

Scripture: John 3:1-19 and 17:1-26 (selected verses)

3.¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above/[without being born again].” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above/[you must be born again]....’ ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”

17.¹After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you....”⁶“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word....”¹¹And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one....¹⁵I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world....²⁰“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us....²⁶I made your name

known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

Sermon Text:

As I began to say last week, I truly believe that God calls his people to unity. I believe exciting things can happen in ecumenical settings, so when I came to Guelph, a newly ordained minister, I was keen to get involved in the ministerial. A ministerial is supposed to gather up all the clergy of all the different churches in an area, and bring them together in supportive prayer and conversation. As I was dismayed to discover, this doesn't *really* happen in Guelph because there are not one but *two* ministerials. And most of the clergy in this city, including my Presbyterian colleagues, don't go to either one. The two groups are: “the Guelph Ministerial,” which is comprised mainly of clergy from the mainline denominations and the institutional chaplains, and the “Evangelical Fellowship of Guelph,” which is comprised of the city's evangelical pastors.

Now this is enough to cause a real identity crisis for the Presbyterians in town, because while we are “mainline,” we are also “evangelical.” Does that surprise you? “Mainline” as a descriptive label doesn't mean much. It means we're established; we've been around a while -- like the Uniteds and the Anglicans that dominate the Guelph Ministerial. On the other hand, our 16th century forebearers were calling themselves “evangelicals” before anyone ever thought of calling us “Protestant” or “Reformed,” and before most of the denominations which now bear the evangelical label -- the Baptists, Pentecostals, Salvation Army, Independent Community church people etc, even existed. In the 16th century an “evangelical” was someone who believed the good news that salvation was free in Christ Jesus – the gift of God's grace, apart from works of the law. And *that*, as we said last week, was *our* defining position. But somewhere in the last century a kind of evangelicalism has sprung up, with which we share many core beliefs, but which is also culturally alien to us. I experience this

every time I attend the ministerial (for it's the Evangelical Fellowship of Guelph) which I choose to attend – this sense of being drawn into fellowship by what unites us, and yet the sense also, of being alienated by the parts of that identity that *don't* fit. It's these modern evangelicals I want to talk about today. And as I did with the Catholics last week, I want to name some of the differences between us, but to lay even more emphasis on what we can appreciate about that tradition.

Probably the greatest on-the-ground difference between us and the evangelicals has to do with worship. Some of you have returned from a visit to Lakeside, or even to the 11 o'clock service at Kortright, and told me either how glad you are, or how sorry, that we belong to such a *different* church culture. I still remember *my* first full-on exposure to evangelical worship the year I studied at Regent College. Praise choruses were in the style of seven-eleven (seven words repeated 11 times over) and prayers were of the “Jesus wejus” variety: “Jesus, we just want to give you the glory, and we just want to thank you, Lord, that you are raising up a generation for your name....”. I found my reserved Presbyterian piety recoiling from what I took to be the cult-like and emotionally manipulative tactics of the praise leaders. I was distracted by the moans and groans of the other worshippers, feeling I was being made a party to something indecent. The preaching, which was usually delivered with powerpoint, I felt to be less an encounter with God, and a means of grace, than a chemical process, yielding an extract: You start with Romans 5: 1-11 and you end up with 5 handy points to take home.

While that style of worship obviously has great appeal, while it seems to speak to young people in a way that traditional worship doesn't, it wasn't *my* cup of tea. But as my year at Regent progressed, I grew in my capacity to worship in that way. I think the turning point came as I made friends with some of those same people who were impeding my view and distracting my attention by waving their hands in the air. Usually they'd tell me that it was at just such a service, that they gave their lives to Jesus, and here

they were, 10 and 15 years later, still serving him, leading completely changed lives. When is the last time you have known someone to respond that way at one of *our* services? What God showed me that year is that: “by their fruits you shall know them.” True, *some* evangelical worship *is* just junk-food for the emotions, *some* can be just as formulaic, in its way, as any service of worship read from a book. But *some* evangelical worship also presents the gospel with a boldness and a clarity that is rare in our time. *Some* creates the hunger for God, which the Christian education and discipleship programmes of the church then go on to satisfy. As I have come to know contemporary praise music better, I have come to see that just like the traditional music in our hymnbook, there is the good, the bad and the ugly. There are certain grounds on which you could criticize contemporary praise music: it tends to focus on the individual and is very self-reflexive, it tends to concentrate on certain stock themes in Scripture instead of exploring the whole canon, it relies heavily on refrains that are so musically seductive, that the fluffiness of the words often goes unnoticed. But then you could criticize many of our traditional hymns for being practically incomprehensible, they are so theologically dense. There is sentimentalism and bad theology in some of our older hymns too.

