

Compassion: Putting Evangelism First Through Social Action
A Social Action Green Paper Presented to the Council of Convention
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“Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When He saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to the disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field.’” (Matthew 9: 35-38)

In 1996 the Evangelism Commission challenged our Council and Assembly to re-establish the priority of evangelism throughout our Baptist Convention in Atlantic Canada. We are pleased to note that, with this renewed emphasis on evangelism, the tide is beginning to turn with modest increases in baptisms, and significant growth in Sunday School attendance. The Evangelism Commission is continuing to offer visionary leadership in this area, through promotion of the Alpha Course, Evangelism First Conferences, Open Doors 99, The 2000 and Beyond Conference, promotion of a bible study course entitled “Walking as Jesus Walked”, etc.

In the midst of discussions of “re-structuring”, we are very grateful to the Evangelism Commission for these initiatives which we trust will provide a solid foundation for evangelism through whatever new structures evolve as a result of the Convention Review Process. Meanwhile, the Social Action Commission has been seeking to define a strategy for Social Action. Our “What’s Love Got to do With It?” initiative (Bible Study and Youth Literary/Video Competition) has been designed to encourage Atlantic Baptists to think biblically about social and moral issues and to transfer that understanding into loving action. We wish to encourage Atlantic Baptists to develop a mature Christian worldview. And, we believe that we are at a decisive moment in our denominational history in terms of merging evangelism and social action.

As a Convention, we have enthusiastically supported the call to put “evangelism first”. But exactly how are we to do this? At all levels of our structure, what practical steps can we take to ensure that we are all motivated by, and accountable to this goal? Are there any significant obstacles to this sharpening of our focus? To the extent that we are successful in putting “evangelism first”, what can we expect to happen in our churches and communities, and how well are we equipped to deal with these things?

We believe that in order to truly put “evangelism first”, we will need to come to terms with the “model” or paradigm that has shaped our churches and their ministries over the past century, recognizing both its strengths and limitations. We will also argue that in order to truly put “evangelism first” we will need to adopt a model for ministry and evangelism which is explicitly based on the expression of compassion within the communities in which we serve.

Now Is the Time

“Now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.” (2 Cor. 6:2)

As the Social Action Commission has addressed issues of social and moral concern in recent years, we have been impressed - and concerned - by the rate at which the tide in public life seems to be going against views and policies long taken for granted in Canada. One has only to listen to the news or read the papers and National magazines to realize that, when it comes to public policy and the courts, little is sacred in Canada. Reaction amongst Christians and Christian organizations ranges from quiet apathy to angry activism.

What is the proper Christian response to all that is taking place in our legislatures, courts, and the media? How much of our time, energy and other resources ought we to spend protesting the apparent erosion of Christian values within our society? What has all this to do with evangelism? Is it possible to “do” evangelism without understanding these issues?

In what is commonly known as Jesus’ high priestly prayer, He prays for His disciples, saying:

My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.’ (John 17:15-19)

Clearly, we have been sent into the world, that through us - as we go into all the world, making disciples and teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded us (Matthew 28:19-20) - people will see God. It is for this purpose that we are here. Jesus promised that He would be with us and that we would be sanctified for this purpose. The question, it seems, is how are we to go? Do we go in humility or in defiance, expressing compassion or anger? As Christians we must make decisions about how we are going to live in our communities and in the larger society.

The prayer of the Social Action Commission is that Atlantic Baptists will take the time to hear God’s voice amidst the confusion of secular agendas and changing policies, that we will truly learn to trust in the Lord with all our heart, that we will not lean on our own understanding, but rather, as we acknowledge Him in all our ways, that we will trust Him to direct our paths (Proverbs 3:5-6). We believe that the church needs to engage our culture, standing firm on the truth of God’s word so that we can speak that truth in love. We believe that God calls us and equips us to do this, and protects us as we go forth in His name. We believe that now is the time to be salt and light in Atlantic Canada. And we believe that, as we live out our faith, in community, we will enjoy the favor of all the people and God will add to our numbers daily those who are being saved (Acts 2:47).

