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The Theology of Evangelism

MAY I make clear at the outset, Mr. Moderator* what I consider I am expected to do in this paper. I am not here, with you, to give an appraisal of the precise theological standpoint of this evangelist or that. I am not asked to discuss the theology of evangelists. I am here to speak on "The Theology of Evangelism." Obviously the two are closely connected, but they are not the same. My task is not to say in what precise terms the message shall be presented. I am concerned with the doctrine of God and His ways with men which accounts for there being a message at all. That, I take it, is the strict meaning of the phrase which constitutes the title of this paper.

In case I am not making this point sufficiently convincing, perhaps you will bear a quotation from P. T. Forsyth. He is speaking of missions. He has in mind, primarily, overseas missions. And he has this to say :

"Truths like grace, atonement, judgment, and redemption, may be strange or remote to the individual; because faith often lives with the momentum of past generations of faith upon it. But for the Church these truths are necessary, for its ministers central, and for its missions vital. They may not be the missionary's stock-in-trade which he sets out as soon as he lands, but they are always his capital and inspiration."

Note the distinction between the stock-in-trade which he sets out and the capital and inspiration. The stock-in-trade, that is, the exact form of doctrine and its presentation may vary from one evangelist to another (within certain limits, of course), but there is a common capital, a doctrine of God which the Church as a whole possesses, without which there is no evangelism worthy of the name. It is with this that we are primarily concerned at the moment. What is the theology that sends us out as men who can do no other?

Very much to the point would be to ask what sent the early disciples out. In seeking the answer to this question we come upon a quality in these early preachers which made their contemporaries detest them. I refer to a certain exclusiveness amounting almost to intolerance; an exclusiveness or intolerance which points unmistakably to a belief on the part of these preachers that what they brought was *sui generis*.

This must be made clear. It was not the newness of Christianity which constituted its offence. On the contrary, newness was a com-

* A paper read to the Free Church Federal Council in London.

mentation rather than otherwise. There were lots of new religions in the air at the time, and very popular religions they were. They were welcomed; Christianity was, on the whole, rejected. Why? For, after all, in many respects Christianity and these mystery religions were very similar; so similar that, as is well known, some scholars have sought to prove that Paul borrowed his terms from these religions. They had, for instance, an initiatory rite corresponding to our baptism and a sacramental feast corresponding to the Lord's Supper. They preached deliverance from sin and access to heaven. Why, then, were the mystery religions popular while Christianity was despised?

The reason is simple and clear. Every Roman citizen had a religious duty to the state; he must offer a grain of incense to the genius of Rome and Caesar. In this the mystery religions found no difficulty at all. So long as their devotees satisfied the demands of the mystery religions, there was no objection to their sacrificing to Caesar. Indeed, in the course of their growth these religions had absorbed elements from other religions around and by this time some of them were three or four religions rolled into one. No difficulty was felt about pooling gods. So the moderate demands of Rome could be met quite easily. Salvation was to be sought in many places and compromise and accommodation were even encouraged.

In the midst of this broadminded, tolerant conglomeration there arose men, pale and confident, to tell the world that they could not compromise, that they could recognise no other name, since they proclaimed the one name whereby men must be saved. Do we wonder that they were detested? There was about them an air of dogmatism quite objectionable to the world of their day. If only they had brought just another teacher, just another religion. . . . But no; they came declaring that they had the one and only faith; that there was no salvation in any other. And the world hated them.

NONE OTHER NAME

Now, we have to look at this claim very seriously, for in it, it seems to me, is summed up the whole of the theology of evangelism. We can keep on going through the actions, of course, even when we have ceased to accept this claim. But not for long. The continuance of Christian evangelism is in the last resort dependent on the belief that there is no other name; that there is really no other salvation.

But is this belief justified? Does it not depend upon what is meant by the word "salvation"? It is fair to say that when we say that the gospel saves, modern man tends to think the whole time solely in terms of a change of character. Significantly enough, one modern religious movement has dispensed altogether with the word "salvation" and has substituted for it the word "change." This

substitution has the advantage of showing clearly what the modern mind thinks the word "saved" ought to mean.

Unobtrusively but surely, a corresponding change has taken place in our own attitude as Christians to the justification of evangelism. It is to be seen most clearly, perhaps, in our modern attitude to overseas missions. Time was when the appeal of "so many dying every hour without Christ and passing into a lost eternity" was used effectively. For good or ill, that day is gone. If the somewhat pretentious claim of the Christian Faith to absolute uniqueness means anything by now, we feel it must consist in its being the Faith which produces the most startling change in men and in creating the finest type of character. Thus, we are committed at once to the task of producing positive evidence of the uniqueness of our Faith in the type of convert our stations can show.