So worship is one of the things which divides us and the evangelicals. It has created such a sharp divide between those, on the one hand, who feel contemporary worship is poisonous, and those, on the other hand, who feel that no *other* kind of worship has any Spirit or flavour, that people now speak of “the worship wars.” Christians should not be having a war over worship! We must develop our understanding of what worship *is* -- of what good worship *should be* -- and strive to meet its demands, whether in the traditional or the contemporary style.

A second difference we could name between ourselves and the modern evangelicals, is a theological one having to do with the way we conceive the relationship between Christ’s people and world. Still on the subject of evangelical praise music, Glen

Soderholm once made a comment which got me thinking about this deeper theological difference and where it comes from. Glen said that music in evangelical worship tends to have its scriptural location in Revelation chapters 4 and 5, that great scene of heavenly worship before the Lamb upon the throne. Now Revelation 4 and 5 is an awesome picture, he said, it's just not like any church or any Christian experience in the real world that he knows. And so, when Glen writes his own songs, he makes a point of giving a voice to people who need healing, people who have doubt, people who believe in a divine good-will that they do not fully see. Revelation 4 and 5 is a scene of worship that is right out of this world, described as an encouragement to a persecuted church which is very much in this world, and for whom this world is incredibly hostile. John's vision says that even while Christians on earth are undergoing martyrdom and apparent defeat, what is going on in heaven is a victory celebration.

We didn't read from Revelation this morning, but we did read from John's gospel, and there you can hear that same attitude toward the world, which runs all through John's writing. On the one hand, the world is what God so loves that he sent his only begotten Son down to it, not to condemn it, but to save it (John 3:16-17)). But, on the other hand, the world is also what rejected Jesus, so that whosoever *does* believe in him, will have the experience of being at odds with the world (John 3: 18-19, John 17: 16). Jesus, knowing that the world will be a hostile place for his disciples just as it has been a hostile place for him, prays to the Father in John 17: “¹⁵*I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.* ¹⁶*They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.*” This enmity between Christ and the world, and between the world and Christ's people, is keenly felt in evangelical piety.

Evangelicals identify with the persecuted church of Revelation, probably more for historical reasons¹ than because

¹ Many evangelicals are in the Anabaptist tradition. The Anabaptist experience, historically, has been one of persecution both by Catholics and Protestants.

they are persecuted today. Some evangelicals *are* persecuted today, because of their uncompromising faithfulness to Christ and his gospel, but some evangelicals are simply obnoxious and so are disliked for that reason, or because the world finds it a more admirable thing to sing songs of victory and celebration when you are suffering, than when you represent numerical success, wealth, and political influence.²

One of the things I find alien when I go to the ministerial is all the talk that goes on there about “claiming the city for Christ.” At its best, the idea is a vision of outreach – of the church being salt and light to the community in which it is set – in a way that will transform not only individuals but whole cities, with their structures and institutions. At its worst though, I think this kind of talk smacks of triumphalism, and because the ministerial is about 95 percent male, perhaps a bit of machismo.

In the interests of “claiming the city for Christ,” Royal City church does prayer walks around the downtown core, once a week -- sort of like Joshua did around the city of Jericho when he was preparing to conquer it. Another of the ministerial members thought it would be a good idea to erect a 40 foot high cross in Riverside Park during Easter week so that the banner of Christ would fly over Guelph. I think a 40 foot high cross is a terrible idea -- a monument more to the vanity of Christians than to the glory of God. As for the prayer walks, part of me says that prayer, whatever its format, is always good. But another part of me says that “conquering the city,” whether by might or by the Spirit, is an aggressive ambition to have, and not awfully like our Lord whose only earthly crown was a crown of thorns.

As Presbyterians we have always been big on transforming the world, to the degree that that is possible here, by participating actively in it, not withdrawing from it in fear, nor engaging it from a totally hostile platform. Presbyterians have always read the

² Evangelicals in the States represent such a powerful political lobby that recently Saddleback church in California was able to request and receive an audience with the two presidential candidates. Go to http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/08/16/warren.forum/index.html?eref=rss_topstories for coverage of the fascinating interviews. There is a video link where you can watch the whole thing.

world’s literature, listened to the world’s music, sometimes even contributed in these fields of creativity. Only with the rise of evangelicalism has this whole new market arisen, of people who believe they can only read Christian fiction, or listen to Christian music. Evangelicals believe that the kingdom of this world must be conquered by the kingdom of heaven. So their cry is “victory.” Presbyterians believe that Christ intends us to live in and to suffer with this old world until he returns to renew it. In the meantime he renews *us*: we are born again, or born from above, and so the promise of the world’s transformation is seen in us. As we crucify our own worldliness, our own tendency to oppose God and reject his Christ, we begin to extend the reign of Christ over the world’s domain.

