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Evangelism in the New Testament

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It is an understatement to claim that evangelism is a prominent feature in the pages of the New Testament. In fact it dominates the whole scene. We cannot possibly make sense of what we read apart from this overriding concern. The New Testament is all about how God came to earth in Jesus to open the way of real life, and how the news was transmitted to those who were alienated from the ground and source of being in God.

If we want to know about evangelism the New Testament is the place to start. It is the best text book on the subject. It is here that we find out what the gospel is. It is here that we read the first account of how it began to be spread. It is here that we are presented with a pattern for evangelism in our or any age.¹ We must therefore consider the guidelines contained in the New Testament and assess their current relevance. If they have something to say to us in our 20th-century situation then we may perhaps dignify them with the name of principles.

1. We start with LANGUAGE AND THEOLOGY. Ours is an era of biblical linguistics. We have the tools at our disposal to discover the precise meaning of New Testament words to a degree not known before. If we want to know what evangelism is we begin with the verb *evangelizomai*. What does it convey?

The obvious and yet vital factor is that the gospel is built into evangelism by definition. The relationship between evangelism and the gospel is determined by etymology. To evangelize is to bring or promote or announce the evangel or the good news. The two are inseparable.

Recent research has established *evangelion* as a distinctive New Testament term.² It appears over seventy times with the specific connotation of good news and is rarely found in this sense except in Christian literature. Occasionally it is used with reference to straightforward news items, but the regular use of the verb in the New Testament and elsewhere relates to the distinctively Christian message. Evangelism has to do with its dissemination.

In his definitive article in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Friedrich shows that Jesus is the focus of evangelism.³ He is at once the one who brings the good news and about whom the good news is brought. Indeed the whole life and ministry of Jesus was a preaching of the gospel. All he did, as well as all he said, had this goal in view. 'The coming of Jesus to earth,

his life and death, were the great message of peace, the great proclamation of peace. His manifestation—not merely his preaching, but his whole work, is described in terms of εὐκγγελιζομαι.²¹ The Fathers (following Origen) used to say that Jesus was himself the kingdom (*autobasileia*).² They might equally well have said that he is himself the gospel.

According to the New Testament, to evangelize is to set forth Jesus. When this was done in the strength of the spirit, an effect was invariably produced. So Friedrich can add that εὐκγγελιζομαι is not just speaking and preaching; it is proclamation with full authority and power. Signs and wonders accompany the evangelical message. They belong together, for the Word is powerful and effective.²⁶ The reason is not far to seek. Jesus was never proclaimed in his absence. He was present in the preaching with his resurrection power. Here lay the secret of effectiveness. J. K. S. Reid has underlined this aspect of evangelism in his book on *The Authority of Scripture*. 'To proclaim the gospel is to stretch out the hand and point the finger to him who is the Word of God, and when this occurs, there Jesus Christ is present.'²⁷

Turning from language to theology, we are realizing afresh today that evangelism must be seen in the context of God's redemptive purpose for mankind.⁵ Taking it even further back than that, we discover that its roots lie in the very nature of God himself. Because God is the kind of God he is, evangelism is a necessary corollary of his being. The God of the New Testament, the God and Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, is an outgoing God. He does not and indeed cannot keep himself to himself. He is essentially one who moves out of himself to others. Creation is the product of that urge. He made man for fellowship with himself. Redemption is the product of the same urge. God must restore man to fellowship with himself. It is in such theological consideration that the heart of evangelism lies. 'Of all missionary journeys the Incarnation was the first, the costliest, the most effective', claims Harold Moulton. 'God has never asked men to do what he himself has not done before them.'²⁸ Those who worship an outgoing God must be outgoing themselves.

In recent years the relationship between the Church's mission and the divine mission has been examined more closely and spelt out more clearly than before.¹⁰ The mission of the Church stems from the mission of God. It is patterned on it and is indeed an expression of it. In his vivid and readable study of Jesus, Eduard Schweizer draws attention to a declaration which, with several variants, recurs in a number of places in the New Testament.¹¹ The basic announcement is that 'God sent his only Son to save the world'. It recurs in such passages as Galatians 4.4,5, Romans 8.3,4, John 3.16 and 1 John 4.9-14. As Schweizer points out, the verb 'sent' can be expressed in various ways; the formulation of God's purpose, the salvation of the

world, is also variable.¹³ Always, however, God is the subject, the object is always his Son. 'This shows', Schweizer concludes, 'that even before Paul this statement had received a fixed form in the usage of the community because it was obviously used often in the liturgy or in catechesis.'¹³ This, then, is how from the very start the mission of God was understood.

