

The Reality of our Status as the Remnant

Various Remnant Related Verses

What is the one activity Mennonites fear most? What is the one word that we love, but do not do well? What is the one command of Jesus we automatically get up tight about? What biblical theme do we fight about – a lot? What is the one discipleship activity we are weak at? What is the most urgent priority of the church today? All these questions have the same answer.

As I was throwing away files recently, and I have collected a lot over the years, 14 file drawers full, plus what has been added to my computer, I ran across another evangelism file. It was full of old articles from the evangelical and Mennonite world. I put it in the pile to throw away. But as I grabbed it to put into the recycle bin, I found I just could not dump it.

So, I'm going to share a variety of ideas, from these articles and my own opinions. This is not a sermon of three points, or a logical stream of thoughts, or a full-fledged coherent theme. It is a conglomeration of ideas and experiences that are often interconnected. As you listen, make your own list about evangelism concerns, how the world changes have affected the church, as well as witnessing opportunities for today.

The first general thought. Many people are keeping the faith but losing their religion. Even pastors, like the one who felt he had to go to Ireland as he fled his congregation. Many followers of Jesus are saying similar things as one person said. "I remain committed to Christ as always, but not to being 'Christian,' or being part of Christianity. It is impossible for me to 'belong' to this quarrelsome, disputatious, hostile, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years I have tried. I have failed. I am an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else. I have had it with organized religion."

When the news about the Catholic Church and its pedophilia problem, first burst on the news in a big way, my very first thought and gut reaction was – this hurts all organized religion – Christians, Buddhist, Muslims, Hindus, any

religious group you can name. Why? Because if we cannot trust religious people, who can we trust? Since then, we have heard repeated story after story of other evils in the church, and church related groups, both today and in our history. The church provides lots of material for comics who point out, with some humor, facts like, some anti-abortion churches have crosses representing the unborn babies killed, but none for school children murdered.

And it is amazing we cannot learn from each other. Today, it does not surprise us the largest Protestant denomination in the US is facing major trust issues with its pastors and church leaders leading the way in sexual abuse.

Another part of the leakage from the church is all the focus on what we are against. I think it is important to be against a variety of things as we find when we read the Bible. The Bible is full of shall nots. But that should not be our overwhelming focus. This tends to focus on fear. Instead we should be proclaiming what we are for – loudly & constantly. Like maturing in the Fruits of the Holy Spirit. Building up and protecting everyone. The Sermon on the Mount

But as one article asks, "Has atheism ever had a better salesman than a famous Moral Majority preacher blaming the September 11 attacks on the ACLU – American Civil Liberties Union. Or another well known preacher saying Haiti's earthquake was because of an ancient curse. Or at least one church kicking out congregants because they committed the un-Christian act of voting Democrat. What about being unfriendly to immigrants when the Bible constantly condemns mistreating the stranger and alien? And I will just mention the covid mask debate.

What similar stories do we have in the Canadian church and in our culture & politics? We are not free from the same kind of influences. We live too close to the US. The church is increasingly its own worst enemy in major and smaller ways. What could we list for ourselves and this congregation and this community?

Another general thought. Simply, the world around us has changed. The world is not like our parents and grandparent's worlds. It is not even like the culture my 30-year-old children live in. You can find online articles like, [22 Objects That People Born After 1999 Won't Recognize](#). Rotary phones. Cassette tapes. 8 track tapes. Floppy disks. Beanie Babies. Phone booths. Paper maps. Fax machines. We could go on and on. And this is just the physical stuff – much less all the new kinds of jobs, and so on. Plus, increasingly, when I'm listening to media – I go, wait – what was that word, that phrase, that reference? It is totally unfamiliar to me. So, we must adjust, as Covid has forced us to with technology.

And a big change in the church is the next boat load from Germany is not coming next month. Our own internal Mennonite growth is just not going to occur, where 2 children married non-Mennonite church members, 2 children died, 2 children married within the church, 2 children married other Mennonites. And 2 children rejected the faith. Plus, our families are much smaller and often so spread out. So, the natural biological growth we depended on – will not occur. So, we must do something different.

