

The Fundamental Flaw

There is a massive flaw lying at the very heart of Relationship Evangelism. Relationship Evangelism is not unique in this, I hasten to add; nor new. This wrong principle has held sway in the evangelical world for a very long time indeed – but Relationship Evangelism certainly pushes the boundaries further than ever.

What is this flaw? It takes the form of an assumption. I can best explain what I mean by taking us back to the New Testament. After all, Christ gave the early church the great commission: the first believers had to take the gospel into all the world in order to see sinners converted and then built up in the faith (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:47-48; Acts 1:4-8). Not only that. In carrying out Christ's command, the early church found itself surrounded by hostile cultures – Jewish, Roman and Greek. Nevertheless – despite their small beginnings, their personal inadequacy and natural fear, the virulent and prolonged hatred that was vented upon them – the first believers saw conversions, and saw them in massive numbers, at least at the start.¹ They advanced the gospel throughout the world; they 'turned the world upside down' (Acts 17:6).

How did they do it? How did they go about attracting men and women to the church so that they could evangelise them? They didn't! They did not try to warp Christ's command to them to 'Go and tell' into inviting the ungodly to 'Come and see'.² Nor did they adjust the angel's command to the apostles

¹ See Acts chapters 14,17,18,19 and 28, for smaller numbers of converts as time went on.

² Chapter 8 of Evans' book is entitled: 'Reach Out in Mission: "Come and See" creates wins for everyone' (Evans pp141-167,231-232). I admit that Evans' Chapter 10 is entitled: 'Transform a Life: Preparing Everyone for "Go and Tell"' (Evans pp184-210). But by this stage we are deep in a book which sets out a 'deeds ministry' to encourage the 'unchurched' into a long-term relationship with

in gaol: ‘Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life’ (Acts 5:20),³ into: ‘Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people, inviting them to church, telling them of the goodies which have been arranged for their delectation’.

Take the use Christ makes of ‘door’ in this connection. He told the believers – the *ekklēsia* – at Philadelphia that he had set before them ‘an open door, which no one is able to shut’ (Rev. 3:18). I don’t think he meant ‘a way of escape’; rather, he was referring to an open door to himself in prayer, and an open door into the world for evangelism. When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, and had ‘gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles’ (Acts 14:27). Paul could tell the Corinthians: ‘I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries’ (1 Cor. 16:8-9). Again: ‘When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ... a door was opened for me in the Lord’ (2 Cor. 2:12). He wanted the believers at Colosse to join with him in prayer: ‘Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison – that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak’ (Col. 4:3-

‘church’. And although he does speak of talking about Christ (Evans pp190,204,210), Evans is still thinking of getting unbelievers into church attendance (Evans p190); see the cases of Gina and Tony (Evans pp205-206).

³ In light of what is to come, Albert Barnes in his *Commentary* has an interesting comment: ‘In a public and conspicuous place. In this way there would be a most striking exhibition of their boldness; a proof that God had delivered them, and a manifestation of their purpose to obey God rather than man’. John Gill, too, in his *Commentary* comments in a similar vein, including this: ‘All the doctrines of the gospel [must be spoken publicly with courage]; none of them are to be dropped or concealed, but to be spoken out, fully, freely, and faithfully, with all boldness and constancy, though they cannot be comprehended by reason, and are rejected by learned men, and the majority of the people, though charged with novelty and licentiousness, and attended with reproach and persecution’.

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4). This weight of evidence cries out against Relationship Evangelism. In the new system, Christ's door for believers to go into the world has become an entrance gate for the 'unchurched' to be 'churchified'!

Christ's 'come and see' (John 1:39), was not an invitation to attend church; it was an invitation to come to *him* and stay with *him*. 'Come to me', he said (Matt. 11:28; John 7:37). Coming to Christ is saving. No wonder then that the Lord Jesus deplored it when men refused to come to him:

You refuse to come to me that you may have life (John 5:40).

You can hear it in his appeal to the Jews:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say: 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' (Matt. 23:37-39).

Even so, he rested in God's decree: 'All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out' (John 6:37).

There can be no question about it: coming to *Christ*, not coming to *church*, is the gospel call. The Samaritan woman at the well invited her fellow-citizens: 'Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?' And we read that 'they went out of the town and were coming to him' (John 4:29-30). Philip did not take Nathaniel to a meeting, but to Christ (John 1:45-46). And so on.

If it is objected that the invitations were to a house, to a well, and such like, to meet Christ, and that this justifies invitations to come to church (eventually to meet Christ – though, perhaps, this is not spelled out upfront), I respond by saying that this objection confuses the incidentals of the narratives (when Jesus was physically present) with the spiritual equivalents today. Coming to Christ today has no physical connotation whatsoever. Coming to meetings, coming to events, coming to church... is not the same as

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coming to Christ. The two should never be confused. Christendom does that. Believers should not be playing Christendom's game!

So, with respect to evangelism,⁴ what methods did the first believers employ? What ministries did they set up? And how did they evaluate them? Which experts, advisers, consultants or researchers did they call on?