By its very nature it led to evangelism. That is why John has Jesus telling his disciples on the evening of Easter day: 'As the Father sent me, so I send you' (John 20.21 cf.17.18). If, then, we are to know what is the mission of the Church, we need to know what is the mission of the Father and of the Son. The total purpose of this divine sending includes more than evangelism, but evangelism is a cardinal feature and all the rest is geared to it. Mission and evangelism are not identical, although intimately linked. The mission of the Church represents all God gives it to do, of which evangelism is a major aspect.

2. We now consider PROCLAMATION AND INVITATION. The integral connection between evangelism and the evangel has already been established. As John Stott insisted in his paper on 'The Biblical Basis of Evangelism', delivered at the Lausanne Congress in 1974, 'evangelism may and must be defined only in terms of the message. Therefore biblical evangelism makes the biblical evangel indispensable. Nothing hinders evangelism today more than the widespread loss of confidence in the truth, relevance and power of the gospel. When this ceases to be good news from God and becomes instead "rumours of God" we can hardly expect the Church to exhibit much evangelistic enthusiasm!'¹⁴

'The first Christians were men with a story to tell', according to G. B. Caird.¹⁵ Evangelism, then, means proclamation. It may mean more but it cannot mean less. Some sort of verbalization is essential if a story is to be told. Form-criticism—and particularly that branch of it which scrutinizes the epistles—enables us to reconstruct the original content of the gospel as reflected in confessional formulae and doxological ascriptions.¹⁶ The tradition preserved, for example, in 1 Corinthians 15.3-5, could take us back to within two years of the crucifixion and certainly not more than five or six at most.¹⁷

In an instructive chapter in a Scandinavian symposium, Bo Reicke argues that the evidence compels us to 'presuppose the existence of more or less elaborate forms of apostolic preaching, soon after the resurrection of Christ, if not already in his lifetime. Although the apostolic message was something quite new and *sui generis* we must also look for the causes and origins of its forms, for historical research does not indicate any creation *ex nihilo* of external forms. So we must ask the question: Whence did the apostles derive the forms of this early preaching?'¹⁸

His answer is that they depend on the teaching of Jesus. 'One fact

is of extraordinary importance: the apostles were the representatives of the Lord and an extension or multiplication of his person."¹⁹ It was not that the apostles repeated precisely what Jesus said. Rather they performed an activity which corresponded with what Jesus did as the messenger of God. The ministry of our Lord was twofold in character—to convert his disobedient contemporaries and to inform and build up those already won. In the prior task of conversion Reicke underlines two factors in the evangelistic proclamation of Jesus which are reproduced in the evangelistic proclamation of the apostolic church—admonition and invitation.²⁰

The element of warning cannot be overlooked even though it is less characteristic of the New Testament than the Old. The preaching ministry of Jesus began with a call to repentance before the invitation to believe was issued (Matthew 4.17). Admonition remains a recurring feature of our Lord's teaching, especially in controversy with the Jewish establishment. It is equally apparent in the speeches of Peter and Paul as recorded in Acts. Reicke also regards Romans 1.18-3.20—a lengthy exposure of man's wickedness affecting Jew and Gentile alike—as falling into the same category. 'It is scarcely possible to avoid the impression that Paul has reproduced such discourses as he and his colleagues used to give when publicly attacking Jews and Gentiles in order to convince them of the necessity of conversion. He has probably given the readers a specimen of this preaching, starting from the declaration in 1.16 that he is not ashamed of the gospel.'²¹

In the New Testament, as distinct from the Old, the note of warning is always sounded in the context of grace and as a prelude to invitation. Both are designed to lead to conversion. 'The essential purpose of New Testament preaching was invitation,' claims Reicke, 'and indeed invitation to something that was already known to the proleptically present.'²² The Old Testament looked forward to the coming of Messiah—God's appointed deliverer. The New Testament announced that the one who was to come and who would yet come in glory at the end of the age, had in fact now come in human form. Those who recognized by faith who Jesus was were invited to change their minds about the past and commit themselves to him.

We have only to compare the contents and conclusions of the sermons in Acts to recognize a common factor in focusing attention on Jesus and inviting men to respond to him. The speeches conform to a logical scheme aimed at persuasion. A thesis is set out presenting the claims of Jesus, supported by appropriate proofs and then pressed home in the form of a challenge. To the Jews Jesus is offered as the Elect One of God, the Suffering Servant and the Risen Lord in whom the prophecies are fulfilled. To the Gentiles he is proclaimed as the One in whom the God all men seek has uniquely revealed himself

and through whom reality can be found. The same destination is reached by different routes.