I think there is a danger in saying “the world is the enemy” and the world is “those other people over there -- not *me* because I’ve been taken out of the world; I’m in Christ. I’m in the church.” That is what leads to the triumphalism, and the aggression³ which is so problematic. But there is equal danger in becoming too comfortable with the world, in failing to recognise that the world is, and always has been, the place where Christ is rejected. What I think evangelicals do a really good job of, is in naming how radically different a thing it is to live as a follower of Jesus Christ. They call it being “born again” – and they didn’t make that term up. It’s taken from Jesus conversation with Nicodemus. He says “you must be born again.” And that’s in our Bible too. Is there any more definite way of saying that becoming a Christian involves a total life change. It is the ultimate new beginning, the ultimate second chance.

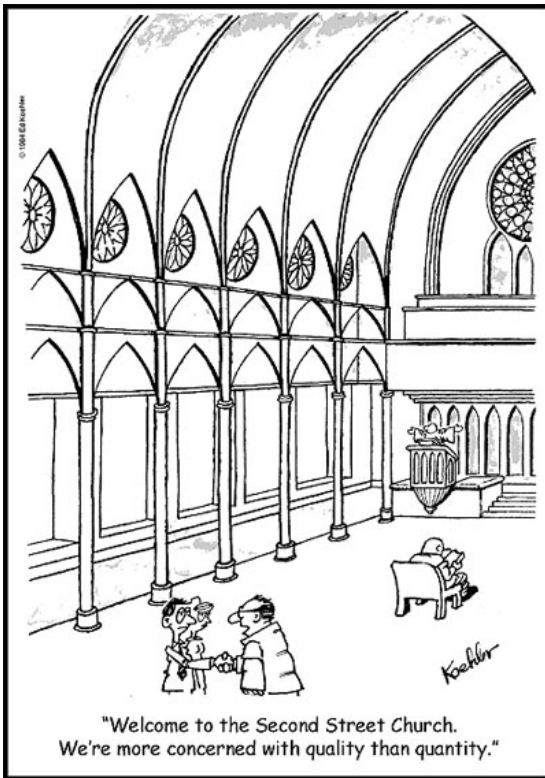
When I was at Regent I was constantly encountering people who understood their lives in terms of one of those before-and-after makeover pictures that we see in magazines. “That was me

³If “aggression” seems too strong a word, check out a video game recently released by Left Behind Games, where “Christian militias wage physical and spiritual warfare using the power of prayer and modern military weaponry to covert New Yorkers and kill those who resist....Warriors shout ‘Praise the Lord!’ as they blow infidels away” (see <http://www.talk2action.org/story/2006/6/7/41835/37829>). In its aggression, there is truly little to distinguish fundamentalist “Christianity” from fundamentalist Islam.

before Christ, addicted to drugs, addicted to the chase for money, living only for myself. This is me now with Christ in my life, forgiven, living for the Lord, serving others. I sometimes found it hard to know what to reply when folk asked me about *my* conversion because I cannot point to an hour-of-decision⁴ when I prayed “the sinner’s prayer” asked Jesus into my heart. I have always been more aware of God’s power calling me toward him, than I have been of any decision of mine to turn around 180 degrees on the road. But perhaps it is not so important to remember when we were born. Perhaps it is more important to know that we are definitely alive. Being “born again” means that we know we are alive in Christ *today*, and that is at least 180 degrees different from *not* being alive in him.

Evangelicals understand this: that Christ’s presence or

absence in a person’s life makes all the difference. It is not a difference on the qualitative scale – a difference between sort of doing alright versus being completely fulfilled. It is the difference between being alive and being dead. Because they understand, better perhaps than we do, just what is at stake, evangelicals are more eager than we are to share the gift they have received with others. They are good at telling their story. At the heart of what defines an evangelical, is not only believing the good news, but being an ambassador of the good news. How wonderful it would be if Presbyterians would get in touch with their evangelical heritage at this point. If



⁴ Billy Graham’s radio programme “The Hour of Decision” was well named, because the mainspring of Baptist theology (the particular Baptists excepted) is our decision for Christ. This position has exercised great influence throughout the evangelical world. In Presbyterianism, however, the emphasis is on *God’s* decision for *us*, sacramentalised at baptism. There is nothing wrong with looking for a response to God (and perhaps Presbyterians do not look for this response expectantly enough), as long as we realize that it is a *response*, and that God’s action in our lives has been present long before. Living Faith says: “When we have turned and repented, we recognise that the Spirit enabled us to believe” (LF 4.2.1).

we did, we would no longer have to look over our shoulder at *their* full churches while our own, it seems, are emptying.