This is important. Evans – as is evident throughout his book – is a great advocate of calling on experts from the world to advise the church on methods and best practice in evangelism.

So, I ask again, what advice did the first believers take from the world's experts? They didn't! In fact, they ruled it out. They regarded the world's thinking as futile! Yes, futile! So whyever would they consult futile thinkers when trying to carry out the Lord's commission? Consider this: 'So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts' (Eph. 4:17). By the way, the futility of pagan thinking is not to be confined to their philosophy leading to sexual immorality and perversion; it governs their approach to all things. And while I would not push 3 John 7 – 'It was for the sake of the Name that they [the brothers, believers] went out, receiving no help from the pagans' – to say that we should never make use of advice from outside Scripture, I really do think that John's words put a stop to letting worldly-wise consultants tell us how to evangelise – and evangelise after allowing Christendom to fix the agenda for the church. The New Testament, not pagan experts, must address that for us!

What a contrast with Evans! He is, as I say, one who calls on experts from the world to advise the church as to methods and best practice in evangelism. Indeed, on his scheme, it is

⁴ See Appendix 1 for more on this word.

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not a case of letting pagans tell churches how to run things; the churches invite them in!

Has Evans forgotten that Scripture gives us a stern warning against believers going to the world for aid? Let us not bandy words: taking advice from the world, seeking advice from the world, *is* getting the world's aid. As for the scriptural warning I spoke of, we know that Israel in the age of the old covenant anticipated the errors that believers would make in the days of the new covenant (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:1-11). Well, Israel certainly did it in this matter of consulting the world, relying on the world's help; in Israel's case, it was to Egypt that they looked. Rabshakeh, the Assyrian, was right to taunt Hezekiah:

Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: 'On what do you rest this trust of yours? Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? In whom do you now trust, that you have rebelled against me? Behold, you are trusting now in Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it. Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who trust in him' (2 Kings 18:19-21; see also Isa. 36:6).

The prophet, speaking in the name of God to his people, could not have spelled it out more clearly:

'Ah, stubborn children', declares the LORD, 'who carry out a plan, but not mine, and who make an alliance, but not of my Spirit, that they may add sin to sin; who set out to go down to Egypt, without asking for my direction, to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt! Therefore shall the protection of Pharaoh turn to your shame, and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your humiliation. For though his officials are at Zoan and his envoys reach Hanes, everyone comes to shame through a people that cannot profit them, that brings neither help nor profit, but shame and disgrace'... Egypt's help is worthless and empty; therefore I have called her 'Rahab who sits still' (Isa. 30:1-7).

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the LORD!... The Egyptians

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are man, and not God, and their horses are flesh, and not spirit (Isa. 31:1,3).

Egypt would pay the price! Yes, Egypt would indeed pay the price: ‘Because you have been a staff of reed to the house of Israel, when they grasped you with the hand, you broke and tore all their shoulders; and when they leaned on you, you broke and made all their loins to shake’, God would judge them (Ezek. 29:6-12). But do not miss the thrust of all this! Israel would also pay the price for going to Egypt. This is the material point.

Let us never forget the apostolic principle:

These things happened to them [that is, to Israel] as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come (1 Cor. 10:11).

Does Evans forget or ignore this? He certainly flies in the face of the lessons from Israel’s history in their going to Egypt. As a consequence, he is prepared to advise the churches to repeat Israel’s mistake.

Moreover, his system runs counter to apostolic teaching and practice. Certainly, the apostles never once worried themselves over, advocated or propounded the principles of Relationship Evangelism. Indeed, the apostles never once worried themselves over any method for reaching the lost. The first believers never gave it a thought. They had no theory of evangelism. The question: ‘How to reach the lost?’ never entered their minds. They made no attempt to work out any scheme to do it.

And herein lies the fundamental mistake in the innovation under discussion. Leave aside the utterly unthinkable suggestion that men such as Paul, Peter and John would ever think of consulting Jewish, Roman or Greek experts in the equivalents of salesmanship, business studies, management techniques, public relations, and such like, the early believers never even thought of attracting unbelievers to the *ekklēsia*, enticing them with cleverly-packaged wares selected to tickle their palate. The notion of getting unbelievers ‘to come to church’ never entered their heads; it never once crossed their

minds; it never got to first base. Indeed, the very word chosen to describe them and their gatherings – *ekklēsia*, ‘the called-out ones’ – precluded any such thought. The saints in those days no more thought of attracting unbelievers – the ‘unchurched’ – to their assemblies than flying to the moon! ‘Attract unbelievers to our assembly?’, they would have rasped: ‘Impossible!’ ‘Make *ekklēsia* life and the gospel attractive to the unregenerate?’ ‘Unthinkable!’ ‘Form lasting relationships with unbelievers through deeds ministries so as to prepare the way for those unbelievers to come to church to listen to our message?’ ‘Perish the thought!’ ‘Make the *ekklēsia* appealing to the children of darkness?’ ‘Has not Christ told us in the bluntest of terms that just as the world had hated him and his words, they will hate us and our words (John 15:18-27; 16:2-4,33; 17:14-18)?⁵ How can we even think of attracting them? What would be the point? They wouldn’t want to come, in any case. The atmosphere would be alien to them. They would be like fish out of water’. ‘Come and see?’ Come and see what? What could the *ekklēsia* offer that would interest the ungodly?