In an age when new forms of evangelism are being tried and the whole approach to the non-christian is under review, it may be well to keep in mind this fundamental New Testament emphasis on proclamation and invitation. We shall be discussing methods in the next section: it is sufficient to make it clear in advance that no interpretation of evangelism which bypasses the offer of new life in Jesus can claim to be in line with the New Testament. Unless our contemporary experiments aim at introducing men and women to the timeless, risen Lord and enabling them to discover in him the key to being, then they patently fall short of what our Lord himself and the Church he founded understood by evangelism. We must beware of defining evangelism in terms of success, as Dr J. I. Packer warns, but we dare not reduce its objective.²³

We turn lastly to STRATEGY AND DYNAMIC. Although a response to the impulse of the Holy Spirit, the mission of the apostolic Church was not carried out in any haphazard manner. The missionaries had a clear plan of operation. We must not think of them as flying off madly in all directions with a zeal unaccompanied by discretion and forethought.

The overall scheme was to plant the gospel where it had not been heard before in the places where it would be most likely to take root and grow. Each centre evangelized was itself to become a centre of evangelization. Evangelism is a pioneering movement. Paul told the Christians in Rome that it was his ambition to bring the gospel 'where the very name of Christ has not been heard' (Romans 16.20). That is why Abbé Michonneau insisted that 'since 95 per cent of our people do not come to us, we must direct 95 per cent of our efforts to them. Not merely by sighs and vain wishes, but by real activity.'²⁴ This was the beginning of his revolution in a Paris city parish.

The plan of campaign in the New Testament, so far as the Christian conquest of the empire was concerned, was to seize the opportunity presented by existing circumstances. Roman provincial government had established great colonial cities which were centres of often cosmopolitan population and ready-made spheres of influence. The remarkably advanced Roman system of road communications provided the means of reaching these cities with maximum speed. Sir William Ramsay was convinced that the apostle Paul was working to a master plan to convert the Roman Empire.²⁵ This theory was that Paul had come to see the world through Roman eyes and appreciate the Roman statesman's ideal of a unified society. The apostle believed that Christianity was the one bond which could act as the cement of the Empire. As Caird suggests, it is probably more accurate to conclude that Paul recognized in the Roman Empire the divinely ordained means of supplying the framework of law and order

within which the gospel could be freely preached to all the world.²⁶ Certainly for him the field was the world and the world was Rome. Paul took advantage of every facility provided by secular society and used it to further the gospel.

We cannot overlook the role of the local church in the strategy of New Testament evangelism. Paul was a true apostle: he was a sent man. He was sent by God. But he was also sent by the church at Antioch in Syria. It was while the members of the congregation there, including certain prophets and teachers, were keeping a fast and offering worship to the Lord, that the Holy Spirit guided them to set apart Paul and Barnabas for the work to which he had called them (Acts 13.1-3). When the mission was completed, the apostle returned to Antioch to report back to base. The whole congregation was summoned to hear about 'all that God had helped them to do, and how he had thrown open the gates of faith to the Gentiles' (Acts 13.27). Evangelism must not be confused with individualism. The New Testament recognizes the function of the evangelist, yet like every other worker in the church he always acted as a limb of Christ's body.

Michael Green refers to what he calls the 'tandem relationship' between the Spirit bearing witness to Jesus and believers bearing that witness too.²⁷ The strategy of evangelism demands a dynamic and that dynamic is supplied by the Holy Spirit. As Caird reminds us, 'the sense of newly-acquired power was one of the marks of apostolic Christianity'.²⁸ It is noticeable that in both the Lukan and Johannine versions of the Great Commission, the equipment of the Spirit is included. 'The Holy Spirit is not the Church's possession in its own right', Douglas Webster correctly insists. 'The Holy Spirit has been given to enable the Church to fulfil its evangelistic mission.'²⁹

This is the supernatural dimension in evangelism which cannot be accounted for in merely human terms. There is always a divine plus. It means that strategy alone is not enough. It is this dynamic of the Spirit which is the ultimate factor. The problem of communication finds its resolution in this area. We need to wrestle with it and seek to come to terms with the complexities of language and idiom. But in the last analysis the Holy Spirit himself is the communicator. It is his distinctive function to take the things of Christ and make them plain to men. Again, in the work of evangelism, direction and initiative will come from the Spirit. The Church can expect what Cardinal Suenens calls 'the surprises of the Holy Spirit'.³⁰ This means that unlooked for results will always be looked for. God is not limited by the determinism of sociological or psychological prognosis. In his sovereignty he furthers his plan of redemption. Adolf Schlatter shows how the coming of the Spirit transformed the disciples and 'made them at home with the

miraculous'.³¹ New Testament evangelism is a sequence of miracles.

