

Church of the Nazarene – Patchogue
Sunday February 27, 2005 – AM
Alpha Promotion Sunday

Why Are We Here?

Matt. 28:18-20

I love to teach the Bible and accuracy is my thing. I am a Computer Applications Engineer in my secular job – a logic maniac. Things have to make sense; things have to be true and accurate for me. When I listen to people talking or an explanation of something, I don't hear what normal people hear. I hear the logic in what is being said. My mind filters and focuses on exactness of words. I think like a computer. This could be very aggravating to whoever is talking to me.

If any of you have been to one of my Bible studies, you know that I am a detail man. I feel compelled to tell you the details because I am enthralled by details and accuracy.

I love to learn things and explore and research new areas. This is a blessing and a curse (a blessing for me – and maybe a curse for you). I want to apologize to you for boring some of you in the past with more details that you could handle. Not everyone can deal with the same level of detail that I like. I have always sought out the most accurate literal translations of the Bible because I can't stand the Word of God to be watered down or interpreted loosely. Actually, my latest favorite modern translation of the Bible, for those who are into this also, is the English Standard Version. It is a very accurate literal translation, incorporates inclusive language where appropriate, and it is easy to read. There I go again – I'll save that for my personal study. Accuracy is very important. Even one letter can make a huge difference in the meaning of the text.

The Accuracy of Words

A new monk arrived at the monastery to join his brothers in copying books and scrolls in the monastery's scriptorium. He was assigned as a rubricator on copies of books that had already been copied by hand.

One day he asked Father Florian, "Does not the copying by hand of other copies allow for chances of error? How do we know we are not copying the mistakes of someone else? Are they ever checked against the original?"

Father Florian is set back a bit by the obvious logical observation of this youthful monk. "A very good point, my son. I will take one of the latest books down to the vault and compare it against the original."

Father Florian went down to the secured vault and began his verification. After a day had passed, the monks began to worry and went down looking for the old priest. They were sure something must have happened.

As they approached the vault, they heard sobbing and crying. When they opened the door, they found Father Florian sobbing over the new copy and the original ancient book, both of which opened before him on the table. It was obvious to all that the poor man had been crying his old heart out for a long time.

"What is the problem, Reverend Father?" asked one of the monks.

"Oh, my Lord," sobbed the priest, "the word is 'celebrate'!"

Today I want to speak to you from my heart. There will be no background historical evidence or Greek or Hebrew in this sermon. I am going to read from the New Living Translation (which Pastor Jerry uses all the time). I just want to convey to you what's on my mind. I want to remain accurate, but not by a discourse on what was happening in Rome in the first century. Those things have their place – in a Bible Study perhaps. You are all more than welcome to attend a Bible study for details.

Some of you tolerate the details or catch up on some sleep or maybe fill out some overdue greeting cards as if you're taking notes. (We can see everything from up here! ☺) Similarly, you who are in attendance probably make up only a fraction of those who are outside these doors, who still need to know God.

Listen to this paragraph that I copied from a book called Reclaiming the Great Commission:

“There's a major foam pit for 'Aerial Nose Bleeds,' and it's open to boards, blades, and BMX at the same time. A major wall ride and the famous, huge NISS starter ramp is set up for some major air over the first launch – right into the double spine with a connecting rail.”

How many of you know what on earth that paragraph is talking about? Maybe not many of us here; or maybe a few understand. They are probably young athletic types. It is talking to a crowd of people who share a common interest – skate-boarding, roller blading, and BMX bike riding. Unless you know this sport you might not have a clue what is being said here. I won't bother to tell you what it means – ask your young teenager if you want to know. The point is that this is what the church has become to the unchurched of our community. We are a specialty group of people who hang out together and speak in weird terminology that they don't understand, are not interested in, and may even be a little afraid of (in their own way). How can we convey the Gospel message of Jesus and the promises of the Bible in plain simple language that the people of our community can receive, understand, and relate to? We'll come back to this later.

OK – so here is the most accurate statement or quote I could say. It is a quote from Jesus Himself in answering a question Thomas asked Him.