Those believers knew that the world had hated the prophets for centuries past, and killed them (Matt. 23:31,34,37; Luke 11:47; 13:54; Rom. 11:3; 1 Thess. 2:15). They did not forget that the world (to put it mildly) had not welcomed Christ (John 1:11), but had hated him and wanted to kill him, even from birth (Matt. 2:1-20; Rev. 12:1-6), let alone when he began his ministry (Luke 4:28-29; John 5:18; 7:1,19; 8:37,40; 11:47-53,57), eventually getting their way. And now it would hate them. They expected it. Christ could not have made the position clearer:

⁵ I do not see why the world would hate and want to persecute believers who, while avoiding the confrontational aspect of the gospel, are offering them so many social benefits free of charge. Evans: ‘An MP once remarked to me that he’d love to see churches... grow to 1000 strong, for, he said, they do so much for the community. But he pleaded for us not to start ten churches of 100. He had worked out the economies of scale’ (Evans p180). This extract says so much, I will use it again.

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Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles... Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake (Matt. 10:16-22).

They will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake (Matt. 24:9).

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master'. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours (John 15:18-20).

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. 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 (John 17:14-18).

Oh yes, the early believers knew that what they were as believers, what they did as believers, what they stood for as believers, what they wanted by their preaching, and how they preached, was going to be anathema to the world. And they knew it was inevitable. They had no illusions about it. They knew that the world's hatred was an integral part of their stance for Christ; it 'went with the territory'. This hatred was not 'a difficulty' which took them by surprise; they had been forewarned and, as expected, they experienced it. They did not

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go out of the way to court or provoke it,⁶ but they knew it was the way God was going to advance the cause of Christ as they took the gospel to sinners. ‘All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted’ (2 Tim. 3:12).

It is only as sinners are regenerated, converted, given a new heart by the Spirit in the new covenant, and so given a spiritual appetite and love for Christ and his truth, that they will become interested in, let alone want, ‘church’. The early believers took this as self-evident, a given: had they, themselves, not been in exactly the same boat before their conversion? Saul of Tarsus was unique in many senses, but not in this: he approved of death for believers, ravaged the church – dragging men and women to prison, breathing out threats and murder against believers, showing his evil heart towards them by his actions, causing havoc in the churches, persecuting Christ in them (Acts 8:1,3; 9:13-14,21; 22:4-5; 26:9-11,14; Gal. 1:13). Yes, as in all things, Paul ‘excelled’ in this, but it shows what was – and is – in the natural heart.

What is (note, not ‘was’) the cause of the world’s hatred? It’s simple! Do not miss the present tense: it *is* simple. We are not talking merely about the early days of the gospel; this is a permanent fact of life in this entire gospel age. In this sense, ‘nothing changes here’. What the believers met 2000 years ago, we, in essence, meet today because what they met is what Christ himself met! So why does the world hate believers, hate the *ekklēsia*? Because it hates the triune God and all he stands for:

The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the flesh cannot please God (Rom. 8:7-8).

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him,

⁶ Compare Jehovah’s Witnesses. They used to provoke opposition knowing that martyrdom attracts. I cannot see the advocates of Relationship Evangelism adopting this way of arousing sympathy among pagans. But if ‘success’ is the yardstick, I fail to see why.

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and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14).

That's the root of it.⁷

Specifically, the world – the natural man – hates God, hates his people, because God has separated his people from the world, marking them out as different. Believers are positionally sanctified – separated to God, distinct from the world (1 Cor. 2:2; 2 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 10:10,14; 1 Pet. 1:2, for instance).⁸ Believers are saints, and the world hates them and their holiness! The world's hatred is its reaction to the separateness of the church – the fact that God has made the church separate from, distinct from, different to, the world. In the days of the old covenant, Israel certainly met the world's hatred: 'Has not my inheritance become to me like a speckled bird of prey that other birds of prey surround and attack?' (Jer. 12:9). The Israel of God in the new covenant meets the same. Let your budgie out and the sparrows will love it! Really? They will fear it, hate it, and peck it to death! Oh yes, the church is separate (or should be), and the world does not like it. Not one bit!

Church – *ekklesia* – is a fearful place for unbelievers – its discipline, as its doctrine, is too much for them. The only way church can be made acceptable is to break down biblical church life:

Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events... All the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number (Acts 5:11-14).

⁷ When Christ confronted Saul on the way to Damascus, he told him bluntly that he knew that Saul was not merely persecuting believers; he was persecuting *Christ himself*. It was *Christ in his people* that Saul hated (Acts 9:4-5).

⁸ They are also being progressively sanctified. See my *Fivefold*.

