

Voices: The slow, tragic demise of evangelism, Part 1

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Growing up in a small, conservative Baptist church in the 1960s, I was taught there are two immutable truths about the Christian faith. First, Jesus is the only way to eternal salvation, and anyone who rejects him is going to hell. Second, in light of that fact, every Christian is compelled to share Jesus with others.

An unspoken corollary to those concepts was when a person commits to living for Jesus, not only do they inherit eternal life, but they also become a better person in this life. If that's true, then Christianity ultimately would change the world for the better, one person at a time.

That seemed entirely possible 50 years ago. In fact, many prominent evangelical leaders sincerely believed we were on the road to doing it.

And for good reason. Those fundamental beliefs, after all, were the singular focus of the early Christian church and the driving force that led Christianity to overwhelm and revolutionize the Roman Empire.

Liberal threat to evangelism

As I began my theological training to become a pastor, I was told not only did the little church of my childhood get it right on those two fundamental truths, but in addition, there was an evil liberalism in American Christianity undermining the second of those truths (evangelism) by calling into question the first of those truths (Jesus as the only Savior and hell as a reality).

If Jesus is *not* the only way to God and if hell is *not* real, the logic went, then evangelistic fervor is squelched. It's not that evangelism dies so much as it languishes, pushed to the back shelf by other more pressing concerns, like social justice.

"Liberalism is contributing to the demise of evangelism," was a common refrain.

Sociological research seemed to affirm this claim. While most evangelical churches either were staunchly opposed to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s or simply silent on the most turbulent issues of the day, mainline Protestant churches were at the forefront of those radical social justice movements.

During that same time period, however, those mainline churches were largely in decline. It's a decline that continues to this day.

Political threat to evangelism

Baptists, as the largest group of evangelicals, loved to gloat about the fact liberalism was killing the mainline Protestant churches, while conservative evangelicals were thriving.

Riding on the adrenaline of being the largest, non-Catholic missionary sending agency in the world, glowing from the successes of evangelists like Billy Graham, and basking in the victory of single-handedly electing Ronald Reagan as U.S. president, evangelicals were at the top of the world and seemingly unstoppable.

"Jesus is obviously on our side," was the proud slogan.

But there was a subtle and deadly shift taking place among evangelicals. Drunk with the newfound power of political influence, we started looking to politicians to solve America's problems. Jesus alone was no longer the

answer to America's woes. We saddled Jesus with a political elephant, and it would take 40 years for us to feel the effects.

Christian nationalism

The shift from evangelism to political power cleared the way for Christian nationalism to take root and grow. Christian nationalism in its mildest form is rooted in the idea the United States was founded as a Christian nation and its laws should reflect Christian values.

In its most severe form, Christian nationalism vows to take over and control the “seven mountains” of society: family, religion, education, media, arts and entertainment, business, and government.

The most ardent Christian nationalist would have every American subjected to the teachings of the Bible in every area of life or suffer the consequences.

So far, the milder form has meant everything from ending speeches with “God bless America,” to advocating for more prayer in schools, to requiring public schools to display the Ten Commandments. It also has meant calls for restricting abortion, same-sex marriage and gender-affirming health care.

In the future, depending on the influence of the more radical versions of Christian nationalism, it could mean strict laws about marriage and divorce, the revitalization of sodomy laws, the restricting of the growth of certain competing religious groups through intimidation and deportation, the banning of materials deemed anti-Christian, the wielding of government levers to control anti-Christian movements and so forth.

Christian nationalism is as old as the Roman Empire. The American version is simply the latest manifestation of an ancient culprit—the temptation to

seek our desired outcomes through the power of the state, instead of Christ.

You might ask: What's wrong with wanting our country to reflect the teachings of Christ? What's wrong with creating laws inspired by biblical morals and principles? After all, our nation was founded on Christian ideals.

I will examine these dangers further next week in [Part 2](#).

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