

Dear Friend,

How do you think about your non-church attending neighbor, coworker, family member, etc.? Are they an enemy to be defended against, a project to be worked on, a person with an alien culture and viewpoint, a hindrance to a peaceful, Christian life, a friend to be accepted just as they are...? Honestly, I have thought each of these things about the non-believers I have had contact with over the 31 years I have been a Christian. How you view another person will determine how you behave towards that person. So, what do the Scriptures tell us about how we are to view those outside the church?

Before I answer the question let me tell you why I'm even asking it. As you may remember, I am currently, in these monthly articles reflecting on each of our "Core Values". This month is Core Value #5 which states: "We believe that God aims to use our church to bring some of his lost sheep in Rock County into his fold through proclaiming his gospel to those currently outside Christ's church, through serving the needy (like the poor, the disabled, the elderly) and by planting other churches in Rock County." If this is truly a value we share as a congregation, then it is necessary for us to evaluate how we think of those outside "Christ's church" so that we can adapt biblical methods to bring some who are outside, inside.

I will examine just two of the many things that the Scriptures tell us we are to think of those outside the church. First, they are no different from us in many very important ways. All of us are made in God's image (Genesis 1:26-31) and worthy of the respect and dignity appropriate to all bearers of the divine image. All of us share in the important work of managing God's creation as his image bearers. This means that we share many of the same concerns that our non-believing neighbors share. We all care about raising respectful, responsible children. We share a concern for living in a safe and peaceful community. We want a just government and a pollution free environment. We value loyal friends and enjoy the same creation pleasures.

Another important way we are just like our fellow humans who are outside the church is that we are all sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. We all have inherited a corrupt, fallen nature by virtue of being human. The apostle Paul makes this so very clear in Ephesians 2:1-3 where he describes the condition of Christians prior to God's saving us through Christ: We "...followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the desires of the sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath."

While we are now "new creatures in Christ" and the power of sin and Satan over us has been broken, yet we are still in a war with sin and Satan in which we regularly fail to live by faith and obey Christ. We know by both past and present experience what it is like to be a sinner. We know that the only reason we are different in any way is not due to our innate goodness but to the grace of God. Therefore, we are not proud or condescending in our relationships with those yet outside of Christ. We really can relate to them as "one

beggar telling another beggar where to find food.” We have no ground for believing we are superior or that they are inferior in any way.

A second way the Scriptures tell us to think about those yet outside of the church can be seen in John 10:14-16. Here Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” Jesus says that as long as this world exists he is in the process of bringing all of his sheep home into his one flock, the church. In other words, we have every reason to expect that some of the people we are currently living with that are not yet part of Christ’s one flock are really sheep. They just don’t know it yet. And we don’t know which ones are sheep. Who in the early church knew that Saul of Tarsus, the great persecutor of the church was one of Jesus’ sheep? The only way the church knew is that one of them, named Ananias had to go to Saul and tell him what Jesus had to say and then to see Saul believe and be baptized in the name of Jesus. The only way to know who is a sheep is for them to “hear” the voice of Jesus and then listen to his voice. All true sheep listen to the voice of Jesus.

Therefore, we should always view every person outside the church as if he or she may be a sheep that just doesn’t know it yet. We ought to look for ways to let individuals hear the voice of Jesus so that; if she is a sheep she will come join the flock that is following the good shepherd. It is in and through the gospel of Christ that his sheep hear his voice. So we need to know that gospel so that we can explain it to others. We need to be praying that God would open doors for us to share that gospel (Eph. 6:19-20, Col. 4:3, 2 Thess. 3:1). Then we need to take advantage of the opportunities God gives us to speak the words of Christ so that his sheep will hear his voice and come home. It is part of our joyful privilege to be the voice of Jesus to his lost sheep. Let’s pray that God would enable us, both personally and corporately to be his voice in our community.

Being the voice of Jesus with you,