

FEBRUARY 2017

A MISSIONARY ENCOUNTER TODAY?

BY TIM KELLER

In two previous articles we have looked at how the early Christians before Constantine were both highly persecuted for being too exclusive, narrow, and strange, and yet at the same time they were fast growing, especially in the urban centers. (See Alan Kreider, “The Improbable Growth of the Church” in *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, Baker Academic, 2016).

This has been called an effective “missionary encounter” with Roman society. There was both offense and attraction, confrontation and persuasion. Christianity did not adapt to culture in order to gain more adherents, but neither did it remain a small, withdrawn band. Christianity confronted and critiqued the culture, believers suffered for it, and yet the faith also convinced many people, attracting growing numbers of converts daily.

It is obvious that in western societies Christians are again seen as too exclusive and narrow, and they, too, may soon be excluded from many government, academic, and corporate careers and jobs, and be socially

marginalized in various other ways. What are we can we learn from the early church so that we can have our own effective missionary encounter?

First, we need to avoid thinking that faithful witness will mean either fast, explosive growth (if we get the ministry formula just right) or a long-term dwindling with little fruit or impact. 1 Peter 2:11-12

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gives us a good brief summary of the original missionary dynamic when it tells us, in one sentence, that some outside the church accused and persecuted them, while others saw their good deeds and glorified God.

Second, we must avoid either assimilation or rigidity. There are indeed those who, in order to draw thousands, play down the more offensive and demanding aspects of Christianity. There are also those who insist that any effort at all to adjust our evangelistic pre-

sentations to particular cultural mistakes and aspirations is wrong. Yet Gregory of Nyssa, in the prologue to his *Great Catechism* insisted that you couldn’t win a polytheist and a Jew by the same arguments. You must frame your exposition of the gospel differently in each case. So must we.

So what might our missionary encounter consist of? It might contain:

1. *A public apologetic, both popular and ‘high.’* The early church developed effective public apologetics (e.g. Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, the author of the Epistle to Diognetus, and Augustine).

We must not present a purely rational apologetic, but also a cultural one. Augustine developed a ‘High Theory’ critique of pagan culture. He defended the exclusive-looking beliefs of Christians like this. “Our beliefs and lives do not in any way weaken the social fabric — rather they strengthen them. Indeed, you will never have the society you want if you maintain your polytheism.”

But besides a high level critical theory, there must also be
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popular apologetics. We need to show how the main promises secular culture makes regarding meaning, satisfaction, freedom, and identity can't be fulfilled. We need an explosion of 'memoir' apologetics — thoughtful, accessible, and wildly diverse stories of people who found Christ and had their lives changed by the gospel. We also need a host of accessible books putting forth the 'deep logic' of Christian sexuality. Finally, public apologetics in a post-Christian society will have to include public repentance for the failures of the church in the past and present.

2. *A counter-culture.* Like the early church, we should be an alternate society with several characteristics:

(a) We should be marked by a striking multi-ethnicity. Christianity is far and away the most ethnically and culturally diverse religion in the world. This is an enormous credibility factor for Christianity. Yet the western church often does not look multi-ethnic to its culture. The public spokespersons for the church should be from as many different racial groups as possible.

(b) We should be pioneers in civility, in building bridges

to those who oppose us. The earliest Christians were viciously persecuted and put to death, but the church practiced forgiveness and non-retaliation. Nowhere in the west are Christians facing this, yet many respond to even verbal criticism with like-toned disdain and attacks. Instead, Christians should be peacemakers, rather than pouring scorn on our critics and 'sitting in the seat of the mockers.'

(c) Like the early church, today's church should be famous for its generosity, care for the poor, and commitment to justice in society. It should be well known as *the* main institution working to organize poor and marginal communities to advocate for their own interests with government and business.

(d) Like the early church, we should be committed to the sanctity of life, and to being a sexual counter-culture. The church today must not merely maintain the traditional sex ethic among its own people, but it must learn to critique the false cultural narratives underlying our society's practice and view of sex.

3. *Faithful presence within the vocations.* Today's church must equip Christians with the doc-

trine of vocation to integrate their faith with their work. This "faithful presence" within the vocational fields by Christians would lead, among other things, to a reformation of capitalism (restoring trust to the financial markets through self-regulation), to a reformation of politics (restoring not just centrism but bi-partisanship), and to a reformation of the academy, the media, the arts, and technology. For help in understanding "faithful presence" see James D. Hunter's *To Change the World* and the many books on integrating faith and work.

4. *An evangelistic stance and approach.* There is no evangelistic presentation that fits every culture. Every culture requires the basics of sin and salvation to be communicated in different ways. The gospel relates to other religions and worldviews as "subversive fulfillment" — the Gospel fulfills culture's deepest aspirations, but only by contradicting the distorted and idolatrous means the world adopts to satisfy them.