A New Paradigm

In his book entitled *Church Without Walls* (1992), Jim Petersen argues that the church needs a paradigm change. A paradigm is a framework for seeing and understanding what goes on around us in a particular context. He says (1992:22):

Our society is undergoing several paradigmatic changes simultaneously, but I don’t see the church responding accordingly. We are making many cosmetic changes, but our basic perceptions remain unaltered. We continue to think ‘sanctuaries, pulpits, pews and clergy.’ These will undoubtedly continue to serve those of us who have a church heritage, and a certain number of those who do not. But we haven’t asked what it will take to make the gospel truly accessible and transforming to the rest of this society. Do we have the creativity to assess the true needs, and the mobility to go into our world in an effectual manner?

Our churches have operated within a particular paradigm - one based on sanctuaries, pulpits, pews and clergy. This paradigm is based on the assumption that the lost ought to come and hear the good news, come to Christ, come and be saved, come and join the church. Is this consistent with the Great Commission which tells us to go, or with the Great Commandment which tells us to love our neighbours as Jesus loves us?

Our efforts to put “evangelism first” will not begin to reach their potential until we are willing to change our paradigm - until we live as Jesus lived, walk as He walked, and love as He loves. Jim Petersen (1992:119) says:

The sad reality is that going to the lost, living Christlike lives among them and revealing Christ to them, is not in our ecclesiology. The believer has not made a whole lot of progress toward regaining his or her place in ministry. The church came out of the Reformation with no vision for the penetration of society by believers and no provision for the traveling, or mobile, expressions of the people of God... The believer is the key to penetrating our society. The primary function of leadership should be to serve those believers by equipping them for ministry. They need resources, skill, and constant encouragement. They need to be released and affirmed as they scatter to fulfill their functions in the body and among their unbelieving friends. There's only one problem. Our leaders don't know how to do this.

Putting "evangelism first" is a charge and a call to every believer. We believe it has profound implications for our Convention. Without a shift in paradigms, we will only reach those who are willing to make the first move to come to us and we will continue to rely on our pastors to "do the ministry". This is not so much a question of strategy as of theology. It is not a matter of choosing which approach or paradigm we are more comfortable with.

Do we have the courage to examine ourselves and allow God to lead us into the new century? Are we willing to make whatever changes are necessary to obey God's call on our lives and really put "evangelism first"?

The Example of Jesus

"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps." (1 Peter 2:21)

In order to put this discussion in context, it will be helpful to examine the example of Jesus. What can we learn from the Gospels concerning Jesus' ministry amongst the people to whom He appeared in the form of a man? We would suggest that Jesus' earthly ministry was defined by one overriding quality: compassion. In every setting and in every encounter, Jesus showed compassion. He was rejected by the ruling religious authorities because His actions challenged the prevailing social divisions. His ministry was an offense to the social divisions established by a "politics of purity". Marcus Borg (1994:49), in his book entitled *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*,⁽¹⁾ puts it this way:

Indeed, it is only when we appreciate this dimension of Jesus' emphasis upon compassion that we realize how radical his message and vision were. For Jesus, compassion was more than a quality of God and an individual virtue: it was a social paradigm, the core value for life in community. To put it boldly: compassion for Jesus was political. He directly and repeatedly challenged the dominant sociopolitical paradigm of his social world and advocated instead what might be called a politics of compassion.

We cannot truly appreciate the quality or impact of Jesus' ministry without understanding the social, cultural, and political context within which He lived. It was a culture which grew out of a purity system. Purity rules and rituals rigidly defined society and one's place in it. Borg (1994:53) says:

It is in the context of a purity system that created a world with sharp social boundaries between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, that we can see the sociopolitical significance of compassion.

