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ONE :

FLY THE AIRPLANE!

EVANGELISM PRINCIPLE 1: *Keep your priorities straight.*

I STARTED FLYING AIRPLANES about the same time that I started driving cars. In fact, I had the privilege of earning my private pilot's license when I was eighteen years old. My father, a veteran pilot with thousands of hours of flying time, taught me how to fly.

My father was also a very disciplined pilot, so there were a few extra "procedures" that went along with me learning to fly. I probably had the most extensive preflight checklist that had ever been designed. We checked everything! It seemed to me that my checklist was a book.

But I will always remember that my father had only one checklist item when it came to the "emergency checklist." That one checklist item was "Fly the airplane." It was a very simple, straightforward, and basic statement.

You see, when an emergency happens in the cockpit, it is easy for the pilot to get distracted. A lot of airplane accidents happen when a distracted pilot flies a perfectly good airplane into the ground because his attention is momentarily drawn somewhere else. Hence, the first emergency checklist item reminds you of the very basics. First, make

sure that you fly the airplane. Go back to the basics. Once you have the airplane under control, then you work the problem.

When you come to the subject of evangelism, it is difficult to know where to start. After all, there are so many different strategies that are out there. When is it appropriate to employ a relational strategy? When is it appropriate to be more aggressive? Should we argue evidences for the faith? The various approaches to evangelism can be like the distractions in the cockpit.

THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUR PRIORITIES

So where do you begin to sort all of this out? You go back to the basics. You go back to the one main item on the checklist. You begin by talking about why you are doing what you are doing. For evangelism to be effective, you have to keep your priorities in order. So for us to begin our study, let me talk about priorities.

Priorities are important. Priorities help guide decisions that we make about the use of our time and our money. They are like a lighthouse in the midst of a storm or a landmark to focus upon in the forest when things get rough. Where can we go to find those priorities? I think our Lord understood our need for priorities when He comforted His disciples in the Upper Room prior to His arrest.

John 13–16 records the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus' last in-depth communication with His disciples before going to the cross. The following chapter, John 17, records His High Priestly Prayer, which is Jesus' prayer for His disciples in light of His impending departure from this world.

In the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus is about to leave His disciples. It is the evening of the Last Supper, and it is the night in which Jesus will be betrayed. In an upstairs room in Jerusalem, gathered for the Passover Feast, the twelve disciples listen as Jesus begins to lay out three priorities for them. He will summarize everything that He has said over the past three years.

John 13 records Jesus demonstrating what it means to truly have love for one another (John 13:35) by washing His disciples' feet. His comments, however, to Judas Iscariot in John 13:21–30 troubled His disciples.

In response, Jesus deals with the disciples' troubled hearts. He talks about a place in heaven that has been prepared for them (John 14:1–14). He tells them about the Holy Spirit who will come to them as a Helper and Guide (John 14:15–26). He talks about peace (John 14:27–31). Jesus says in John 14:27, “Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.”

Then in John 15, Jesus begins to instruct His disciples. He leaves directions for His disciples for when He will no longer be with them. As Jesus begins to address His disciples in this chapter, He is, in essence, saying, “I am about to leave you, and there are three priorities that you need to hear. There are a couple of items that I think are important. There are a few priorities in life that will help to guide you after I leave.” Jesus then outlines three priorities in life that His disciples should follow.¹

In John 16, Jesus once again speaks about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He talks about how the Holy Spirit will glorify Him. He speaks about His return and how they might have peace and courage.

And then, amazingly, in the High Priestly Prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus prays for the same three priorities that He just gave in the Upper Room Discourse in John 15. If these priorities are what Jesus Christ desired to communicate to His disciples before He left, we need to pay attention to what He is saying. What are these three priorities?