Today's church must discover various ways to present the gospel to our culture and its various sub-groupings, not merely
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REDEEMER REPORT

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FROM THE GUTTER TO A FAMILY AT BROOKLYN TEEN CHALLENGE

BY CORRIE MITCHELL

*Debra Burgos battled a 20-year addiction to alcohol and a 10-year addiction to heroin.
Now she's a spiritual mom to those going through the same struggles she once did.*

When Debra Burgos tells incoming students at Brooklyn Teen Challenge, a faith-based residential recovery program, that she knows how they feel, she really does know how they feel.

"I've hit rock bottom. I've been homeless. I've lived under abandoned trailers. I've lived in the streets. I've done it all. I've seen it all," Debra, who is now 56 and works as the administrator at Brooklyn Teen Challenge, said.

At one point, she lived in what's called an "abandominium" — an abandoned building occupied by homeless people. She'd have to crawl through shattered windows to get to the third floor, climbing over people and through dirt and garbage to get to her spot. At the time, though, she thought she had it made.

It isn't often that Debra sits in her office in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn reflecting on her past. But there are days she'll look out of her window and ask herself, "Is this reality or is this a dream? I can't believe that God has taken me from the gutter, actually living in the street, to where he's placed me now. That's amazing."

Replacing bitterness with love

Debra was raised in a Christian home, but her relationship with Christ growing up was as

a ruler and a judge. "I didn't know God as a loving God," she says. She had lost her own father to alcoholism when she was four. She grew resentful and bitter that her father would choose alcohol over fatherhood.

By age 28, she had married her high school sweetheart, had her own home, her first child, and a job with the federal government. But all that changed when struggles invaded her marriage. She started drinking, and it all spiraled downward from there. Then came the heroin use. The homelessness. It got to the point where Debra was carrying everything she owned (an extra shirt and pair of jeans) in a plastic grocery bag. She lived under an abandoned trailer, creating a blanket out of leaves.

In July of 2000, Debra's family brought her to Brooklyn Teen Challenge. Her son was three months old at the time. Debra knew she needed help. But she wasn't willing to surrender — at least not fully.

"When I came in here in 2000, I used Teen Challenge as a revolving door," Debra says. "It was difficult here, because I was distracted by the streets. Also, being around the men was a distraction for me."

So Debra continued to struggle with what became a 20-year addiction to alcohol and a

10-year addiction to heroin.

But then, in 2007, she went to the Walter Hoving Home, a sister ministry of Brooklyn Teen Challenge up in Garrison, New York. "It's on 23 acres of land, secluded, no men. And God really changed my life there."

The bitterness she had felt was replaced with love. Love. That's what she says truly has the power to change lives. Love is, after all, what so dramatically changed hers.

When I grow up ...

Many of the students come to Brooklyn Teen Challenge broken. Debra's own addiction had taken her to the point that she wasn't able to have contact with her children or her family. And that's true of a lot of the students that come there. But the love of Christ can transform even the most broken lives.

Specifically, Debra remembers how loved by the staff she felt as a student. She desperately wanted to do what they did, to become a staff member herself. She knew in her heart that she wanted to work in ministry, she just never believed it was possible because her life "was so out of control."

"Even though at that time I was 40 years old, I always looked at the staff and thought, *When I grow up, I want to be like that*. Not grow up in age, but grow up

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A NEW WAY TO WORK

BY WALLY LARSON, JR.

I'm a lawyer, but that's just the start of what God has called me to at work.

In May I graduated from the Center for Faith and Work's Gotham Fellowship program. Paul writes in Romans that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." I think the Lord used the Gotham Fellowship to help me see how short I fall of God's glory in my work.

Before Gotham I relied upon God for "the big work things:" to have a job and keep a job. But it did not occur to me that every moment and thought and interaction at work should be subject to His reign. That's when I began to glimpse how short I was falling for how Jesus wanted me to approach my work.

Forgetting to thank God for success. Reverting to panicky self-reliance in a crisis. Pride, over-sensitivity, lack of grace. Falling into fear when

I couldn't see exactly "where things are going."

In short, I am a broken vessel because my heart is sin-sick. And my words and thoughts and actions at work flow from that sin-sick heart.

While that realization is very humbling, it has an upside — it helps me to recognize how deeply I have to continue to depend on Him to put to death that sinful nature which remains in me. I cannot boast in my work, only in Him. I cannot find my hope or power in my work, only in Him. I cannot look to my work for ultimate truth and security, only to Him.

It's a new adventure: how to glorify God at work. It means wrestling with tough questions. Questions like:

- *How can I glorify Him in this work conversation, on this conference call, in that meeting?*

- *What does it mean to glorify God when I'm giving advice that someone won't want to hear?*
- *When to be sharp? When to be soft-spoken?*

The adventure also means accepting that God's thoughts and ways are not my thoughts and ways. So when I experience adversity or humiliation, there may be no "lesson" to be articulated, only an internal refinement to experience, like Paul's thorn in the flesh. Just like when I exercise in the morning, there may be no "lesson" to learn from my time on the treadmill, only the physical benefit of having gone through it.

