

Where is Evangelism Headed?

I'm not an alarmist, I'm not, I'm not, I'm not! Now that we have that issue resolved, let's move on.

When I was in my teens, I worked with "Papa John" (Not the TV pizza guy, but a pizza guy nonetheless). Papa John also had a construction crew, of some sort. His motto: "I take a the bum off the street and put him to work" (Having worked my pre-teen and teen years, I had to move sixteen hundred miles to Carson City, NV to be called a bum). Nevertheless, Papa John was from the old country. We hauled rock out of a quarry, we poured sidewalks at the Governor's mansion, driveways for old mansions around town and wherever else Papa John could get a gig. It was an interesting and educational experience.

One notable aspect of working for Papa John was (as I mentioned, he was from the old country: Italy), Papa John would not allow the crew to use power tools. No matter the job, no matter that we were working alongside a table saw, a power drill, or anything else that required electricity, the jobs were completed by pure manual labor. Papa John's reasoning went something like this: "Back in the old country when we were building roads it took as many as two hundred men to cut boards, or haul rocks, and/or cement with wheelbarrows. In today's society (1971), everything is done with power equipment, or cement trucks (the exception to this rule was when we drove a hundred-and thirty-miles, one way, to haul rocks that we loaded by hand)." We would drive a dump truck down into the quarry and load it up by heaving large rocks (after a day of doing so, even the small rocks felt like boulders), then drive out of the quarry and transfer the rocks, by hand, to a forty-foot flatbed: then back down the hill to the quarry. Papa John's thought process was simple: back in the old country, hundreds of men were employed. In the day's society (1971), ten men with power tools, etc., could accomplish the work of two hundred, thus one hundred and ninety were out of work.

Today we are living in a time of luxury, a time when more can be done with less. Throughout the world, individuals are protesting for a four-day work week. Throughout the past fifty plus years, not only did we have a five-to-seven-day work week, but we also had two or more additional jobs to feed the family. Even now I know of workers that put in twelve-hour, seven day a week jobs: no complaints. But today, there is a common resounding from employers that "We cannot find people that will work." Back in "the old country," preachers and teachers did their research with, wait for it, books. A preacher, teacher, elder, etc., literally had to read those books to find the treasures to be dug out of the clay and mire. Today, all you must do is type a word or phrase into a search bar and, within the blink of an eye, it appears on a screen. Not only are articles available for whatever subject suits your fancy, but also entire commentaries, dictionaries, and any other type of "aries" that might strike your fancy. Studies that used to take weeks, months, or even years to bring together can now be compiled in a day (superficially, that is). There have been gospel preachers, teachers, elders, deacons, and saints that have invested forty-hours a week in biblical research, and then invested forty-hours in the world, doing what their studies had encouraged them to do, i.e., take that which they had learned and distribute it to the lost. What is happening to evangelism?

There are many that continue to invest untold hours, weeks and years to the furtherance of evangelism. However, there appears to be a trend where evangelism has been reduced to a billboard, marquee and/or website. It rings of the adage "If you build it, they will come," or "location, location, location." Put out the shingle and our neighbors will come: Not on your life!

Get on your favorite search engine, type in “churches of Christ,” or whatever suits your intellectual pursuits, and you will be blessed with more pages and links than you’ll be able to surf in this lifetime. Now, I’m not bashing computers, I have three on my desk, and a phone that is smarter than I. However, these “tools” can often rob the community of people contact. We can spend hours building websites, surfing the web, posting on Facebook, Tick-Tock, X, numerous chatrooms, or any other form that allows an individual to “get their message out there!”

“Back in the old country,” gates were installed to keep things in, not to keep people out. You could “drop in” on a family of brethren without the least bit of concern that your sudden appearance would not be welcomed. Now, text messaging has replaced written letters, phone calls, or smoke signals.

What’s the point? The society within which we live has become accustomed to isolation. Once again, don’t get me wrong, I enjoy isolated times. I’m not your charismatic talk-about-anything-and-everything, your-happy-go-lucky guy in the crowd, but I’ve seen the isolation among brethren to be a matter that needs to be addressed. I recall the Hebrew prophet, who said, “Take heed, brethren, lest haply there shall be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God: but exhort one another day by day, so long as it is called To-day; lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin: for we are become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our confidence firm unto the end” (Heb. 3:12-14). “Day by day”!? Heart be still!

Society is being inundated with artificial intelligence (AI): Fully automated restaurants, and retail establishments that will eliminate the need for human involvement. A report stated the benefits of robots to take the human element out of the equation, i.e., robots do not steal. “Back in the old country,” it required a workforce. AI is reducing the need for human involvement. “Back in the old country” it took a workforce of two hundred to accomplish what AI can now do with ten. Even the Golden Arches have revamped their stores to cut off customer service and replaced it with a kiosk, grocery stores that encourage “self-checkout” by making assisted checkouts inconvenient. There is no stopping what’s happening. So, what’s the point? Consider:

What is the next step in evangelism? When the pandemic hit and brethren were restricted from assembling with the saints, “worship services” could be accessed online, where assembly with the saints was inconvenient, where individuals can sing along with the brethren, and hear the same message the attendees were hearing, and don’t even have to get out of their pj’s: and many like it that way. Already, evangelism is being reduced to online toys: Flashier pages, lights that capture the imagination (look at how the outward trappings lure individuals into the casinos), like bugs to a light. If we build buildings with all the trappings of sight and sound, if websites provide entertainment and interaction, the need for and desire for all hands on deck, people talking to people about the spiritual opportunities provided through Christ will be diminished, and Christians will no longer be a light to the world: “Back in the old country” will dwindle from the minds of brethren, until...until, the light comes on and brethren break the cycle and serve the Lord in Spirit and in Truth. ret