A fourth thought. One article by Phil Cooke titled, *Is Convenience Ruining the Church?*, sends me in a variety of directions of thinking. I noticed when I was pressured to have baptism classes during Sunday School, so the class would not mess up the schedules of the families involved. It has caused me to ask, where is the sacrifice, the commitment, and the priorities?

I have heard lots of moaning over the years how sports interfere with church activities. My response? If all Christians agreed to not play on Sunday, we would not need to complain. And if we were not accommodated, we could run our own leagues.” Childhood is a good time to enjoy sports. I love sports and played until about the age of 40. But I must ask, what is our witness when we allow convenience, culture, and sports to control our priorities? Maybe we should stand out by not participa-

ting. And can we display the same excitement about Jesus & evangelism as we do for sports?

We are so focused on “convenience culture,” all around us. There is a company that has combined the wine and bread into one disc, so Communion services can happen more quickly and be more convenient. There are even a few drive through funeral parlors for the busy.

A new believer, who had significantly changed, had an important observation when she started attending church. She had been as non-religious as you can get. When she was asked about the length of worship, she said, “Hey, if I am going to get up, get dressed to go to something that matters, I would feel cheated if it only lasted an hour. Worship is not about convenience. It is about experience. If God is there, what is the rush?” Plus, maybe we should be the best dressed we are all week in church?

It is normal for us to find ways of doing things that are the most convenient. I am all for that. You probably noticed I stopped wearing a tie – like most of the men here. And I really enjoy being here because we do not spend hours in meetings. But I do think we need to think and pray that convenience is not an idol for us.

And a **thought**, among many we could mention, but I think is a **real issue**, we have professionalized what should be the common practice of evangelism, by everyone who is a follower of Jesus. It was a shock in our first congregations, that they initially would not pay Rose & I the going recommended rate, because they did not count our years of experience of being missionaries. They said church planting was not pastoring – even though they wanted to hire us because we had been church planters.

The church has professionalized evangelism through church roles. I have regularly had church members bring people to me or ask me to visit someone – to evangelize them, while they stood on the side lines. My response has always been, I will be glad to help, but since God has placed the person in front of you, what

are you doing to help witness to that person? Use the opportunity God has given you.

And, although I like the idea of spiritual gifts, they also have been used as an excuse to not evangelize. But evangelism is not listed as a spiritual gift in the Bible – anywhere! Why? Maybe because it is what all followers of Jesus have a responsibility to do – simply by walking and breathing as followers of Jesus. Jesus instructed all his disciples to make disciples. Did he pick out only 3 disciples to evangelize?

Also, I think there is a good case to be made that despite the church's best intentions, we have created the assumption that evangelism is something that happens at church, and through certain professionals, not through followers of Jesus. If I had 100 dollars for every time, I have heard someone moan about not having the well-known evangelist come annually to the area anymore, I could retire comfortably. And there has been lots of encouragement to invite people to church so they can hear the gospel.

So, we must forget the mindset most believers will never become professional evangelists or pastors. This makes the number of evangelists available - huge! And can we, as we see by the millions of children and adults around the world, who participate in sports, can we as a remnant, participate in the common and normal practice of evangelism, that not only brings joy, but also brings faith and life and hope to all as.

So, I think we need a lot of humility moving forward. I think we need to learn the lessons of the past. I think we need to repent of a few habits and ideas – even though they are with the best intentions. And I have gradually recognized that we are in remnant time. We cannot act like religious colonizers.

Here is a list, one of many, of how the world and the church has changed and is being changed. We are in a post Christendom world. **Post-Christendom** is the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have

been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence. Here are seven changes in our society and in the church that we as a remnant, need to accept and work with.

From the *centre to the margins*: in Christendom the Christian story & the churches were central; but in post – Christendom these are marginal.

We have moved from *majority to minority*: in Christendom Christians comprised the (often overwhelming) majority; but in post-Christendom we are an increasing minority.