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You see, it could not be clearer. The believers met: nobody else. It was only as sinners were converted that ‘church’ came into the picture; the church and the world did not mix.

So what are we to make of this from Evans? He says:

The Master wants us mixed in and making a difference. ‘My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one’ (John 17:15). Paul tells Christians in Corinth: ‘I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – *not at all meaning the people of this world* who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but who is sexually immoral’ (1 Cor. 5:9-11).⁹

Yes, of course, believers are in the world and must witness to unbelievers in the world.¹⁰ And of course, churches have to discipline members who sin. But this does not mean that we have get unbelievers to attend church. Associating with unbelievers in the world and witnessing to them is one thing; designing church activity as a mixed believer/unbeliever affair is quite another. The church in the world is not all the same as the world in the church. The church and the world are chalk and cheese.

That’s not all. The church is to be vocal about its distinctiveness: it dare not hide its light under any convenient bushel (Matt. 5:15). This is what the world cannot stomach. It

⁹ Evans pp190-191, emphasis his. There is more to be said. In the chapter ‘Community’ I will return to the Corinthian passage and – which Evans did not do – complete the quote from Paul.

¹⁰ I agree with Evans’ searching words – indeed, I feel their just rebuke – when he declares: ‘We settle for an attitude that says: “They realise I am a Christian, and if they want to know more, they know where to ask”. We may hide behind 1 Peter 3:15, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have”. We think: “Well I would answer, *but no one asks*”, and so we may go many years without talking of Christ to other people’ (Evans p190, emphasis his). Evans is right to reprove this attitude.

cannot abide a separate community in its midst, especially one which is vocal about its separateness, and emphasises – harps on about – its distinctives.¹¹ Above all, the world cannot stand a self-opinionated community which bluntly tells all the rest that they are wrong, and that it – and it alone – has the truth. Such is the church, the *ekklēsia*, and as such, it will not be ignored by the world. ‘Offence’ and ‘offensive’ don’t come anywhere near it! Worst of all in the eyes of the world, of course, is Christ’s own claim that he is ‘the way and the truth and the life’, and that there is no access to God ‘except through [him]’ (John 14:6). The apostles did not play down Christ’s assertion. Far from it! They were uncompromising in their insistence that Christ alone can save (Acts 4:12). Preach *that* and it won’t only be Muslims who show their hatred! Especially if and when they get to know about the marching orders believers are under:

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said: ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty’ (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

Publicly and statedly confining unbelievers to the lawless, to darkness, to followers of Belial, to worshippers of idols? The world won’t like that sort of talk! Hatred of believers because of hatred to Christ is inevitable – and the world will not be backward¹² in coming forward, and in showing it. This is precisely what happened to the first believers: it did not take

¹¹ See William Horsburgh: ‘Coping with Hatred’. See also Spurgeon sermon 1491.

¹² That is, slow.

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long for the religious and political powers' hatred to show itself (Acts 3 – 5). Nevertheless, the believers did not cower – rather, they audaciously asserted the uniqueness of Christ, consigning all other religions and systems to the dustbin (that is, trash or garbage can). They started with Judaism:

Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead... is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone'. Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:10-12).

'Salvation – you are sinners – salvation from nowhere and no-one else. Religion? Your religion? All religions? Useless lumber! Trash! Garbage! And worse – religion is one of the greatest hindrances to sinners coming to Christ the only Redeemer'. That was their message, even as they were on trial. Compare Paul before Agrippa (Acts 26). And Peter made his uncompromising declaration (in Acts 4), not from behind a pulpit barricade among fellow-believers, six feet above and fifty feet beyond contradiction, but on trial, standing in the court before powerful Jews; namely, 'the rulers, elders and teachers of the law... Annas the high priest... Caiaphas, John, Alexander and the other men of the high priest's family' (Acts 4:5-6).

And that did not signal the end of it: having been forbidden to preach, warned and threatened, Peter and John gave the rulers a very short and sharp reply – 'We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard' (Acts 4:20) – and returned to their fellow believers. They, hearing of the threats, prayed – not for release from trial and suffering – but for power to declare the gospel with all boldness in the midst of suffering. God granted them his Spirit, and thus the early church continued to preach Christ and his gospel boldly (Acts 4:23-31); and so it went on (see Acts 5).

Jumping ahead for a moment, in short compass Paul twice urged the Ephesian believers to pray for him that he might not fail – or funk it – by pulling his punches when it came to preaching (Eph. 6:19-20). See also Acts 9:27,29; 13:46; 14:3; 18:26; 19:8; Philippians 1:14,20; 1 Thessalonians 2:2. Why all

this emphasis on boldness and the need for courage? In Relationship Evangelism, boldness and courage don't come into it; there's no need for such courage; rather, it seems, cleverness, slickness, efficiency, proper evaluation, advertising, oiling the wheels... these are the order of the day. 'Brethren, pray that we will be more skilful at managing the system!'