Considered in this light, it is little wonder that Jesus was rejected by the religious authorities. He violated purity rules every time He supped with sinners, talked with harlots, healed lepers, raised the dead, etc. His public ministry - His consistent, relentless expression of compassion - violated the purity rules of His society. While Jesus did not attempt to effect political change through military or revolutionary means, we fail to understand His message if we do not grasp the extent to which His expression of compassion

challenged social and spiritual norms of His day. Jesus came, not to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17), opening the door for God's grace.

Following his life changing encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul was able to set aside the paradigm by which he had been raised (based on the law of Moses and the social divisions which resulted) and grasp the better way that Jesus modeled. Paul wrote to the Galatians (3:28), "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." To believe this, and to act accordingly, required a major shift in focus for the early church, and for us, even today.

While it is not a question of purity or compassion - the one or the other, it is a question of balance. God desires for us to be holy as He is holy (1 Peter 1:15-16), but also to be compassionate (or merciful) as He is compassionate (Luke 6:36). Have we, individually and corporately, accomplished this balance? If the church in Atlantic Canada today is characterized by a proper balance between purity and compassion, we would expect that it would be seeing tremendous growth. Since this is not the case, either in our denomination or in any other, we must conclude that this is not the case. Borg (1994:58) notes that "whereas purity divides and excludes, compassion unites and includes."

Jesus' ministry resulted in a battle over two different ways to interpret Scripture. Borg (1994:59) notes:

The same hermeneutical struggle goes on in the church today. In parts of the church there are groups that emphasize holiness and purity as the Christian way of life, and they draw their own sharp social boundaries between the righteous and sinners.

The chasm Paul faced between the culture of the early Jewish Christians and the Gentile world was huge. Petersen (1992:75) says:

It is hard for us to appreciate the extent of the cultural chasm that separated first-century Jews from the Gentile surroundings... The key to Paul's crossing cultural boundaries was his willingness to leave behind the traditions in which he had been raised.

We would suggest that the chasm between Jews and Gentiles in the first century is not unlike the chasm that now exists between Christian (churchgoers) and pretty much everyone else in our society. If we are serious about putting "evangelism first" we must honestly consider whether or not we must leave behind some of the traditions with which we have been raised, in order to cross cultural boundaries.

In every community in Atlantic Canada, there are those people whom we have, whether intentionally or not, defined as "untouchables". They may be the economically poor and marginalized citizens of our communities, the alcoholics and drug addicts, homosexuals, those who have had abortions, people of other religious faiths, and even Christians who attend a church of another denomination, to name a few. If we are to put "evangelism first" we must confront our prejudices and be willing to set aside those things which hinder our effective witness to all the world.

Compassion, Evangelism, and Social Action

The Social Action Commission believes that it is through the expression of compassion by God's people that evangelism and social action find their common purpose. Without an attitude of compassion (both as individual believers and corporately through our churches, Associations, and Convention) efforts to put "evangelism first" will have, at best, limited success. Even if every person in our constituency were to participate in the Alpha Course and attend all of the Evangelism conferences, unless we change or make room in our paradigm for ministry for compassion, we will not see the full impact of God's redemptive power on our communities.

We believe that as we make this adjustment, God will guide and direct us to speak the truth in love on issues of social and moral concern. We will be able to speak because we will live compassionately and

our lives will be consistent with the truth we proclaim. We will realize that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). In other words, the battle is not against any human opponent or government.

We cannot overstate the importance of compassion for personal evangelism as well as social action. Let us examine ourselves in light of Paul’s description to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 13) of the “most excellent way”:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

In terms of our efforts in social action to be advocates for social justice in the public forum, let us follow the example of Jesus. Love never fails. When we forget this, and treat those with whom we disagree with contempt, and even hatred, we not only defeat our goal to put evangelism first, but we also grieve the Holy Spirit.

Where Do We Go From Here?