From *settlers to sojourners*: in Christendom Christians felt at home in a culture shaped by their Biblical story; but in post-Christendom we are aliens, exiles, pilgrims, a remnant, in a culture where we no longer feel at home.

From *privilege to plurality*: in Christendom Christians enjoyed many privileges; but in post-Christendom we are one community among many diverse groups in a plural society.

We have moved from *control to witness*: in Christendom churches could exert control over society; but in post-Christendom we exercise influence only through verbal witnessing to our story with Jesus and its implications and values.

From *maintenance to mission*: in Christendom the emphasis was on maintaining a supposedly Christian status quo; but in post-Christendom it is on a mission within a contested environment.

From *institution to movement*: in Christendom churches operated mainly in institutional mode; but in post-Christendom we must become again a Christian movement as occurred in history.

So, what can we do in a post-Christian world? What can we do when our faithfulness and hard work does not bring the results it once did?

Next week some answers will be offered. But here is a starting point. **First, we must accept the reality that change in upon us.** I like Ed Stetzer's analogy. The problem is, while many have fixed up the barn, the wheat still is not

harvesting itself. We have some nice-looking barns. The problem is that we have fields and fields yet to be harvested.

And as you can list, we have obstacles in the culture and within the church culture – many more than we have time to list and discuss. So we must accept the reality that change is upon us and not be defensive. And face and find ways to deal with the obstacles and challenges.

More thoughts for today. We must accept some of the biggest reasons people reject our evangelism efforts. People simply find our evangelism – in any form, unbelievable.

Too often, and I sense we all know this, we cannot treat people like projects to be converted. But it is so easy to do. It is a fine line between presenting Jesus to someone and seeing them as a target and we have done our job. We can name all the approaches to people that Christians use – that make us cringe. People cannot be projects to be completed.

On the other hand, we often are so fearful that we will offend someone. So we stay silent. Or avoid them. Or we simply pray and leave it up to God. A person's response to Christ is ultimately a matter that rests in God's mighty hands – something we have no control over. But a person's hearing of the gospel is a matter we do have control over and responsibility for.

So, we need to find ways to speak up, and ask for opportunities to creatively share our faith. ***We must make sure our evangelism is believable because it is done in grace.*** This sure is hard to do often, but we cannot be silent, because that also is not God's grace. You could preach your own sermon or lead your own Bible discussion in this area.

Another reason ***people find our evangelism unbelievable is because it is foolish.*** So many Gospel values, do not seem to work in this world. The whole issue of gun control and violence is just the current one in the news. The message of Jesus is counter cultural. There are good reasons the book, The Upside-Down

Kingdom is so popular. It presents a world view that is out of this world. But it is the only way this world will work well, in love, peace, joy, hope, goodness, self-control, and kindness.

So we need to pray for wisdom that focuses on understanding people and finding various ways to explain and argue gospel truths. This takes constant work. ***We need to keep learning ways to communicate better.*** We need to listen more and proscribe solutions to people less. People often do not have a clue what we are talking about because the words and phrases we use in our religious vocabulary and the context we are addressing, are not in people's vocabulary. ***We accept that love is inefficient & takes energy & time.*** It recognizes people are complex & have many needs – often ones they do not recognize.

As we work at getting better at facing our new realities, let us not put pressure on ourselves. Conversion is in God's hands. But we must share the incomparable life-giving good news of Jesus. By now you have probably figured out the answer to the questions at the beginning of the sermon is verbal evangelism.

Please spend this week adding to this list of things that have changed and do not work as well as they formerly did. Also, in preparation for next week, come up with a list of things we should try – new things or old reworked ideas.

To close I leave you with some words from the Apostle Paul – the third most prominent evangelist in the Bible. “Preach the word, be ready in season and out of season.” (2 Tim 4:2) “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” (Col. 4:5-6) “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” Rom. 10:17) Jesus & Paul tells us each to evangelize verbally in person, and in all the ways we can, as congregations and denominations.