No wonder, then, that the believers would welcome outsiders (note the term) if they could see clear signs that those outsiders – Jews and pagans – had repented of their sin, given up their Judaism or their paganism, and had turned from the world to Christ (Acts 19:17-20; 1 Thess. 1:4-10). *Only then would they welcome them.* After all, they might be spies, plants, moles. This is no alarmist talk! Compare 2 Corinthians 11:13,26; Galatians 2:4; 2 Timothy 3:6; Jude 4. The first believers saw 'church' as no place for unbelievers; indeed, in those days the unbelievers would have reciprocated the sentiment. Read through Acts and see how unbelievers almost invariably showed their hostility to believers, not their benign acquiescence in, and genteel curiosity about, the ways and teachings of these somewhat odd but 'very nice', respectable people. There was no 'live and let live' about it. Believers certainly would never have thought of actively encouraging unbelievers to come among them, let alone making that the virtual be-all and end-all of church life, their 'mission'.¹³

Let us be clear about it. Even in the pages of the New Testament, martyrdom is not unknown. Right from the earliest days, violent death was on the agenda for believers. We have Stephen (Acts 7 and 8). Then we have Paul (Acts 13 and on). He needed Christ's encouragement: 'The Lord said to Paul one night in a vision: "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people"' (Acts 18: 9-10). Then we have Revelation 2 and 3 – plenty of suffering, even martyrdom there! And in the following centuries, the appalling suffering of the saints is

¹³ Read on for the relevance of 'mission'.

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legendary. Roman amphitheatres may be a pleasant afternoon's diversion or sight-seeing expedition on a package tour these days – a photo opportunity – but try to put yourself in the boots of the believers herded into the cages down below. Listen to the throaty roars of the champing lions close by, and the baying of the waiting crowd in the sun above, who, munching their equivalent of packets of popcorn as they scan the programme, eagerly anticipate the gory spectacle which is about to begin.

What Paul said of the apostles was, in principle, no doubt true of the saints in general:

I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labour, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things (1 Cor. 4:9-13).

In light of that, unbelievers would never have considered believers as 'nice' people to associate with.

We know, for instance, how difficult it was for the converted Saul to get among the saints in Jerusalem: 'When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple'. It was only when Barnabas stepped in and reassured the believers, that they allowed the new convert in: 'But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus' (Acts 9:26-27). Allowing for all the extraordinary circumstances of Paul's case, the point is clear enough: the early church and the world

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did not mix, least of all ‘in church’. As I said, who knows but that the newcomer might not be a mark for the authorities?¹⁴

Oh! Things had started pleasantly enough:

[The believers] devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.¹⁵ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47).

So much for the very early days. But those halcyon days were short lived. Even in those heady days, as for the saints ‘enjoying the favour of all the people’, this, of course, did not extend to believers encouraging unbelievers to attend their meetings. There is no suggestion (in Scripture) that the first believers thought of establishing ministries and putting on events designed to attract the unconverted. In any case, as I have just noted, it was not long before things changed. The first outbreak of persecution was not long in coming. Within a few days, the church found itself in the maelstrom of Acts 3 and 4, with Peter and John hailed into court and then thrown into prison. And this rapidly led to Acts 5: ‘All the believers used to meet together in Solomon’s Colonnade. No one else dared join them,¹⁶ even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women

¹⁴ Compare the Baptists in the time of Charles II (see my *Battle*).

¹⁵ Anyone among their number, that is. See the chapter ‘Community’.

¹⁶ Incredibly, some (Matthew Henry and John Gill among them) think this means that the ‘ordinary’ believers would not make themselves equal to the apostles as ministers! It just shows how ministerial (Christendom) presuppositions can blind the best of commentators. The text means that unbelievers did not dare join the believers.

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believed in the Lord and were added to their number' (Acts 5:12-14).

And in that last sentence, we have the hallmark of the early church. The only way unbelievers could be added to the church was by conversion which was accompanied by baptism, immersion, dipping into water. And we must not restrict this being 'added to the church' to 'becoming members'. The concept of 'church membership' as we know it today (at least in Separatist churches – State and Presbyterian churches are even further removed from the New Testament) is yet another hangover from Christendom. 'Added to the church' speaks of a man or woman spiritually belonging to the saints, associating with them, united to fellow-believers in covenant (that is, in a mutual agreement), being recognised by them as truly regenerate, one willing to be devoted to the life of the *ekklēsia* (Acts 1:14; 2:41-42).

And so the suffering went on, unremittingly right through the rest of Acts and beyond. Indeed, things got worse as Revelation 2 – 3 shows – to say nothing of the rest of that book! Whatever else that book speaks of, it certainly shows the hostility of the world to Christ, his gospel and his people. Even so, Christ will triumph – but only by means of his people passing through fire and blood! Clear it is that in those early days the church and the world did not mix. Neither party would have dreamed of mutual society in the assemblies of the saints. If they did, they were sure to meet with Christ's rebuke, with its warning of the removal of the candlestick.

