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## ***The Witness of “Withness”***

We preachers sometimes talk out of both sides of our mouths

First we speak of a God who cannot abide the presence of sin (kind of like my great-aunt who would faint if you used the word ‘darn’). We speak of a God who is separated from us by a bottomless chasm. A God who made a bridge for us so we could cross over to his side. A God who then left our side to go back to his side, and who is now far away. A God who is waiting for us to show up.

But then the other side of our mouths starts flapping.

We speak of how a Christian ought to be ‘a friend of sinners.’ How a Christian should enter into the lives of unchurched people, even though those lives can be messy with sin. Take the initiative and go to them, rather than waiting for them to show up at church.

Here’s the question that is coming to my mind lately... Is it possible that evangelism is so hard because it contradicts our theology? After all, if God is far away from my ‘lost’ neighbors, why should I be expected to draw near to them? If my church’s evangelism consists mostly of opening the church door and waiting for sinners to come flowing in, is it possible that my church is simply acting like its god?

Maybe it’s time to upgrade to a vision of God in which evangelism makes sense. To find this vision, we need look no further than the vision of Jesus, the apostles, and the early church.

We start with the being of God. The Son is with the Father in the fellowship of the Spirit. In the Triune being we find nothing of separation, alienation, or passivity. The Church Fathers rightly imagined the Triune life as “The Great Dance.” And this Dancing, this “With”-ness was *so* beautiful and true and good, that one day Father and Son and Spirit said together: “Let us make man in our image.”

So that Their new creation could share in the Son’s life with the Father, creation was given its being “in Christ.” All created things are “from him and through him and to him” (Rom 11.36). In Him all things “live and move and have [their] being” (Acts 17). “In Him all things hold together” (Col 1.17). And when the Son became incarnate, God’s creation become a permanent part of God’s life. The created universe (the whole human race included) was drawn into the eternal Great Dance. And as we live and move and have our being within the Father-Son dance, the Spirit works at cleansing the eyes of our hearts, helping us to see the truth about ourselves—that “we are God’s children” (Rom 8.16).

God is not far away, waiting for us to show up. Our shepherd has found his lost sheep, and He has taken us home. Repent and believe. Jesus is the Immanuel, “God with us.” Not “God far away.” Not “God with us if we get our religion right.” No way. He is God with us. Period. Jesus’ message was not “The kingdom of God is far away, but you can go there after you die if you work up enough faith.” No. His message was “The kingdom of God has arrived. Believe it” (Mark 1.15).

Imagine a new kind of evangelism, based on the gospel truth of “God with us.” What do its evangelists look like?

1. **They know where God is.** When they feel close to God, they rejoice that their brain chemistry is in line with reality. When they don’t feel close to God, they rest in the truth that their ebbing belief does not change God’s location. Jesus himself struggled with ‘not feeling God’s presence,’ and coincidentally, he was quite open about it in the presence of unbelievers (Mark 15.34; Psalm 22). This new kind of evangelist knows the truth, is set free by the truth, and is able to obey Jesus’ most oft-repeated command: “Fear not.”
2. **They know that God is not the problem.** Too often, our ‘gospel’ is about a God who needed to kill somebody because He was mad about sin, but then luckily Jesus took the bullet for us. Jesus came to protect us from God. And as we try to join in Jesus’ saving work, our evangelistic logic goes something like this:
  - a. God loves my non-Christian friends.
  - b. If they don’t believe this, He will torture them forever.
  - c. I must help Jesus protect my friends from God.

The evangelist of the future is one who has traded up for a better, non-schizophrenic God. A God who has embraced His Creation and is now in the process of rescuing it, not from Himself, but from the evil that results when its people live in darkness and despair.

3. **They look for (and find) God in the most unlikely places.** A disciple is someone who believes that “God is with me.” An evangelist is simply a disciple who also believes that “God is with *you* too.”

One of my coworkers is a single mother who just doesn’t have time for religion. But when I see the love she showers on her daughter, I know I am watching her share in the Triune life of love, whether she knows it or not. Love has only one Source.

Whatever issues God might have with my atheist gay friend’s sex life, God is with him and his partner of many years. In their every act of kindness to each other, they are participating in the kindness of the God they don’t believe in, the God who is rumored to hate them.

Likewise the Triune life finds expression even in non-Christian religions. The beauty of the Taj Mahal comes from Somewhere. When we find truth in the teachings of Buddha, those truths comes from Somewhere. When a good deed is done by a Wiccan, that goodness comes from Somewhere. Christians do not have a monopoly on truth, goodness and beauty. Christians just know a little more about the One from Whom those blessings come.

As a disciple of Jesus, I’m learning to believe the good news that I’ve been drawn into the with-ness of the Triune Life. In precise theological terms, I am “participating in God’s being.” The Holy Spirit is helping me experience the truth of this good news, and also to give that experience away. Every time I am truly *with* another person, I am performing the steps of the Great Dance in the hope that the other person will begin to hear the Music a little better.

When I am with my friends—Christian or otherwise— they experience with-ness. They may not

immediately understand that experience as “God is with me.” But they *do* understand “John is with me.” And if our goal is to share in Christ’s incarnating of God’s life in the world, that’s a pretty good start.

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