To this point, this paper has been a call to examine ourselves and consider whether or not our current paradigm for ministry is one which will allow us to effectively put “evangelism first”. We have suggested that we need to understand the way Jesus’ ministry modeled compassion and challenged the preoccupation with purity rules and rituals characteristic of the social and cultural context of His day. So, where do we go from here?

We believe that even a subtle shift in thinking on this issue will have a profound impact on our efforts to put “evangelism first”. As we begin to recognize the various ways by which we have allowed purity traditions to direct our thinking and actions at all levels of our witness and ministry, and as we consciously and intentionally examine these in light of Scripture, may God open our eyes to more clearly see His grace and His love, not only for us, but also for the lost world to which He has sent us.

Let us remember that God has called us to serve - He will do the seeking and saving of souls. We are to show compassion, but He will convict and convert. In a little book called *Simple Words of Wisdom*, Penelope Stokes (1998:62-63) says this about compassion:

In Christian circles we talk a lot about compassion - empathizing with others, developing sensitivity to the struggles of those less fortunate than ourselves, ministering to the needy. But God requires more of us than random acts of charity. God calls us to ‘love our neighbour as ourselves.’ It’s a monumental challenge... The human condition has changed little in two thousand years. People today, even members of our families and churches, citizens of our own hometowns - our literal neighbours - are harassed and helpless, wandering sheep. But it’s not enough simply to herd them into church and tell them spiritual

stories about the Good Shepherd. Jesus did more than teach them. He lived among the lost sheep, healing them and feeding them, listening to their stories of brokenness and despair, or shattered dreams, of unfulfilled longings and unmet needs. A lot of shepherdless sheep roam among us. They are waiting - the harassed, the helpless, the aimless, the defenseless. We can bring hope and healing, direction and protection. But we dare not go to them with superficial piety. We must go as Jesus did. He loved them. He knew what made them weep. And he wept with them.

We do not have a checklist of simple steps we need to take in order to live compassionately. We know only that the first step is to recognize that we are products, not only of God's grace and workmanship, but also of the society in which we live, including its religious traditions. As we are willing to allow God to shape our every thought and action and as we truly devote ourselves to His service (Romans 12), He will help us to see weaknesses or errors in our traditions and He will bless our efforts to put "evangelism first".

We must never fear change, so long as our hearts are right before God, and we must never fear truth. Leith Anderson, in his book *Winning the Values War In a Changing Culture* (1994:58) says:

Truth is always consistent with God. As Christians, then, we should never be afraid that some truth will somehow discredit God or that some archaeological discovery will prove God wrong. What God is and does always fits with reality and truth... I'm sorry to say that the church has not always lived up to this biblical standard. There have been too many times when the church has valued beliefs more than truth.

In these days of rapid social and technological change, political and judicial examination of traditional values, economic uncertainty, ecological strain, and spiritual plurality and confusion, we feel that there has perhaps never been a greater opportunity for the Church to be salt and light in our society. We possess the full armor of God, but as we "suit up" and as we pick up the sword which is the Word of God, let us be sure that we wield it in a manner worthy of our calling. Let every word we utter, in evangelism and in social action, be motivated and directed by a commitment to compassion. Let us study with renewed purpose, the life of Jesus and follow His example in ministry as we go forth in His name!

References

Anderson, Leith, *Winning the Values War in a Changing Culture*, Bethany House Publishers, 1994.

Borg, Marcus J., *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Harper Collins Publishers, 1995.

Petersen, Jim, *Church Without Walls*, NavPress, 1992.

Stokes, Penelope J., *Simple Words of Wisdom*, 1998.

¹ The Social Action Commission recognizes that Marcus Borg is a controversial author. By quoting him in this paper, we do not wish to imply that we endorse his broader theological positions. However, the chapter in his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, entitled "Jesus, Compassion, and Politics" has challenged our thinking on the topic of how we are to engage our culture.