The truth is, there is no text, let alone passage, to which the Relationship-Evangelism teachers can turn to show us the apostles and the early believers bothering their heads about attracting the 'unchurched'. Where, in Scripture, do we come across believers debating this question? Oh, we know that unbelievers would, from time to time, come into church services – stray in, wander in, I might say – but all the evidence is that their presence was unusual and unsought, and when it did occur, it was merely occasional:

If the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in [languages], *and some who do not understand or some*

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unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But *if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in* while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming: 'God is really among you!' (1 Cor. 14:23-25).

'If an unbeliever... comes in'. Or, as James puts it: 'Suppose a man [an unbelieving man, that is] comes into your meeting' (Jas. 2:2). Do not miss the 'suppose'. I admit that James did not literally use the word, but that is what he meant: 'For if any have come into...'. Again, I know he talked of 'synagogue', but he was, in truth, speaking of the believers' 'meeting' or 'assembly'.¹⁷ 'Suppose an unbeliever comes into one of your meetings, attends one of your assemblies...'.

The notion that the early church was actively encouraging unbelievers to attend their meetings, that it was devising and putting on events and activities designed to attract as many unbelievers as possible, and planning larger buildings to cater for the swelling numbers, is simply fantastical. Cloud-cuckoo land!

Here we reach the crux. Here we meet the flaw. *The mistake is to think in terms of attracting unbelievers to church in order to evangelise them.* This has become the over-arching theme. The fundamental error in Relationship Evangelism is to look upon the church as a kind of friendship-pool in which we can gather unbelievers in order to fish for converts. Christendom has been at it for 1800 years or more. Relationship Evangelism is just the latest (so far) and most polished way of carrying on the business (and I use the word advisedly). But Christ did not establish the church as a fishing-pool. Christ did not establish the church for the unconverted, not even for their attendance so that it might lead to their conversion. The church exists for believers, and

¹⁷ See Thayer. 'This is the only place in the New Testament where the Jewish word is used for a Christian congregation' (Charles John Ellicott; see also Jamieson-Fausset-Brown; Matthew Poole; M.R.Vincent).

ultimately for the glory of God, not to put on events for the delectation of the unregenerate, however laudable the motive. The idea that the church has to be unbeliever-friendly is quite foreign to Scripture.¹⁸ The church is not a stall in a mall, set up in order to sell Christ to pagans, or trade in spirituality.

The truth is, Christendom's practice of institutional churches assembling in sacred buildings or specially designated meeting houses leads directly to the notion of 'going to church', which leads to the attendance of unbelievers 'at church'; indeed, it promotes the notion. We must not forget that the first churches (especially after the scattering from Jerusalem) met in private houses,¹⁹ often very small houses at that, judging from the evidence we have. In such secluded, intimate gatherings, it is therefore unlikely that unbelievers would wander in uninvited.

In saying this, of course, I am not for a moment suggesting that we should invest in some kind of airport security device, by means of which we can subject all who enter our meetings to some kind of spiritual X-ray bombardment, in order to zap all who are not in Christ. Frizzling the unconverted if they stray into one of our meetings would seem a very odd way of converting them! It would remind me of the way the opponents of the Anabaptists wanted to resist the Turks (who reached the gates of Vienna) with the sword.

But I am saying that an unconverted person attending as a visitor on an occasional basis is altogether different to the church encouraging permanent, long-term, contented attendance by the unregenerate. Above all, the notion that we should positively encourage such attendance, devising schemes to bring it about, and setting in motion a calibrated process²⁰ to nurture it unto maturity, is something utterly foreign to the New Testament.

¹⁸ I will return to this. See my *Gadfly* pp23-37.

¹⁹ See below.

²⁰ Process – see, for instance, my *Hinge; Conversion*. I remind you of an earlier note. Evans: 'We [at Kempston] began to organise deeds of kindness and ministries of mercy in a more deliberate way... People started to come. They spread the word about the benefits...

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Yet this unbiblical principle – that our task is to devise methods to get people to attend church in order to see them converted – is now ingrained in us all. It stems, without question, from Christendom! Alas, I have to confess that for decades, right from my conversion, I thought in terms of evangelising sinners by gathering them with the saints in open, public worship.²¹ I now see that I was mistaken. Having said that, in churches where I preach, I do so in such a way that any sinner who happens to be present might be converted; indeed, I aim for it. I would have to answer to God if I did not. I go further. I am only too conscious of the presence of Christendom Christians – those who mistake Churchianity or even decency for conversion to Christ. Although it is an uphill struggle, I do all I can to awaken them from their stupor. I have to confess, however, that I find this a most trying experience; I feel I am rolling a massive stone up a very steep incline. The baggage, past, present and future, I have to overcome – in the almost vain effort – is most dispiriting.

I have been blessed by reading Evans' book, in that my thinking in this whole area has clarified, sharpened. I now see that actively welcoming the unconverted to church, especially the idea of forming long-term relationships with them to get them to church, in order to evangelise them, is wrong; not merely misguided, I stress, but wrong. This does not, however, turn me into a hyper-Calvinist! But it does mean that I can no longer countenance the prostitution of the church, and her message, to enable her to do a job for which she has no scriptural mandate. Hence my book.