PRIORITY 1: ABIDE IN JESUS

The first thing that He says in John 15:4–5 is *abide in Christ*. “Abide in Me, and I in you,” Jesus commands. “As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless

you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”

The word *abide* means to remain, stay, or continue. In other words, the disciples are to remain, or continue, in their relationship with Christ. We have been created to be dependent upon Christ. Abiding in Jesus means to believe in Him and continue to follow Him. Jesus may have had Judas in mind as one who did not abide in Christ. Judas failed to continue to follow Him. Judas appeared to be a follower and a disciple, but was not.

The Father is the vinedresser (15:1) and is interested in fruitfulness. Jesus is the true vine (15:1), and we are the branches (15:5). In essence, fruitful people are Christlike people.

Fruit is the manifestation of Christian character in a broad sense. Bearing fruit is living according to Scripture, which stands in contrast to an unbeliever who refuses to submit to Christ’s biblical teaching. Bearing fruit would include evangelism and other qualities that would give evidence of one’s faith in Christ.

The passage does not read, “Apart from Me you can do some things,” or, “Apart from Me you can be effective in ministry,” or, “Apart from Me you can have an effective outreach in evangelism.” No, what the Bible says is, “Apart from Me you can do nothing.”

Granted, you are going to be able to do some things (nonbelievers do things all the time), but what you are about to do under your own power will amount to nothing but wood, hay, and stubble. Your works in the flesh will be of the flesh. All of the works that you do in the flesh will be burned up (1 Corinthians 3:11–15).

Above everything else in life, we are to be committed first to Jesus Christ. Our relationship with Jesus Christ needs to be first in our life, our top priority. First above anything else is Jesus Christ.

That first priority is emphasized throughout the Scriptures, from God’s words to Israel after the Exodus, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one. Love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, with all

your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:4 paraphrased), to the New Testament admonition to “fix your thoughts on Jesus” and later to “fix your eyes on Jesus” (Hebrews 3:1 NIV; 12:2). The book of Revelation, the Bible’s finale, focuses on Christ and concludes with the worship of God.

Recall Jesus’ answer to a Pharisee lawyer:

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And [Jesus] said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment.” (Matthew 22:36–38)

The Scriptures continue to cry out that our first priority needs to be Jesus Christ. Apart from Him we can do nothing. Every aspect of our life needs to be lived with that priority clearly cemented in our brain.

The greatest obstacle to [evangelism] is the church
that is preoccupied with its own existence.

If the church is centered on anything—on anyone, on any doctrine, on any project—apart from Jesus Christ, it is off balance. Beware of those things that might try to drag us away from that first freshness of knowing Jesus Christ. Beware of those kicks, of those fads, of those silly gimmicks that twenty years from now will be passé and discarded because they did not work.

I believe that the greatest obstacle to the evangelization of the world is the church that is preoccupied with its own existence rather than focused upon Jesus Christ. We must be willing to put all of our activities and all of our efforts on trial before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ.

Having Jesus Christ first in our church begins with Jesus Christ

being first with us individually. Jesus Christ first in our church begins with our individual worship. Is Jesus Christ first in your life? It begins with our personal devotional life. With Christ as the center of our lives there is movement, there is arrangement, there is direction, and there is empowerment.

Christ becomes the center of our lives only when abiding in Him is foremost in our thoughts. Your wife or your husband cannot be first. He or she is a companion along the way. Your children cannot be first. Scholarship cannot be first. Personal ministry, no matter how vital or successful, cannot be first. Your church cannot be first or you will burn out. You yourself cannot be first. Jesus Christ needs to be first in your life. Apart from Him nothing is going to happen.

How do you know when God is first in your life? The fruit of the Spirit will be manifested. You will experience love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23).

Where you spend your time and your money is going to be a good indication of your first priority in life. When I started dating my wife more than thirty years ago, how did Patty know that she was the focus of my attention? How did she know that she was my priority? She could tell because of my focus in life. What is first in your life?

PRIORITY 2: LOVE ONE ANOTHER

The second priority that we see in chapter 15 is to *love one another*. Notice John 15:12, “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.” After Jesus told the Pharisee that the greatest commandment was to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” He noted a second great commandment. “The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37–40).

