published called *Churches That Abuse*, by Ronald Enroth. Some dismissed it as the whinings of an unspiritual cynic. But some of the practices described in this book are frighteningly similar to the practices that take place in some of our own congregations. Could this mean that our intense desire for growth has often been fueled by the wrong motivations?

I have observed over the years that nurturing and caring for new converts is an area to which many churches give little attention. They seem to have a sink-or-swim attitude. And some of those who claim to be driven by an intense, nearly obsessive, burden to reach the world for Jesus take some of the worst care of the new believers in their assemblies. Why? Because they want to reach the world for the wrong reasons.

Such people love the idea of end-time revival. They love the idea of power and signs and miraculous happenings. They love the idea of seeing the masses come to Jesus in the latter days. But the problem is, they don't love that unremarkable fellow on the fourth row who was baptized six months ago and needs a little attention from his spiritual daddy. They see him as a nuisance. But how does Jesus see him?

More often than not, Jesus reached out to people one at a time. He conversed with Nicodemus, He healed the man at the pool of Bethesda, He ministered to Mary, He visited Zacchaeus. The early church approached soul-winning the same way. We read of the man at the gate Beautiful, the centurion Cornelius, the Ethiopian

eunuch, Lydia, the Philippian jailor. Certainly mass evangelism is a legitimate undertaking. But the fact is that people get saved as individuals, not as masses.

How many times have we told a sinner, "If you were the only one needing salvation, Jesus would have died for you?" Do we really believe this? How far are we willing to go for one individual?

Consider: Who is more important to Jesus, a lost soul or one He has saved? Is it the one He's watching constantly sinning or the one He's in intimate communion with? Is it the one who is separated from Him by a wall of iniquity or the one He converses with daily? Is it the one who is trampling on His blood or the one who is covered by His blood?

Ask yourself this: Who is more important to you, your wife or the lady next door? This is not to say that the lady next door is unimportant, but the question is, who is the most important? The Bible says that Jesus is the Savior of the body, the bride, not the lady next door.

Without question Jesus has a great love for the unsaved people of this world. But His eye is on His bride. It is her that He nourishes and cherishes (Ephesians 5:29). It is her that He calls His special treasure...above all people (Exodus 19:5). It is her that He calls the fairest among women (Song of Solomon 1:8).

If this is so, then why are we putting so much more emphasis on winning the unsaved than caring for the saved? Why are we constantly trying to reproduce the day of Pentecost while putting little effort into reproducing the day after Pentecost?

If the book of Acts is our instruction manual on soul-winning, then the Epistles are our instruction manual on taking care of the souls that are won. Which, I ask, dominates the New Testament? Which requires more time and attention, birthing a baby or raising a child to adulthood?

Let us strive to be balanced in our labors for the Lord. Paul was exceedingly zealous for winning the lost; yet he learned very early in his walk with God that Jesus takes personally any mistreatment of His Church. Yes, we are told to do good to all, but, adds Paul, *especially* to those who are of the household of faith (Galatians 6:10). What will it profit if we win the world but lose the Church in the process?

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Note to the reader:

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