A few years ago a man called Carey Nieuhof went to a three point charge in Oro, that was struggling in the manner of so many of the aging congregations across our denomination. One of the first things he did was to preside over an amalgamation of the three points, and to pitch a vision to the united congregation of Trinity, Oro, that they were to think more about their future than the past. I followed Carey’s ministry with interest from the beginning because we both grew up under the ministry of a man named Paul Brown. He was minister to Carey in Midland, Ontario, and then moved to Nova Scotia where he became my minister. Before Carey was too long in the ministry, he became frustrated by the ineffectuality of reaching so few, while so many went unreached by the gospel. At some point I think he came under the influence of the Willow Creek movement, a model for church growth coming out one of the evangelical mega-churches in the States. Carey took the opportunity of a new beginning with his united congregations to begin doing ministry in a new way. At one point Carey decided that the church had to totally redesign its worship service so that worship became evangelism. If you were already a believer then there was a service for you on Wednesday night. The focus of Sunday was geared to the seeker. As you can imagine, such a radical move caused some heated discussion in the session, but the elders embraced the vision and ran with it. The church’s resolve was basically to do *whatever it took* to reach people for Christ. Some people, of course, left Trinity, but many more came. In fact, hundreds more came. For a while Trinity Oro was our miracle congregation and Carey was our home-grown hero, asked to speak at conferences nationwide on church growth and evangelism to “generation next.” I think Trinity had between 500 and a thousand at worship when they approached the Presbytery to see if they could start a satellite congregation. Now in the evangelical world of Willow Creek and Holy Trinity Brompton, the London church where Alpha began, starting a new

congregation when your first congregation gets too big is a no-brainer. Graham Singh was sent to intern at the 87th satellite church planted by Holy Trinity Brompton, but the Presbytery of Barrie does not belong to the evangelical world. This is not the way the Presbyterian Church in Canada does church! And so Carey was faced with dilemma: follow the passion for reaching the unchurched which lead him to do everything he had done thus far, or else stay within the Presbyterian Church and recognise the limits the Presbytery was setting. Carey felt he needed to follow his passion. And that is how the Presbyterian Church lost its most successful congregation. The hundreds still worship with Carey, and their church is called Connexus. Meanwhile Trinity Oro continues with about 100 members – an average Presbyterian congregation. For me this story raises questions about how seriously we take the calling to reach people for Christ, and whether we, in the Presbyterian Church, are so afraid to let the Spirit have control of the ministry that we will always sabotage our success. At the height of Trinity’s popularity my friend John Vissers visited them. I remember discussing with him some of the radical things they were doing. I questioned whether it was right to altogether substitute an exercise in evangelism for weekly divine worship. He said: “yes, I had a lot of questions about what they were doing there, but I’ll tell you this: I like the way they are doing evangelism a heck of a lot better than the way most Presbyterian churches, and many of their fiercest critics *aren’t* doing evangelism.”

Why is it that we always feel this need to criticize a success in which we do not share? Can the answer be as simple as the sin of envy? Now we would never admit that we *envy* the evangelical churches, so instead we *blame* them (for stealing our sheep, and for pandering to the culture) and we snipe at *them* (for their feel-good worship, and for their immature theology). I’ve said it before: this is the ploy that Satan always uses to weaken the body of Christ – divide and conquer – for well he knows that “a house divided against itself cannot stand” (Matthew 12:25). The evangelicals are

not the enemy, and while we regard them as such, we frustrate the aims of our Lord who prayed “that [we] may be one” (John 17.11).

The evangelicals have good things to teach us, in just those ways in which they differ from us: lessons about the need to draw clear lines in the sand between the old life we have died to in Christ, and the new birth we have received, lessons about sharing gladly and boldly with others the message about the new life we have found. Yet, in fact, when we look at our essentials – at matters of theology as opposed to matters of culture – we see that there is not that much that divides us at all. The Presbyterian Church in Canada was once proud to declare itself evangelical. We must get back in touch with this part of our identity, for Christ came to preach and to effect the good news – the evangel – of God. If we are not in the business of being evangelical, then I would be hard-pressed to say what our business is.