We are first to abide in Christ, and then we are to love one another. That means we are to build one another up in love.

Once again, Scripture reaffirms that priority. Leviticus 19:18 reads, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” and Deuteronomy 15:11 adds, “You shall freely open your hand to your brother.”

“Love one another” is the most basic one-another command in the New Testament; however, there are many practical examples in the New Testament of what it means to love one another in the body of Christ. You read in Romans to “love one another,”² as well as to “be of the same mind toward one another,” “[build] up . . . one another,” and “admonish one another.”³ Other ways we are to love one another, according to the Scriptures, are to “care for one another,” “serve one another,” “bear one another’s burdens,” “be kind to one another,” [and to] “be subject to one another.”⁴ The apostle James also tells us to “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another” (5:16). We could go on and on and on with all the “one another” passages in the New Testament. There are many, many truths in Scripture that continue to point to the relationship we need to have with one another in Jesus Christ.

Notice in the John 15 passage that the type of love that we are to have for one another is a sacrificial love (v. 13). It is also an intimate love (vv. 14–15). Jesus no longer refers to His disciples as slaves but friends. But the love that we have for one another is also a fruitful love (vv. 16–17). The nature of our relationships with other Christian brothers and sisters should stimulate us toward greater fruitfulness. Are you the type of friend who stimulates a closer walk with the Savior, or are you more of a consumer in the relationship? Do you value your relationships within the body of Christ the same way that Jesus would value those relationships?

Paul said in 2 Corinthians 8:5, “And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will” (NIV). Priority number one is abide in Christ. Give yourself to the Lord. Priority number two is love one another. Give yourself to the brothers and sisters in Christ.

Loving one another begins with our own personal activity of worship and continues in the way that we reach out to people around us in the body of Jesus Christ. Reaching out, caring, and bearing one another's burdens within a local small group context is one way loving one another is going to spill out to a lost world.

Once we lead somebody to Jesus Christ, where is the first place we are going to take him or her? We are going to take that person to the local church. It is my prayer that the church reflects Christlike love.

PRIORITY 3: REACH THE WORLD

Third, we are not only to abide in Christ and love one another, but we are also to reach the world. Scripture says that you will bear witness. In John 15:16 we read that we are appointed to "go and bear fruit." When Jesus says "go," He is encouraging His disciples to look beyond the regular circle of His followers, reaching others with the love of Christ.

"Fruit" here refers not only to the fruit of the Spirit but also to a broad range of being fruitful for Christ. As we bear fruit, many will be touched for Jesus Christ.

Verses 26 and 27 of that chapter say, "He will testify about Me, and you will testify also." Because of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we will be witnesses for Christ.

We do not have to go through the entire Bible to be able to accurately document priority number three. We read in the Old Testament in Psalm 67:2, "That Your way may be known on the earth, Your salvation among all nations." God said, "I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6).

The New Testament makes it clear that the church is to take the Gospel to the world. It is extremely important for the health of the church that leaders continue to make courageous plans for evangelism. In fact, the whole book of Acts is the fulfillment of this call. In

the book of Acts we see the message of Christ geographically and theologically taken by the power of the Holy Spirit from Jerusalem (the Jews) to Rome (the Gentiles).

Out of our commitment to Jesus Christ must flow our commitment to His church and to His body. When we are rich in His Word and experience the dynamic that we have with our Lord, then we can encourage God's people. When we are encouraged by His people, and we are fed and nourished by God's servants, then we will be committed to reach the world.

Evangelism is a natural expression of . . .
our relationship with Jesus Christ.

We see a commitment to the world demonstrated in the life of Jesus Christ. He was with the hungry. He was with the sick. He mingled with the crowd. He was with the street women. He was with the rich. He was with the woman who was divorced five times. All the way through Scripture we see Jesus continuing to reach out to the people around Him. There was no exclusivism. There was no sense of becoming ingrown in fellowship. The New Testament church was continually reaching out. It was continually spilling out and overflowing into the world.

