

Lutheran Mission Matters



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Is Online Ministry the ‘Gospel Blimp’ of Today’s Church?

Vernon E. Wendt Jr.

Telling the Good News in These End Times

After showing His glorified body to others forty days after His resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Heavenly Father. We can imagine what was going through the minds of the apostles when Jesus ascended to heaven before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight.

We infer from Acts 1:10 that they were so in awe of Jesus’ ascension into the clouds, that for a while at least, they simply stared up into the sky, wondering if their eyes were playing tricks on them. And where did Jesus go? But, then suddenly two angels appeared to them, saying, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

And I wonder if the angels are asking a similar question of us today as they asked the apostles at our Lord’s ascension. Why are we spending so much time on trivial matters, as individuals and as a church, when there are people dying and going to hell all around us every day? The question is especially important when we consider our failure to “Go, while telling the Good News of the Gospel” to others.

We who are living in these End Times have been called to be the body of Christ on this earth in His stead. Likewise, 2 Corinthians 3:2 indicates that we are to be living letters of God’s Word for all to read, showing clearly our love for God and our love for our neighbor. While the Church celebrates the Ascension of our Lord as a sign of God’s ultimate victory over everything evil, the descension of the Holy Spirit impresses on us that the Church will continue to be in our world as an unsettling community until the Lord returns.



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Is the Body of Christ Absent or Present?

But how can we possibly be the body of Christ when we've been told for the past year and more to keep our distance from each other? How do we in this unsettling situation demonstrate the presence of the Lord both inside and outside of the church's walls?

One of the ways is to continue to receive God's means of grace for the forgiveness of our sins by being in regular worship, so that we might be a spigot of God's grace to others and not merely a sponge by keeping the Good News of the Gospel to ourselves. And we seek the Holy Spirit's counsel and direction, showing us how we might communicate the Gospel in meaningful and effective ways to others.

Given the social distancing challenges, however, churches have had to modify their usual ways of administering God's Word and Sacraments. On top of this, we've had to wrestle with keeping the fourth commandment, as well as first and third commandments, while being in a nationwide lockdown, having to observe local restrictions, indoor mask mandates, etc. By far, the most difficult challenge I've faced has been being barred from visiting members in the hospitals and nursing homes when spiritual care is of the essence. However, with the aid of my iPhone, I've been able to make some virtual visits, when barred from being present in the body.

And yet, the efficacy of God's means of grace remains the same, no matter how unique the liturgical adaptations and practices we've had to make in their administration. The barriers created by the coronavirus pandemic have served to heighten the importance of making bridges in order that Jesus might continue to serve us today through His Word and Sacraments.

An analogy has been made between how God used the roads built in ancient Rome to spread the Gospel in the early church, so He would have today's church use the information highway (i.e., the internet) to spread the Gospel today.

No doubt, the internet can be an effective tool for us to use in communicating the Gospel beyond the four walls of a building. And I'm thankful that we can share our Christian faith with others literally around the world and communicate the Good News that Christ died for sinners, like you and me, in this unique way.

But we should also keep in mind that the most effective way to do evangelism is when we are personally involved in people's lives, just as our Savior was when He walked the earth, and not by simply posting a message while hiding behind our cell phones or computer screens.

Is the Internet Today's "Gospel Blimp"?

There's an old movie called *The Gospel Blimp* that came out in 1967 that applies to the "online-connected" churches of today. The movie is based upon a book written

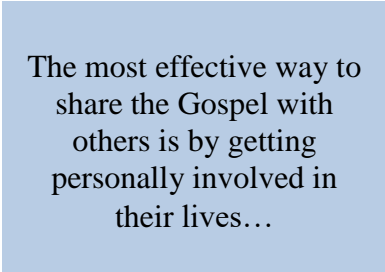
by Joseph Bayly in 1960 entitled, *The Gospel Blimp (and Other Parables)*¹. In the opening scene, a group of Christians are discussing *how* they might share the Gospel with their neighbors. For example, their neighbors next door drink beer and skip church on the weekends (except for Christmas and Easter). That behavior causes the group to reason that they aren't true Christians like they are, even though they hardly even know them.

Suddenly a blimp appears in the sky, and as they look up into the sky, they get what they think is a brilliant idea for sharing the Gospel. They would raise enough funds to purchase a blimp that people could easily see in the sky with a sign trailing behind it that would broadcast a message from the Bible from a loudspeaker. In addition, they would “fire bomb” gospel tracts from the blimp all over the community. No longer would they have to worry about having awkward over-the-fence conversations with neighbors or investing their time and energy in building a relationship with them. The blimp would take care of everything.

Their focus on the Gospel blimp, however, not only has a negative effect on their family life, it ultimately ends up distracting them from personally witnessing to their neighbors, even those next door. Their “brilliant idea” of having a Gospel blimp was not so brilliant after all.

