

WHEN WE DRIVE OUR TENT PEGS TOO DEEP

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Christian researchers have concluded, after watching North American trends for three decades, that the evangelical movement has stagnated. (Evangelicals are those who have strong beliefs about the sole authority of the Bible, the Lordship of Jesus, his atonement at the Cross, and personal faith for salvation.) Since those conclusions derive from statistics, that is, from percentages of populations, they tend to be weak in explaining the causes of stagnation, or the lack of causes that should have led to more growth. Fortunately, many church planting movements in other parts of the world have more than offset the decline in North America.

The original Good News about Jesus remains the explosive power of God to save all who turn to him in faith. That fact is neither in doubt nor contradicted wherever the gospel flows unhindered. Thus, we who seek to mentor gospel workers, such as missionaries, church planters, evangelists, and pastors, must understand some of the hindrances to a continual flow of the Good News, balanced with a repertoire of gospel facilitators. Now, most hindrances to evangelism happen to be good things, things with a biblical basis, and things that used to help confirm the gospel, but now hinder it. We shall call them “tent pegs,” good things driven too deep.

The tent pegs seem to come in three pairs, clergy and chapel, abstraction and academy, performers and platforms. These tent pegs work very well and should not be discarded readily where they help to promote the gospel and lead sinners to repentant faith. However, where driven too deep, these aids to spreading the gospel actually keep it from moving, spreading and finding new homelands. Apparently, in North America and in regions where some North American missions have gone, the tent pegs have been driven too deep.

Driving tent pegs too deep

Tent pegs 1 & 2: the clergy & the chapel. From the earliest days of the Christian movement, elders appointed apostles who, in turn, appointed elders in new churches. Elders and deacons are good for churches, helping them to grow and to reproduce. Elders pastored church members, empowering them to exercise their spiritual gifts and to obey the commandments of Jesus. From the earliest times, churches gathered in homes, market places and schools. Believers often enlarged their rooms to accommodate believers. With time, however, and under pressure from government, churches adopted Roman political offices, idol chapels and Greek oratory as their own, driving these tent pegs too deep.

To this day, where Christian ministry remains tied to chapels, including their cost, upkeep, programs and impersonal seating arrangements, even lively churches eventually stagnate. Where shepherding elders are replaced by paid clergy who grant themselves privileges, including salaries, liturgical authority, and superior social standing, even the best-intentioned eventually stagnate. Some of the authors of this article are or were clergymen. (See Loosening confining tent pegs, below.)

Tent pegs 3 & 4: the abstract and the academy. Some of the authors of this article are or have been themselves instructors in bible schools and seminaries, so they speak not as enemies but as educators. Perhaps the greatest bane of the evangelical movement in the 19th and 20th centuries was its theological controversies, all of which derived, not so much from a misunderstanding of the Bibles as from abstract theology. Where we taught our outlines of Latin-based words as authoritative truth, our Aristotelian logic as proof of truth, and our statements of faith as tests of fellowship, we made enemies of our friends, and became divided and conquered.

The very educational institutions that we erected to educate our evangelical clergy, missionaries and evangelical workers, have too often served to weaken their confidence in their own ability to understand their Bible, to alienate them from fellow believers, to replace the Word with abstract theology, to decry obedience as legalism, to doubt the power of God to solve human problems, and to denounce the loving efforts of laymen as substandard dangers to the faith.

Tent pegs 5 & 6: the performer and the platform. Evangelical faith, as commonly perceived in North America, must be proclaimed by skilled performers prancing upon platforms. What is the world's impression of us? Let's be honest about this. Many see us as performers warbling into a shiny microphone, thundering against classes of sinners doomed to hell, or demanding that angels become servile to us! Sophisticated overhead projections, coloured strobe lights, thumping drum beats and blaring loud-speakers! Awed followers applauding their denunciations of liberal politics, cheering to their damning epithets against the sins of perversion, applauding

their stories of unproven miracles, and digging deep into our pockets and purses to pay for their private airplanes and unholy trusts upon the sands of exclusive beaches. (If you don't believe this, just ask them!)

The social response to these changes in the evangelical movement has been to stay away in droves. Some of the performers stand ignored except when lampooned by scoffers. The content of the original apostolic gospel has become the least understood message of the 21st century in North America, drowned out by the blaring antics of self-important gospel performers.

Loosening our tent pegs

Learn the original Good News. Know the First, let us review the original Good News, as Jesus and his apostles taught it, preached it, recited it, sang it and wrote into the Holy Scriptures we call the New Testament. Amazingly few evangelicals can tell you more than one or two points of the gospel. Instead of the gospel, evangelicals were taught by their clergy and in their academies that the gospel is a set up abstract ideas, philosophical notions, or ideas hard to express. The Good News was originally a story, the true history about Jesus.

Telling this story brings men and women, boys and girls, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, animists and atheists to faith and eternal life. Abstract theologies, clerical privileges and platform antics cannot do so. Take these texts as examples of the original gospel:

Luke 24.44-49; Acts 2.22-40; Acts 3.13-26; Acts 5.29-32; Acts 10.34-48; Acts 13.23-41; Acts 17:1-4; Acts 17.22-31; and 1 Corinthians 15:1-8.

Your assignment is to summarize these accounts into a story that you can tell to others through whatever media they prefer.

Do not expect all clergy to teach the gospel, for some will only tell you how they do their liturgy. Do not leave it to theologians to explain the gospel, for they will mostly elaborate their abstract theory of the atonement; and do not expect to hear the gospel from performers who mostly want to draw attention to themselves.

Empower believers to tell the Good News. Learn together to tell the story about Jesus. Then practice singing it, acting it out, painting it or recording it. Use methods that new believers can imitate and equipment that they have available, so that they can spread the Gospel in a popular movement. Find or draw pictures that illustrate the story. Test the pictures to be sure that local folk understand the pictures, and change the pictures if you must. Plan with them where they will go and with whom they will share the story. Practice with them how to invite others to repent of their old ways and to put their trust in Jesus. Invite them to be baptised and to become a new church, cell or home group. Believers should normally go two-by-two when they share the gospel, as Jesus instructed. They will feel more confident, and while one speaks, the other prays. When they return, listen to their reports, answer their questions, and plan with them the next steps.

Do not leave telling the gospel for others to do, especially do not leave it all to platform performers, clergy in their chapel or theologians in their academy. Those all have their place, but not in bringing your relatives and neighbours to faith in Jesus.

Avoid every obstacle that hinders the Good News flowing to families, friends and society. The gospel story about Jesus remains the most powerful message on earth. It transform character, releases folk from every kind of spiritual, mental, social and chemical bondage, it conquers every wicked spiritual force, it mends hearts, heals relationships, and gives hope in this life and the life to come. No wonder that Satan does all he can to stop the message!

Three of the greatest hindrances to the gospel flowing freely remain (a) confining the message to sermons preached by the clergy, for sinners will not hear them; (b) defining the message with abstract theology that says true things about the cross in terms incomprehensible to ordinary mortals; and (c) refining the message by platform healers and entertainers seeking to promote their own business, reputation and income at your expense.

Resources

P. O'Connor, *Reproducible Pastoral Training*, <www.MissionBooks.com>.

Free CP training software "*Come, Let Us Disciple the Nations*" from <www.Paul-Timothy.net/dn/>.

Free mentoring tools and materials for new leaders from <www.MentorAndMultiply.com>.

Train & Multiply® church planting and pastoral training course from <www.TrainAndMultiply.com>.

Order *Church Multiplication Guide* from a bookshop or at <www.WCLbooks.com>.

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