'Danger! Men at work' is a sign often seen at the roadside. 'Danger! God at work' is the sign of the Church when it is truly fulfilling its mission. Contrary to what some would have us assume, modern secular man is not altogether insensitive to spiritual reality. When God is really seen in his Church—in its proclamation and in its life style, men may still get in touch with him today at the vital point of contact in Christ.

Notes

- 1 Douglas Webster, *What is Evangelism?* London, Highway Press, 1959, p.72.
- 2 *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), ed. Gerhard Kittel, ET Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1964, Vol. II, pp.721-7 (Gerhard Friedrich).
- 3 *Ibid.* 2.718.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Comm. in Matthaem* xiv.7 ('the kingdom in person').
- 6 TDNT 2.720.
- 7 John K. S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture: A Study of the Reformation and Post-Reformation Understanding of the Bible*, London, Methuen, 1957, p.273.
- 8 The initial clause of the Lausanne Covenant, agreed by the International Congress on World Evangelization in 1974, has to do with the purpose of God (*Let the Earth Hear His Voice: International Congress on World Evangelization Lausanne, Switzerland*, ed. J. D. Douglas, Minneapolis, World Wide Publications, 1975, p.3).
- 9 Harold K. Moulton, *The Mission of the Church: Studies in the Missionary Words of the New Testament*, London, Epworth Press, 1959, p.4.
- 10 e.g. Georg Vicedom, *Missio Dei: Einführung in eine Theologie der Mission*, München, Keiser, 1958.
- 11 Eduard Schweizer, *Jesus*, ET London, SCM Press, 1971, p.81.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, p.69.
- 15 George B. Caird, *The Apostolic Age*, London, Duckworth, 1955, p.36.
- 16 Ethelbert Stauffer, *New Testament Theology*, ET London, S.C.M. Press, 1955, pp.235-53.
- 17 Edward Lynn Bode, *The First Easter Morning*, Rome Biblical Institute Press, 1970, p.91; A. M. Hunter, *Bible and Gospel*, London, SCM Press, 1969, p.109; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, ET London, SCM Press, 1964, p.90.

- 18 *The Root of the Vine: Essays in Biblical Theology*, ed. Anton Fridricksen, New York, Philosophical Library, 1953, p.129 ('A Synopsis of Early Christian Preaching', Bo Reicke).
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Op. cit., pp.130, 134-43.
- 21 Op. cit., p.135.
- 22 Op. cit., p.136.
- 23 James I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, London, Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1961, pp.40, 41.
- 24 Abbé Michonneau, *Revolution in a City Parish*, London, Blackfriars, 1949, p.8.
- 25 W. M. Ramsay, *Pauline and Other Studies in Early Church History*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1906, pp.49-100.
- 26 Caird, op. cit., p.125.
- 27 *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, p.166.
- 28 Caird, op. cit., p.57.
- 29 Webster, op. cit., p.79.
- 30 A. M. Ramsey and L.-J. Suenens, *The Future of the Christian Church*, London, SCM Press, 1971, p.50.
- 31 Adolf Schlatter, *The Church in the New Testament Period*, ET London, SPCK, 1955, p.18.

The Church's Mission to Society

HENRY D. RACK

ALTHOUGH an Archbishop of Canterbury can still issue a solo call to the nation as one of its assumed moral leaders, the rather muted response tends to underline the highly marginal position of the contemporary Church as a guide to society. Reflections on the Church's mission to society, whether in terms of religion or of social influence, must therefore start by frankly recognizing this fact and some of the reasons for it. East European theologians have spoken of the 'end of the Constantinian era' of ecclesiastical privilege and alliance with the ruling secular powers; West European theologians have sometimes spoken dramatically of 'dechristianization' and a 'post-Christian era'. Even if one recognizes that old habits and privileges die hard and that there are differences between societies which were once in some sense Christian and those which have never been in any sense Christian, it would probably be good for the churches to approach our society with a more realistic assessment of our capacity to 'guide' it, and of society's willingness to be guided.