John 14:6 - Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me." (NLT)

That's it! Simple and so profound in any translation. This is the reason I am here. This is the reason preachers preach and teachers of the faith teach. This is the reason evangelists evangel. ☺ The problem is that probably less than 5 or 10% of the people out there know this as a reality. In fact the reality is that most of the people you know outside of the Christian faith and some within the church are on their way to hell. Did you hear that? People outside of a relationship with Jesus are going to an eternity of separation from God and eternal darkness away from Jesus – the True Light. The Bible is clear about this, but we like to think that a loving God wouldn't do such a thing to the nice people I know and work with. Listen to Jesus own words ...

Matt 7:13-14 - "You can enter God's Kingdom *only* through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose the easy way. But the gateway to life is small, and the road is narrow, and *only a few ever find it.*" (NLT)

This is the dilemma. This is the bad news. Most people are on the wide road leading to eternal separation from God. They are all on it for various reasons or because of various circumstances, but they are on it non-the-less. It's our job to help them; to pray for them; and if we can, to do something about it. The Good News is that the Bible has documented the simple solution. Jesus is the Way. The Gospel message of Jesus Christ is the Good News people out there need. What can you and I possibly do to remedy this situation and why should we bother since it is already stated that they are on their way to hell and they don't really want to be helped? That's nonsense! Everyone wants to be helped. They are searching more than ever for spiritual meaning to life. They have deep questions, and they will continue to look everywhere else but the church for the answers to the "Questions of Life." Look at the increase of commercials for Psychic phone lines and people who connect to those who have passed over to the next world. This is nothing new. Saul went to a medium to bring Samuel back from the dead so he could inquire of him. This stuff is as old as life itself, but it is still condemned by God as an abomination and displeasing to Him. Those things aren't the answer. Jesus is the only answer – as we read earlier. What are we here for and what can we do? That brings me to the text for today ...

Matt 28:18-20 - *Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given complete authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."* (NLT)

Look at our business cards and our stationery. Look at the motto.
<scan of business cards for PJ and me>

Listen to what Jesus is saying. He is saying it to those who would follow after Him – that's you and me too. Make disciples – make Jesus known to the people; Teach these new disciples – know Jesus and His teachings. Look at our business cards again. If you didn't know this already – this is the goal, the vision of our church. We're not here to keep each other company and feel good about being in church together, although that is nice and should be a by-product of our relationship with Jesus. Our main purpose for being here is to reach our community with the Gospel somehow, and then disciple or teach them what they need to know so they can go out and reach others with the Gospel of Jesus. This is why we are here folks – the rest is gravy.

Doesn't God want us to have that warm fuzzy feeling of being together in fellowship as believers? You betcha He does. But that is not to take the place of our vision and reason for existing. It is not to take precedence over the mission of the church. This building is a vehicle for reaching the lost and teaching them the things of God so they can live a Holy life and not perish in hell for eternity. This building is NOT the church – we are the church no matter what the building looks like or even if we have a building at all. We are blessed to have this building and to be in the position where expansion may be necessary to house everyone comfortably and provide access for handicapped people to hear the Gospel. Keep the vision in focus gang. If we expand, it will be to reach more people for the Lord. That will be many less people in our community going to hell. That's has to be our focus and our motivation. We are going to multiple services in a couple of weeks. This is because we will be able to accommodate more who would have stayed home instead of coming to church. It doesn't matter if we have pews or chairs, altar rails or an open area, a steeple or a flat roof, a churchy looking sanctuary or store front space. We are here to bring Jesus to as many in our community as we can before they pass on to eternity without God.

Do you know the Lord? Is your eternity secure in Him? Then it is your obligation to support the efforts of getting the message of salvation out to others who in ignorance will die in sin unless they hear and respond. We have no control over the response - that's the work of the Holy Spirit, but we do have control over the direction of our church in bringing the message of salvation in Jesus Christ to as many as possible at any cost. So what can we do about this? How can we tell them in a way they will understand and be able to relate to?

