

Seeking The Lost!

by David Barnes

I have recently, again, been made aware of the problems associated with evangelizing our local community. A few months ago I was going through my neighborhood handing out flyers for a Bible study we have in our home on Tuesday evening. The information on the flyer was simple and straight forward, informing people of the time and place. I stopped to speak with a man who was working in his garage. While we discussed the opportunity for study he asked "What church are you associated with?" Having been down that road before I said "We are a group of nondenominational Christians who would like to tell others about Jesus and study His word." He was not satisfied with that answer. He asked "What is the name of your church?" I know many Christians would reply "The church of Christ" and give the subject no more thought. While that might be sufficient in some circumstances, it would be insufficient in this instance. Let me give some reasons why.

1. I don't have a church! We need to stand firm on this point. The world has turned the word church into something not found in God's word. It is to the delight of Satan that this has happened. The spiritual waters of the world have been so muddied, people have no idea what the church is or how the word is used in the Bible. (Take a look at Berry Kercheville's article in Focus, January/February 2002 for some excellent information on this.)

2. The church does not have a proper name! The information he was looking for was non biblical. While the world may name it's churches Jesus never named His church and neither should we! The phrases church of God (I Cor. 1:2) or church of Christ (Rom. 16:16) or church of the Firstborn (Heb. 12:23) are possessive. They simply describe who possesses these people.

3. The term "church of Christ" represents another denomination to practically everyone outside our fellowship. We are not a denomination yet when I tell someone we are non denominational, people just do not get it. Church of Christ = Denomination to them.

Some might think I am majoring in minors but I do not think so. I prefer to stand exactly on Biblical teaching. I have been taught to do so since I was a child. I have been teaching others to do so since I became a Christian. It's the right thing to do. Satan is constantly trying to capture Bible terms to serve his own wicked purposes. He lies and deceives in order to slay. His efforts to "name the church" and have it viewed as a "denomination" are just two example of his insidious work.

What Satan accomplishes with all this is exactly what happened in my conversation with this man I was trying to reach with the gospel. When he asked what the name of my church was I replied that there was no proper name to be given, that we were Christians

serving God. The conversation circled around for a while and he finally placed me in a position where I felt the need to say "church of Christ." Well, that was it. I immediately saw by his eyes and his body language he thought he could classify me and dismiss what I was trying to offer. He was willing to say little else and the conversation was over. He has never attended our studies.

I am not giving up on him but neither am I optimistic about my chances to have a meaningful conversation with him about Jesus. He thinks he knows exactly what I believe and is not interested in what I have to say.

How many people see the sign in front of the building and drive on by thinking they know who we are and what we teach? Yes, they are wrong in their denominational concepts. Yes, they are wrong to think of my church, your church, our church. Yes, they are wrong when they think in terms of a "proper name." That they are wrong is not the question. The question is "How can we be most effective in reaching these lost people?" If, and I do mean IF, what is on the sign fosters the wrong concept in the mind of unbelievers about who we are, why is it not changed? I believe there is no one correct answer for every congregation. It is a judgment call in honor of local autonomy. However, some reasons people refuse to change the sign are...

1. It is the only sign we have ever had, why change it? (Maybe to help reach the lost?)
2. It has served us for x number of years. If it was good enough then it is good enough now. (Good enough then might not be good enough now!)
3. If we change it people will think we are ashamed of the name "Christ." (Assuming something other than "Church of Christ" is selected.)
4. People will think we are just another denomination. (Assuming "Church of God" is selected but then, they already think we are a denomination.)
5. The term "Church of Christ" gives us the opportunity to explain why we are not a denomination. (I prefer to start a spiritual conversation on a different topic)
6. How will a visitor find us? (We can take care of that, besides, we need to seek the lost, not the visitor)

There are more reasons, these will suffice to make my point. Christ's church does not have a "name" in the accepted sense of our religious community. The religious community might think it does but we know better. If how we identify ourselves damages our ability to contact and teach the lost, and if it is within our authority to identify ourselves in a way which would be more productive, surely it makes sense to change for productivity's sake.

The problem of identification is made worse by the negative press the International Church of Christ receives. I went on line and did a search on "cults church of christ." I

clicked on the first web site that appeared. It had a press / media section which I opened. Of the first nineteen media articles featured only five made any attempt to note the difference between the ICOC and other groups identifying themselves as church of Christ. Only one of the five made what I consider a serious attempt to make a clear distinction. One of the five said we were the denomination, Church of Christ. Another said we were the United Church of Christ. Even when we are cut loose from the ICOC in these articles we are still identified as a denomination. If the man on the street does the same kind of search (and I fear many have), what will be their conclusion?

Have you ever suggested changing the sign? It might be a pleasant or at least a neutral experience for you but then again it might be terrible. Some people practically blow a gasket when it is suggested. They refuse to entertain any ideas about change. It is a closed issue from the moment it is opened. We should be people of the Book and yet the Book as well as the mind is often closed on this issue.

I do not endorse change simply for the sake of change. As I said previously, there is no one answer for every local congregation. Local autonomy must be honored. To despise a congregation for change or to despise a congregation for remaining the same is nonsense. Each congregation must do it's best in it's service to God but let us all be as effective as possible. If liberty in Jesus allows changes for the sake of effectiveness, why would I choose otherwise?

Do I sound adamant in all this? Probably so, but I assure you I am not. I am concerned for the lost and open minded about every liberty Jesus offers us. The attitude I see in some Christians reminds me of a statement I heard when I was a teenager. It was suggested we do more in the community to spread the gospel effectively. The reply given was "They know where the building is and when we meet for worship. If they are really interested they will come in and listen." As I recall not many came. With attitudes like that I wondered what they would hear if they did come in and listen!

The people outside Christ are lost, spiritually lost, lost for eternity. Stubbornly clinging to words on a sign for foolish reasons is unbecoming to a child of the King.

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