The whole sorry – not to say sordid – business started, 1800 years ago, with the invention of Christendom; as a direct

After *a couple of years*, the workers were a bit worried that the church leadership would be asking: "Where are the gospel results?" But leaders *have to give this time* and not be driven by a quick return. As relationships were cemented, questions and opportunities arose which led to a few people initially, and then many, *beginning the journey to faith*' (Evans pp172-174, emphasis mine).

²¹ 'Public worship' is Christendom speak.

consequence of which, it wasn't long before the 'civilised' (Western) world was locked in the tyrannical reign of the religious/political power of the Church of Rome.²² To survive and advance, Rome has always adapted to, assimilated and absorbed the cultures it has met down the centuries. It still does.²³ Christendom, in general, does.

All this has manifested itself in various ways and at times without number. The magisterial Reformers²⁴ showed their love of Christendom. Although they threw off the Papacy, they held on to many of the principles of the Medieval Church; they openly advocated mixed churches by means of the practice of infant baptism and the misinterpretation of the parable of the tares (Matt. 13:24-30), saying that the field is the church, when it is nothing of the sort – the field is *the world*. In the world, the church – true believers – are the wheat; the rest are ungodly – the tares.²⁵ The Anabaptists refuted the Reformed system, and distanced themselves from it; but, alas, Christendom in the Reformed Churches ploughed on undeterred, wreaking havoc on the separated body among them.²⁶ And so, with very few exceptions, the evangelical and Reformed world has been plagued with Christendom's legacy ever since.

Coming back, then, to our own day: Relationship Evangelism, has (to a certain extent) dispensed with one of the curses of Christendom – national Church/State corruption, enforced by the magistrate (that is, government edict, the law, enforced by the police) – only to replace it with another. It has devised an evangelical-and-evangelistic Church/Community system: Church/Social instead of Church/State. Moreover, we

²² The Eastern world was dominated by Byzantium *cum* Constantinople *cum* Istanbul.

²³ Whatever pagan rites it meets – tribalism, fetishes, voodoo, and the like – Rome simply 'Christianises' or 'Romanises' and swallows both it and the people wholesale.

²⁴ So called because they, like Rome, thought the magistrate should enforce religion.

²⁵ See my *Infant*.

²⁶ See my *Battle*.

now find ourselves being advised – urged – to adopt this latest development of Christendom thinking. Thus we daily live to prove the depressing – but realistic – words of the sacred preacher: ‘What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again, there is nothing new under the sun’ (Eccles. 1:9). Consequently, we find ourselves at the opening of a new chapter in the dismal history of Christendom, with Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, Timothy Keller²⁷ and Ray Evans (*et al*) in the van of this latest extension of Constantinian practice.²⁸

But accommodation of the church to and with the world always leads to the world’s assimilation of the church. Let me repeat that by re-stating it. The church might like to think it can cherry-pick from the world, but the world is all the while swallowing the church.

As an illustration,²⁹ take T.E.Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia, no less. His understanding, assimilation and

²⁷ The first reference in Evans’ book is to one of Keller’s books: ‘A brilliant insight into the issues shaping church life and growth. It is a must-read’. That was not the last of it by a long chalk: see the end notes (Evans pp9,220-235).

²⁸ The subtitle of Evans’ book is: *Equipping Today’s Gospel Churches*. Allowing the use of the adjective ‘gospel’ in this connection (but I strongly object to it since it is a hangover of Reformed covenant-theology, and ‘gospel church’ should not figure in a believer’s phrase-book – see my *Infant* and my *Christ Is All*), Evans’ book would be more accurately described as *Equipping Today’s Christendom Churches*. And equipping them to adopt and exploit the culture of the age.

²⁹ Since I speak strongly against Evans going to the world for his practice, but I am prepared to use the world to illustrate my work, am I not shooting myself in the foot? Far from it. There is all the difference in the world between being prepared to go outside Scripture to find illustrations for a practice already established from Scripture, and using Scripture to support a practice established from the world. For the former, we have biblical support and precedence. Christ used illustrations from sewing, fishing, farming, even house-breaking. Paul quoted Greek and Cretan poets, and referred to thieves and the military to drive home his point. But neither Christ

exploitation of Arabic culture(s) enabled him to mobilise the Bedouins into a powerful military force which played a vital role for the Allies in the First World War. He produced a manual on ‘how to do it’. So important is this manual that a century later it continues to play a vital role in current UK and US military and SAS thinking, and is a compulsory study in preparing their personnel to work in the region. So far, so successful and so good? The trouble is the long-term legacy. The present ‘troubles’ in the Middle East are, in part, a consequence of T.E.Lawrence.³⁰

We can delve further back in time. Robert Cecil might congratulate himself that he saved his skin by engineering the succession of James VI at the death of Elizabeth I, but he did so only at a price which others would have to pay: it was thousands of believers – indeed, the nation – under the Stuarts who had to meet the cost! And what a reckoning it was: Charles I, Laud, Strafford, three Civil Wars, the beheading of a king, the reign of Charles II, the loss of so many godly to emigration, untold suffering and indescribable misery, and so on!