The gift Jesus gave me on the cross gives me a new lens to see work through and a power to glorify Him. May His strength be made perfect in my weakness. Amen.

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through preaching but through every Christian learning to be public about his or her faith in their walks of life. For help in understanding how the early church did evangelism see M. Green's *Evangelism in the Early Church* and M. Green's *Evangelism Through the Local Church* to consider what is possible today.

5. *Christian formation in a digital age.* The early church formed people into vibrant Christians in the midst of a pagan culture.

Its members had sharply different priorities concerning money and sex and in many other regards. Alan Kreider points out that early Christians achieved this distinctiveness through up to three years of catechetical training, through the strength of their community and relationships, and through rich worship.

The church in our day faces the same challenge. In the midst of a secular culture, with

its narratives (e.g. "you have to be true to yourself;" "you have to do what makes you happy;" "no one has the right to tell anyone else how to live") — how do we form Christians who are shaped more by the biblical story and narrative? But we also face something different, namely communication technology. In a digital era a person can take in thousands of words and hundreds of ideas
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OFFICER NOMINATION UPDATE

In 1 Timothy 3 Paul is instructing Timothy how to set up the church. He provides screening criteria for both elders and the diaconate, directing that potential leaders be evaluated for gifts, character, and godliness.

All Redeemer members have the privilege to nominate and elect fellow church members to serve on the Session and the Diaconate based on these biblical principles.

During nomination month this past November, the following candidates were nominated and invited to join the training and evaluation process:

Downtown Diaconate nominees:
Susan Lee, Cathy Park and Denise Sohn

East Side Diaconate nominees:
Mark Chang, Shirley Chew, James Rim and Laura Yoshida

East Side elder nominees:
Brandon Straub, Sarat Chandrapaty, Jean Gabeau and Dave Gurak

West Side Diaconate nominees:
Carolina Funk, Stanley Funk, James Juhn, Leslie Kim and Jordan Tanksley

West Side elder nominees:
Jon Brayshaw, Brendon Desrochers, Brian Jones, Richard Lai, David Lee and Andy Morgan

Over the years it's been encouraging to see nominees shifting their initial reaction from "how could I possibly be sufficiently godly, holy, {fill in the blank here} enough to serve as a church officer?" to "what might godly and holy living look like in my life?" Living a godly life involves persisting in faith and following God's call "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" Micah 6:8.

As these women and men enter into a season of training and discernment, please be praying for them, as they will need our prayer support to persist!

BROOKLYN TEEN CHALLENGE ... (CONT'D FROM PAGE 3)

spiritually, mature spiritually."

And that's exactly what has happened. Now, a staff member, she gets to be the one showering students with the love she received.

"I always remember, in the back of my mind, I'm one poor choice away from being a student again," Debra says. "So whenever we get a new student in, I always try to find some common ground with them so we have a line of communication. I always want them to know that I'm here for them."

That's what a family does

There are two things that Debra believes stand out about Brooklyn Teen Challenge. First, it's really a discipleship program more than a faith-based

residential home, as it's often referred to. "There here not to go through a program," Debra says, "but to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, which will sustain them once they leave here."

And second, the people there are family — so much so that when one of the students was struggling to have his family come for their planned visit (one obstacle after another, finances weren't good, things at home weren't good), the men's home decided to help out.

"Students and staff from the youngest student up to the oldest student, including staff and interns, they all pitched in to pay for a way for this student's family to come," Debra recalls. They even collected enough

money so when his family comes here, they'll be able to go do some small things in the city.

"I thought, *That's what a family does,*" Debra says. "I could probably give you a story every couple of hours here, because every day there are miracles happening here. Every day."

Her own life is another example. Whereas in 2005, she wasn't allowed to have contact with her family at all, she's now able to talk to her three children every day. "We have a great relationship," she says. "But it started with baby steps."

Debra, who lives on site, hopes she can also serve as a spiritual mom to the students at Brooklyn Teen Challenge.

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every day that can undermine the power of what happens in face-to-face interaction. In this situation, how do we form people who are distinctly Christian?

This will entail, at least: (a) new tools of catechesis that are formed to present all the ba-

sics of Christian truth as a direct contrast to the narratives of late modern culture (e.g. “You have heard it said — but *I* say unto you.”) (b) worship that combines ancient patterns of liturgy with cultural forms, (c) great use of the arts to tell the Christian story in stories,

(d) theological training of both ministers and lay leaders to conduct these kinds of formative practices. For information in Christian formation see: J. K. A. Smith (*You Are What You Love*) and his cultural liturgies series.

BROOKLYN TEEN CHALLENGE ... (CONT'D FROM PAGE 5)

“While I can never be their biological mom,” Debra says, “when they come in, I try to embrace them and love them and hopefully be a spiritual

mom to help them through the process.”

Brooklyn Teen Challenge is one of Hope for New York’s 40+ affiliate partners that are serving

the poor and marginalized in New York City. You can help us bring hope to New Yorkers: hfny.org/givehfny/