Now, let it be readily acknowledged that in submitting to this "practical" test we have come through with flying colours. In the newer and more backward regions, there is no question at all as to the effectiveness of the Christian Gospel. We compare the Congo pagan with the Congo Christian and the question "Does it work?" is already answered. Even when compared with the older religions of India and China, Christian Faith maintains its pre-eminence in the matter of fruit. The gloom of Buddhism or the joy of Christianity; which would we choose? The rigorous asceticism of Hinduism or the freedom of Christ? There is no doubt about it. Judged by the typical character it produces, the Christian Faith is on top.

But when all this has been said, are we anywhere near interpreting what these early Christian preachers meant when they said that there is no salvation in any other? Does the uniqueness of the Christian Faith consist in placing a good Christian and a good Hindu side by side and showing how much higher and more desirable are the virtues possessed by one than those possessed by the other? Or, to bring the question back to the "home" level, is the justification of evangelism to be sought in the difference in moral worth between the Christian and, say, the social worker who owns no religious allegiance but who derives his inspiration from what he is pleased to call humanitarian principles? In other words, in speaking of the uniqueness of our message, are we bound for ever to the relativity of comparing and contrasting human characters?

Let it be said with emphasis that this bondage was entirely unknown to the evangelists of apostolic days. When they claimed that there is no salvation in any other, they did not think slavishly, as we do, in terms of changed characters. Of course, changed characters and, indeed, healed bodies were testimony to the effectiveness of the Gospel, but when they protested that there is no salvation apart from Christ, they were looking at a great act of God in history and not at a number of reformed men. If C. H. Dodd has not lived

in vain, we are all convinced by now, I believe, that characteristic apostolic preaching, as far as it is capable of reconstruction, consisted not in a commendation of "Christ's way of life," but in the telling of a story about something that happened; something which had never happened before and which, in the nature of the case, could never happen again; the incredible story of the coming of the Lord of Glory to this earth, of His atoning death and His victorious resurrection—the story of what Christ had done *for* men; not, primarily, a promise of what He could do *in* men—this is what fired the early preachers. Of course, this issued in tremendous changes of character on the manward side. The statement in the second chapter of the letter to the Ephesians is proof enough of this. The point I am making is that it was not the character-changing, Christ's-way-of-life aspect of the message that was presented first. True it is that they were known as people "of that way," but the way was the result of the message and not the message itself. New Testament Christianity was never a "way of life" in the modern sense, but a way of life founded upon a doctrine. And it was the doctrine that constituted its uniqueness. If we assert that the only Son of God came into the world and by His death and resurrection reconciled the world to God; if this is what is meant on the Godward side by salvation, then, in the nature of the case, there can be no other name whereby men must be saved. We need no longer to compare this character with that in order to vindicate the claims of Christianity to uniqueness. We need only to keep our eyes fixed on that unprecedented and unrepeatable act of God and we are delivered from all doubts about our right to evangelise. In the last resort, the apology for Christian evangelism is theological and not psychological or sociological.

THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

It will be seen, I hope, that what I am trying to say is that the theology of baptism is essentially the theology of the Cross. You may think I have taken an unconscionably long time to say it. Of that I am painfully aware. But all this, let me hasten to confess, has been quite deliberate. If I need to defend my policy, I would do so by reminding you that G. K. Chesterton once wrote that there are two ways of getting home; and one of them is to stay there. The other is to walk round the whole world till we come back to the same place. I have gone the long way round in order to remind us where we have been in danger of wandering. We have been in all kinds of places before finally reaching once again that spot from which we see that on the day of Pentecost the preacher said absolutely nothing about what Christ meant to him; nothing about what fine fellows God could make of those undesirable murderers in Peter's congregation; nothing even about the social implications of

the Gospel (which was very naughty of him in view of the programme before us)*; nothing about the pattern of life set before men by this remarkable Galilean peasant. What Peter did was to point to the passion, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus as something which God had ordained as the means of the world's salvation. What men have to do is to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Let me not be misunderstood. I am not for one moment suggesting that there is no place in Christian preaching for personal testimony to the grace of Christ in the heart. Certainly I would not be so foolish as to say that the social implications of the Gospel are unimportant. In our modern world they are becoming of ever-increasing moment. What I am saying is that it was at the act of God for man's redemption that these preachers looked. All else was derivative. It is true that the shadow of the Cross fell on every path they trod. When it came to deciding what it was right for a Christian to do or not to do, the Cross was the deciding factor: no Christian must cause a brother to stumble "for whom Christ died." The question of living as one pleased was finally settled by pointing out that we are not our own, we are "bought with a price." Even the character of the marriage relationship was determined in the light of the Cross: husbands are to love their wives "even as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it." There is no end to the implications of the word of the Cross. But this is so because the Cross is a great act of God. Its shadow is ubiquitous because the Cross fills the sky. It is regulative of our thinking because it is the all-in-all of our redemption. The charter of evangelism is not an appendix to Matthew's gospel. It is in the Cross.