When a relationship with and a commitment to Jesus Christ and His body, the church, is clearly evident, people can not help but be drawn to Him. They can not help but be drawn to the grace and mercy that is found in Him. In fact, they will climb trees to see Him, they will go without food to listen to Him, and they will tear the roof off of a house to get near Him.

Evangelism is a natural expression of everything else that's happening in our relationship with Jesus Christ. It's also a natural expression of everything that is happening to us in the body of Jesus Christ. As

the world sees that visible incarnation of the body of Christ, it can not help but be drawn to the truth.

The entire fifteenth chapter of John talks about these three priorities: “abiding in Christ” (vv. 1–11), “loving one another” (vv. 12–17), and “reaching the world” (vv. 18–27). All the way through the chapter we see that the ultimate result is commitment to reaching the world for Jesus Christ.

HOW THE PRIORITIES RELATE

In John 17, the High Priestly Prayer, we see once again those three priorities. Here Jesus relates the three priorities to each other to give specific direction to ministry.

Notice in John 17:11, Jesus prays for the disciples, “Holy Father, keep them in Your name.” This is a reference to priority number one, their relationship to God. Believers are to be kept in His name in order that “they may be one,” which is a reference to priority number two, our relationship to others. Notice also the dependence of priority two on priority one. In other words, a healthy ministry within the body depends on believers having a wholesome walk with Jesus Christ.

But that is not all. In verse 21, Jesus takes things a step further, praying “that they may all be one.” This is a reference to priority number two, “so that the *world* may believe that You sent me” (italics added), which is a reference to priority number three. Not only does Jesus teach His disciples these three priorities in the Upper Room Discourse, but then He prays for those same things in the High Priestly Prayer in John 17!

Growing in Christlikeness and helping others grow in Him are not the ends in themselves. Our Lord’s desire is that these two priorities will, in turn, lead to winning a lost world to Jesus Christ. There is an outward flow that starts in our relationship with Jesus Christ. Abiding in Christ and loving one another leads to reaching the world for Him.

KEEPING A BALANCE

These three priorities must be kept in focus if there is to be balance in evangelism. Here is the main point: *There is a great commandment before there is a great commission.* You may have the slickest method, the slickest presentation, and be the most silver-tongued person around; but if your relationship with Jesus Christ is out of focus, evangelism is out of balance. Everything that happens in evangelism is a by-product of our personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Remember, *out of our personal relationship with Jesus Christ flows our relationship with others and our relationship with the world.*

In Mark 1:17 Jesus says, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." Priority number one flows into priority number three. If you are a follower, then you will be a fisher. A follower is a fisher. If you have priority number one straight, He will make you a fisher of men. If I put my name in this verse, it would read, "Doug, I want you to follow Me. And as you follow Me I will make you a fisher of men."

Evangelism is not our first priority. Our relationship with Jesus Christ is our first priority. However, evangelism is ultimately where the flow of Jesus' argument is headed in the Upper Room Discourse.

Balance is very important in the spiritual life. We must keep things in the proper perspective. We must continue to keep our priorities straight.

Likewise, we cannot just take one priority and focus on that alone. All three priorities should happen together. You cannot just take one and say, "Well, when I get this one all figured out, then I'll move to number two." If you do, you will be out of balance.

Christians need stimulation of personal relationships to help encourage love and good deeds. If we do not move out into the world, we will not have that stimulation that throws us back to Jesus Christ. All three priorities need to be a fundamental part of our lives all the time.

If you are focused on the wrong things, evangelism will be hindered. If you have your priorities straight with Jesus Christ, you are

The 7 Principles of an Evangelistic Life

going to experience the fruit of the Spirit and the fruit overflowing into the world.

Where is your focus right now? Is Jesus Christ first in your life? Keep your priorities straight. Evangelism is a by-product of our relationship with Christ. Put Him first.