So, I repeat, whenever the church thinks it is exploiting the world, the boot is on the other foot! The church’s attempted exploitation of the world does not mean the world will become Christian; rather, the church will become carnal.

I agree with Iain H.Murray:

The devil’s constant strategy is to seek to merge the church and the world so that the people of God lose their distinctiveness and be no longer as a ‘city set upon a hill’.³¹

And I am convinced Relationship Evangelism is but the latest ploy in this regard that Satan has brought out of his locker.

nor Paul allowed, let alone called on, the world to fix their principles for them.

³⁰ See Rory Stewart: ‘The Legacy of Lawrence of Arabia’.

³¹ Iain H.Murray: ‘The Benefits and Dangers of Controversy’, in *Evangelical Holiness and other addresses*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 2013, p114.

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The fundamental mistake having been made – the church being given a new, unscriptural purpose and function – new methods have to be dreamed up to enable the church to fulfil its Christendom-defined role in the world. And where do the advocates of this new system go for their material from which to forge and support their newfangled scheme? They cannot go to Scripture since Scripture does not warrant their intended aim. Oh, they use Scripture – alas, they wrest it, prostitute it and selectively apply certain principles by which they think they justify their practices.³² Moreover, Scripture will not bear the weight they place upon it. No! Their main source must be the world itself. And so it is! As we go on, I will explore this.

But let me now conclude this chapter by linking it, yet again, to what I have said about Christendom. After all, that monstrosity, with its principles, is never far beneath the surface. As we read of *ekklēsia* life in the Scriptures, we cannot but be struck by the lack of emphasis on the visible, with the corresponding heavy emphasis on hearing the word and participating in its practice. Christ left two ordinances – visible signs – baptism and the Lord’s supper. But both of these, Scripture stresses, are symbolic and convey no grace. Indeed, I would argue that neither is to be observed without the preaching of the word. Certainly there is no example in Scripture of baptism without the word. And Christ instituted the supper during his extended discourse to his disciples just before he was crucified. In any case, on no reading of the New Testament can anybody think that the visible trumps the spoken word in the days of the new covenant. This, of course, is in distinct contrast to the old covenant, when the visible was all-powerful. Judaism was very much a sacerdotal religion, the mass of the people being observers of the ritual. Not so in the new covenant, in the *ekklēsia*. Quite the opposite.

All this was changed however with the Fathers and their return to the old covenant. As I have explained, with the Fathers Christendom came in with a vengeance. The visible caught up with the preached word, and then overtook it,

³² See the chapter ‘What of Scripture?’.

swamped it, and virtually destroyed it. The priesthood of all believers was replaced by sacerdotalism, clericalism. Hence the Dark Ages. The Reformers, however, recovered the preached word,³³ and with the passage of time, the visible dwindled. Compare – contrast – the buildings produced by Rome and by the Reformation. Instead of performance (under Rome) watched by the masses, believers were invited to participate under the preached word. Preaching was all-dominant.

Why do I say all this? Because Relationship Evangelism will take us back towards the visible, calling on people to attend church to watch a performance, to participate, not in the preached word, but in carnal activity ‘seasoned’ by ‘preaching’ some sort of ‘gospel’. ‘Go and tell’ really has become ‘Come and see’. Precisely. Come and see a performance. See what we do. Hear our music. See what we have to offer. Drink our coffee, get the taste. Munch the popcorn. Enjoy yourself. Oh, by the way, perhaps you might come to like us, and what we offer, so much that you might join us. We really hope so! Nothing would please us more!

Such, then, is the fundamental flaw with Relationship Evangelism. Voltaire’s satirical dictum applies: ‘The art of medicine is to amuse the patient while nature effects the cure’. Christendom has turned the church into a place to attract unbelievers, to hold – and, yes, to entertain – them, while those who advocate the system gradually evangelise them, hoping that the Spirit will work in them while they keep them occupied, diverted. Relationship Evangelism has taken this wrong-headed principle to new heights. Accordingly, once we have gathered unbelievers by the various ministries and events designed for that purpose, we then can set about the process of evangelising them. In other words, ‘out-reach’ has become ‘in-reach’, after the bribes have worked, and the fish have begun to follow the lure. And I say it is all without the slightest scriptural warrant. It is wrong.

³³ Alas, they failed to grasp the *full* significance of the priesthood of all believers. See my *Pastor; The Priesthood*.

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Relationship Evangelism and *ekklēsia* life are chalk and cheese.³⁴

In a sense, this could signal the end of my book. Whatever good advice there might be in Evans' book, the fundamental mistake having been made, nothing more need be said. Even so, there are further points that need to be made, points that must be made, further points which will strengthen my thesis. I start with Evans' use (and misuse) of Scripture.

³⁴ See Appendix 5 where I face an objection, one which I can easily imagine being made: 'But if this is true, then we shall never preach the gospel in any church service. After all, in your system only believers will be present!' Not so! And for eight reasons.