Evangelism Is Personal

The most effective and meaningful way to share the Gospel with others is by getting personally involved in their lives, befriending them, listening to them, praying with them and for them, talking with them, constantly pointing them to Jesus, and inviting them to be a part of a local church, where the means of grace and Christian fellowship can be found.



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Indeed, according to a survey that I recently conducted of ninety-one youth ranging from 12–18 years old, there seems to be a yearning for a more interactive style of worship. The impact of the impersonal nature of the internet, may have led to a preference for face-to-face contact. The implication is that today's youth don't want to merely be on the receiving end of hearing and learning God's Word. They also want to be actively engaging in a community that ponders together the very Lutheran question, “What does this mean?” in application to their lives.

Evangelism is not for the weak. At times it can get messy. Being rejected and misunderstood, having to patiently listen to others' gripes and complaints when you'd rather not, and going out of your way to show compassion upon others can be very

challenging. It reminds us of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) who showed compassion upon the man who fell among robbers, rather than avoiding him in his need like the priest and Levite did. And ultimately, evangelism involves following our Savior's example by fully immersing ourselves into the lives of others.

Application for Today's Church

And so, I ask you, as fellow missionaries of the Gospel:

1. Who is on your prayer list that God the Holy Spirit is prompting you to share the Gospel with today?
2. And how might you personally become incarnational in their lives, as the hands and feet of Jesus to them?

Perhaps you could start by simply making a phone call, where you really mean it when you ask them, "How are you doing?" along with "How can I pray for you?" and then offer a listening ear. Or try writing a personal letter or card, befriending a stranger in your neighborhood as you take a walk or at the local market, as well as getting even closer to those you already do know. As you actively engage with others, the Holy Spirit will open doors for you to share with them the reason for your hope, peace, and joy, in the midst of these chaotic times.

Above all, you can give to others the love of Jesus that you have first received from Him. And the most loving thing we can do for our neighbor is to tell them the Good News of the Gospel that they might have forgiveness and eternal life.

Conclusion

Online ministry is here to stay and today's Church is undergoing a significant change as we seek to successfully merge and keep pace with the information highway in spreading the Gospel. But we should also keep in mind that evangelism does not consist of merely posting a video, writing a blog, and hiding out behind a screen. Instead, it also involves going beyond the screen and into the lives of the people around us, as we personally look for ways and opportunities to share with them the Good News that also today Jesus seeks and receives sinners!

Endnotes

¹ Joseph Bayly, *The Gospel Blimp* (Haverstown, PA: Windward Press, 1960).

Reviews

VIRUS AS A SUMMONS TO FAITH: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss by Walter Brueggemann. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020. 80 pp. Paperback. \$14.00.

Virus as a Summons to Faith is a book written for both scholars and lay Christians asking questions about God, COVID-19, and Christian responsibilities. It was written and published in two weeks. This was in mid-2020, at the time when the world was still trying to figure out the full scale of crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Even though the book is short (80 pages), it is content-rich, and is a book that world Christians need to read and use to encourage each other during these times.

The book mainly explores questions that most people have probably been asking during this difficult time of COVID-19: Is this pandemic a curse from God? How are we to understand our situations through the lens of Scripture? What is God up to in/through such a global crisis? Brueggemann responds to these questions, focusing on how to move forward with greater faith. To help readers connect their faith to these questions, he carefully guides them through stories of pandemic and plague in the Old Testament.

Brueggemann discusses three interpretative options for Christians to use when exploring questions related to the coming of a “plague”: transactional, purposeful enactment, and enacted in freedom. What he refers to as the *transactional* interpretation of events is a *quid pro quo* reaction from God. According to this view, the cause for crisis is forsaking and disobeying God. One example was God’s reaction to the Israelites’ disobedience, as we read in some Old Testament texts such as Deut. 28:20–34. Here the people were punished because they “have forsaken [Him]” (Deut 28:20). It is possible to view the current pandemic as such a response from God.

The second interpretative lens is “YHWH’s purposeful enactment of force in order to implement the specific purpose of YHWH” (5). According to this view, God “mobilize[s] the various elements” in order to execute His purposes for creation (5). Based on the book of Exodus, Brueggemann discusses how God explains the divine purposes portrayed behind such specific actions as the ten plagues that had devastating impact on the land of Egypt. The purpose behind such actions of God was the liberation of the people of Israel and bringing them out of Egypt—for YHWH is the God of Israel.

His third interpretive lens refers to “YHWH’s holiness enacted in freedom” (10). According to this view, the capacity of human beings to comprehend God’s actions is questioned, particularly in relation to God’s sovereignty (Is 55:8). Brueggemann defines some actions of God as arising from “the sheer holiness of God that can enact in utter freedom without reason, explanation, or accountability, seemingly beyond any purpose at all” (10). The story of Job is an example. The reason for Job’s suffering and Job’s questions related to the cause of his suffering are not explained (Job 38–41), yet

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they cause Job to recognize that he is not God.