ALPHA is one tool that God seems to be blessing in our church. It is not the only program, and it may not be the best for every church, but it is working here in Patchogue.

What is *Alpha*?

Alpha is a ten-week opportunity to explore the validity and relevance of the Christian faith for our lives today. It is a practical introduction to the basics of Christianity with loads of opportunity for debate and discussion. The style of Alpha is informal, friendly and non-pressured.

Alpha is enjoyed and appreciated as much by those who have never set foot in a church as it is by those who once attended and by the regular churchgoer. No matter what their background, whether investigating Christianity for the first time or revisiting their faith, participants get a lot out of an Alpha Course.

Each week people meet together for a meal, a talk on topics such as "Who is Jesus?", "Why Did Jesus Die?", "How Can I be Sure of My Faith?", and "Does God Still Heal Today?", followed by small group interaction. There is a day or weekend retreat midway through the course, which focuses on the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

Here's what Alpha is doing right in our own midst. We have heard testimonies today of how Alpha has made a difference in the lives of those who now attend our church – in fact – they wouldn't be in our congregation if not for Alpha. For others, it has enriched their relationship with God – even though they knew Jesus before the course. For some others, Alpha provides a non-threatening way for them to invite friends, family, and co-workers to the course without feeling intimidated or being ridiculed. At our last Baptism service, we heard how each person was touched by the Alpha course they attended. It made a difference in their lives. Let me briefly go over the components of an Alpha evening and the course. This may be your opportunity to invite someone to the course who you could never invite to a church service. We are here to do whatever it takes to reach the unchurched for God. It may mean preaching from a different translation that makes sense to them; it may mean sitting in different kinds of seats than we are used to for church; it may mean doing different types of music that they can relate to. We are here to introduce people to Jesus and teach them about living for God. That's CHURCH-101.

Alpha starts off with a dinner party that features: dinner prepared by people in our church and a nice setting downstairs for the meal. There is a pre-recorded video presentation of a talk called: "Christianity: Boring, Untrue, Irrelevant?" that states the feelings of the speaker before he came into a relationship with Jesus. We then have dessert together; and dismiss the people asking, "If you think something like this might be a help to you, then sign up for the 10 week course that follows." During the normal course the format is the same except after dessert we break up into small groups for a discussion on the topic for the evening and an optional short Bible study passage. The people are introduced to Jesus and the Bible effortlessly. You can be a part of this wonderful experience of

reaching the lost for Jesus without fear or pressure or embarrassment. All you have to do is invite someone to the Alpha dinner party coming up on March 16th. The rest is up to the Holy Spirit. Please pray for those who will be invited by you or anyone else this Spring. God is doing a mighty work in our midst with such a simple approach.

I would like to show you a 5 minute segment from the video talk that is given during the Alpha Dinner Party.

<video clip from the Alpha Web Site – Christianity: Boring, Untrue, Irrelevant?>

I would also encourage all of you to take the course, no matter where you are on your Journey with God. It will open your eyes to the wonderful program that is reaching the unchurched for the Lord and teaching them the things of God. We are Knowing Jesus – and – Making Him Known through Alpha. We want you all to join the vision. Please pray for Alpha. The materials are simple yet effective tools of evangelism. We offer two levels of follow-up or discipleship using Alpha materials also. The first course after Alpha is “A Life Worth Living” – a study through the book of Philippians verse by verse. The next course is “Challenging Lifestyle” – a study on the Sermon on the Mount – Matt. 5-7. In addition we are hearing great feedback from the Alpha Marriage Course that we just finished last Wednesday. The material is solid and does all the work for you except the invitation. This is still up to you – invite someone you know to Alpha and take the course with them. Together we can fulfill the Great Commission of Jesus: “teach them all the things I have commanded you” - (Knowing Jesus) – “make disciples of all nations” - (Making Jesus Known). The rest is up to God.

That’s the motto of our Church that Pastor Jerry prayed and came up with a few years ago... “Knowing Jesus – Making Him Known” Let’s adopt that vision and carry it out together.

Special Song: Tell Them <to end the message>