

November 23, 2005

OttawaWatch 52: Evangelism vs. discipleship

By Lloyd Mackey

This piece followed on #51, where I asked for feedback with regard to Tristan Emmanuel's suggestion that Christians "have a right to impose their morality in Canada." I had two thoughtfully-written responses. The first was from Brent Russett, at the time senior pastor at Sunnyside Wesleyan Church. As it happens, Sunnyside is a long stone's throw from Carleton University, and many of the church's young attenders are enrolled in the university's highly-regarded journalism program. In 2018, after 28 years at Sunnyside, Russett became the senior minister at historic Asbury Free Methodist Church in Perth, an equally-historic city 45minutes drive from Ottawa.

The other response was from William Badke, who continues as associate librarian at Associated Canadian Theological Schools library at Trinity Western University. His expertise is in research method and at least a thousand or two students have benefited from his counsel through the years. He also is a mystery novelist of some note.

Last week, I asked for feedback with respect to the two Great Commissions found in the Bible, and Tristan Emmanuel's comments on the "discipleship" GC. I quoted from these comments, as they had been reported in a newsletter to supporters of the ministry he heads, known as Equipping Christians for the Public-square (ECP).

I did receive two pieces of feedback from well-respected leaders and communicators. But before reporting on them, please permit me to walk us through the process that followed the writing of that OttawaWatch. Particularly, I would like to see how that process might assist people tasked with producing organization newsletters that communicate the messages and objectives of their leaders.

My quote from the newsletter, which reported on a recent ECP-sponsored conference, was as follows:

ECP Centre Executive Director, Tristan Emmanuel, wrapped up the conference with his message on why Christians **have a right to impose their morality in Canada**. Offering several possible rebuttals to hostile secular criticisms of Christian political activism, he concluded by noting that the "Great Commission" is a call, not to evangelism, but to discipleship - "Go out and make disciples ... and teach them all that Christ commands".

Emmanuel communicated with me earlier this week, to point out that his complete comments were more fulsome than the brief quote suggested, and considerably more nuanced.

I will excerpt the relevant part of his e-mail, which, I should note, was written with what I detected to be a gracious and Christian spirit.

Emmanuel said:

When Paul told Timothy to pray for his countrymen and for those in leadership (1 Tim 2:1-4) it was so that Rome would be favorably disposed -- to some extent -- to Christians, so they could do their job and evangelize and make disciples of the citizens of Rome without necessarily enduring political hardship. Of course, hardships came. Persecution came. But I don't believe that Paul, or Timothy, had a martyrdom complex. I think they both believed that it would be best to be able to build the church in a world where they didn't have to fear for their lives -- at least they prayed for that kind of political environment. I realize that neither Paul nor Timothy had the privileges of "civil rights", the way we have them today, and that is why the focus on prayer. Prayer is essential to what we do. But I also believe that to whom much is given, much is required. We have great freedom, civil freedom and I have to ask what are we doing with that freedom, especially to protect the gospel ministry and the spread of Christianity from political marginalization? That's my motivation.

In terms of the so-called imposing argument:

Actually, (my) lecture spoke about the fact that the Great Commission is not an either/or. It is not either evangelize or disciple, but both. We are called to be witnesses, to share the gospel and we are called to disciple and when we disciple the commandments must be part of that agenda otherwise we are not making disciples. So even if you disagree with me, please don't frame my argument as though I'm pitting evangelism over against discipleship. That's not what I'm saying.

Emmanuel's comments demonstrate something that is a bit of an occupational hazard – and double-edged sword – for communicators charged with converting carefully-crafted and detailed statements into short, precise and easily-understood summaries.

In this instance, ECP's newsletter provided such a summary and *Ottawa Watch* passed it on.

And the comments reproduced below, it should be noted, were in response to the summary, not to Emmanuel's lecture, as he himself reported above.

The first comes from Brent Russett, the senior pastor at Sunnyside Wesleyan Church in Ottawa

Sunnyside, as it happens, is a church located close to Carleton University. Because of that proximity, Russett is pastor, during study months, to a large number of Carleton students, including many enrolled in its highly-regarded journalism program.

So he regularly ministers to people whose study disciplines are very much involved in converting detailed statements and speeches into short, precise and easily-understood statements.

He wrote, with the kind of wit and wisdom that Carleton students would come to expect:

I read your article on Tristan Emmanuel. I did not get the argument that the great commission allows us to impose our morality.

Matthew 28 reads:

19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

The call is to make disciples of all nations (or more accurately translated "all people groups). When disciples are made they are to be baptized. And when they are baptized there is a place to impose morality (teaching them to obey). To make the argument that we can impose morality on people (or people groups) who are not disciples, is just not in the text.

... Just thought I would give you my two cents. But then again, what would you expect from a Wesleyan who believes in free will.

The other response came from William Badke, librarian for Associated Canadian Theological Schools (ACTS) Trinity Western University's Norma Alloway library. In his spare time, Badke is a Christian mystery novelist. And his newest book, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Meaning of Everything*, promises to be a good read as well as a refreshing and original explanation of the Christian gospel.

Badke writes:

I enjoyed your Nov 16 *Ottawa Watch* and was struck by the comment of Tristan Emmanuel that the Great Commission is not a call to evangelism but to discipleship.

In making this unbiblical distinction, Mr. Emmanuel has set himself up for a real public relations problem. The Great Commission, to "make disciples of all nations" presents as a holistic strategy of leading people to commitment to Christ, baptizing them and instructing them about the Lord's commands.

There is no separation of evangelism and discipleship in Jesus' commission. Mr. Emmanuel, however, has separated them, assuming that we can disciple a nation without first winning that nation (a common failing in the strategy of the US Christian right as well).

While being salt and light is always a good thing, assuming that Christian morality can be forced on Canadians regardless of their faith is the same as assuming that we can disciple people before we have done the first stage of discipleship – evangelism.

I trust that the juxtapositioning of these three – or four – sets of comments will provide some clues to help Christians to communicate what we really mean to say, when working in the public square.

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