How this word of the Cross is to be presented, what exact interpretation is to be placed on this divine act, it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss. This, however, may be said in passing; the important thing in the actual presentation of the message is that it is Christ, crucified and risen, that is preached. It is Christ who saves and not a particular theory of the atonement. And Christ can make His way through the crudest Alexandrian statement of the ransom-theory. The Word of God is not bound; not even by our erroneous theology. If the Holy Spirit had to wait for a theologically unimpeachable presentation of the word of the Cross, the work of the Kingdom would be put off *sine die*. But no; it does not happen this way. It is Jesus who saves and not your theory or mine of the Cross.

But having said this for our comfort, we need to go on to say something for our challenge. We owe it to Christ who is the truth and to His Spirit who was sent into the world to lead us into all truth, to make quite sure that we present the truth of the Atonement

* The topic given to the second speaker was "Evangelism and Social Service."

"according to the Scriptures" and not, as Dr. Whale has put it, "according to later forensic or philosophical ideas which use the language of scripture only to misuse it." The new light shed on the meaning of Biblical terms, which often demands the modification of traditional statements of the Atonement, is not always fully taken into account. The result is that we still hear presentations of the story of redemption which imply a penal substitution theory in its crudest form. The stores of knowledge concerning the original languages of the Scriptures and the psychology of the Semitic people are completely ignored. Where this is due to ignorance, it is sometimes pardonable, if regrettable; where it is due to laziness it is most reprehensible; where it is due to a defiant obscurantism it is extremely harmful. For us, as for Luther, theology is essentially *theologia crucis*. But we are not always willing to look at it in all the light of sacred story which gathers round its head sublime.

CHURCH AND SPIRIT

The theology of evangelism is also a theology of the Church. Because it is *theologia crucis* it is *theologia ecclesiae*. And I am not thinking here in terms of an efficient "follow-up" of an evangelistic campaign. When I claim that the theology of evangelism is a theology of the Church, I do not mean that the evangelist should say to his converts, "Now, you go to church." I am thinking of something much more radical. We need to see that in a very real and profound sense this great act of God to which we point was designed to create the Church. We are beginning to see something of what Paul meant when he said that "Christ loved the church and gave himself for it." The "final cause" (I use the term in the Aristotelian sense) of Calvary and the empty grave and of the proclamation thereof is the creation of a redeemed society, a new Israel.

My contention now is that this truth is not something that follows evangelism. It has somehow to be integrated into the evangelism itself. Otherwise the evangelised will inevitably regard the Church as an "extra" in the Christian life, desirable, no doubt, but optional. If I may put this point in terms usually employed in a rather different context, it is part of our evangelism to show that the church is of the *esse* of the Christian life and not merely the *bene esse*. If this is not done there is bound to be untold waste. The free-lance Christian is a short-lived one. The comparison often made of the work of Whitfield and Wesley illustrates this point. Of the two it is agreed that Whitfield was far and away the more gifted preacher and made the more powerful immediate impression. But it was Wesley's work that lasted. And this because he preached with a view to gathering people into churches. The theology of evangelism is a *theologia ecclesiae*. That is why the best field of evangelism is within our churches if only our members will build up

a constituency of friends and neighbours whom they bring along to church to hear the Gospel preached in the obvious context of the fellowship. Some of us find that our people are increasingly doing this and those who are won for Christ thus are somehow of a different kind from those who are won in a setting where the fellowship of the church is something to be added later. This should give us pause.

The theology of evangelism is also, of course, *theologia Spiritus sancti*. We argue and plead. It is He who convicts. We seek to expound the truth; He leads men into it, and always by the hand. We strive with men at appointed times; His activity is a continuous present. He is the atmosphere into which we bring our message. Which is our only hope. As Karl Barth has put it: "Man needs to be made open and free for God's revelation and reconciliation. He is not already that in himself. The Holy Ghost by effecting revelation and reconciliation makes it impossible for us to cherish the thought that we are open for God, that we could prepare and get ourselves ready for this event." But He can.

Indeed, it is He who continues the ministry of Christ. All those touching stories about Christ telling the archangel that He had left the work in the hands of a few publicans and fishermen who loved Him can be so misleading. It is the other Paraclete who talks of the things of Christ and makes them known to us. I said that the theology of evangelism is a *theologia Spiritus sancti*. It might be nearer the mark to telescope the phrase and say, "Evangelism is Holy Spirit."

Theologia crucis, theologia ecclesiae, theologia Spiritus sancti. This, let me remind you again in closing, is not necessarily the evangelist's stock-in-trade; it is the capital of evangelism. I have not felt called upon to deal out the currency; I have tried, all too inadequately, to open the safe door and show you the bullion.

J. ITHEL JONES