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# The Evangelical Quarterly

OCTOBER 15TH, 1945.

## EVANGELISM FOR TO-DAY

THE urgent need for Evangelism is felt in every branch of the Christian Church. That it ought to receive a primary place in post-war construction is the firm conviction of many who remember the aftermath of the last world war, and who realise that any kind of programme, political, social, moral, national or international, must be based upon spiritual realities. Evangelism is not the narrow or superfluous thing that some would make it out to be.<sup>1</sup> It must be recognised as a formative force moulding the destinies of both individuals and nations. Evangelism is often regarded, even by some within the Christian Church, as an over-emphasis of the truth, a by-path of the Church's function, or a false development of the faith. At best it may be tolerated as not bad for certain classes of society. Indeed Evangelism may, in some quarters of Christendom, be suspect, but on the whole, outside of the Christian Church, it is viewed with indifference, especially amongst the more educated classes.

### I

The first essential of Evangelism is a clear comprehension of the message to be delivered. There must be a gospel to preach.

(1) The Gospel of Jesus Christ means first and foremost *certain definite facts of unassailable historicity*. According to the Scriptures Jesus entered into our life and experience as the pre-existent Son of God, being supernaturally born of the womb of the Virgin Mary, lived a blameless and unique life, died upon the Cross, and again according to the Scriptures, rose the third day and is now seated at the right hand of God the Father. These are realities which by faith and reason are indisputable and incontrovertible. Take these away as an indissoluble unity

<sup>1</sup> See John R. Mott, *The Larger Evangelism*, ch. i.

and the Gospel is no more. Evacuate them of actuality and the whole Evangel evaporates. There is one caution. The New Testament Church never hazarded the veracity of the Gospel entrusted to it upon any single fact, but rather upon the integrity of all the known facts. The Divinity of Jesus, for example, was never based upon the Virgin Birth. It was rather the other way round. The Virgin Birth was based upon the Deity of Jesus. This much-debated fact simply fell into its rightful place by the sheer force of the other relative facts. Moreover it was not a fact which could be publicly proved. This historical nature of the Gospel is of immeasurable value in the atmosphere of modern thought. The most subtle and pungent assault upon the Christian Faith is that it is just pure subjectivism, a creation of the fancy, a myth, immortal perhaps but immaterial, a sort of wish-fulfilment of the race. The evangelical narratives are alleged to be merely ætiological stories—stories invented to explain the origin and practice of Christian faith and worship. The revival by Karl Barth of the objective nature of the Evangel is simply a return to the historical reality of the apostolic preaching. It is in days like these, when all the Gospel stands for is doubted and dubbed as a ghostly phenomenon, that the objective reality, apart from me or my thinking or that of any other, ministers its beneficent calm. Were we never to believe or to disbelieve, there are the facts of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. These are rooted in the race whose blood is in our veins; and if we do have a first Adam, we can be as certain and sure that we have a second Adam.

(2) Again, the Gospel means *a revelation, a given interpretation of the historical realities*. "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" implied to the apostles a certain doctrine. The significance of the facts was not the product of human philosophy. Their meaning belongs to the "givenness" of the Gospel, which accordingly is not the Gospel of man but the Gospel of God. Its fountain and flow are heavenly, from God to man. In a word, the Gospel means a revelation. It is a gesture of God to men evidenced by material events. "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John iii. 16). It is admitted that the Divine interpretation of the Gospel facts can only be apprehended when their significance is not merely

intellectually conceded but religiously experienced. Jesus Christ and Him crucified present but pedestrian palpabilities, till by faith the spiritual vista gleams before the eye of the soul.

(3) Once more, the Gospel as it lives to-day means not only a unity of historical facts, a revelation of such divine redemptive activity within the human race, but also *the presentation of Christ to the individual soul*. The very essence of the Christian religion is fellowship with the risen Lord, with a living personality at once human and divine. The Gospel brings this Lord Jesus Christ and the human soul into contact. This is the significance of the closing appeal for repentance which was a normal characteristic of the primitive preaching. The same holds good for the Gospel, whether preached or lived. The introduction of Christ to some person or other is the conscious or unconscious mission of the great number to whom the Saviour of the world makes a difference, just as the confronting of the conscience by Christ, whose Presence fills the preacher's heart, is the preacher's highest task.

Such is the Evangel to-day, as I believe it has always been, without which there can be no Evangelism.

## II

I believe that it is not the *matter* which is so criticised to-day, but rather the *mode* of the Evangel. The first essential, we have just been emphasising, is to have a gospel to preach. The second is to know how to preach it, how to present it to the age in which we live. The Gospel itself may not change, but its adaptation to modern needs may demand serious thought. It is not necessary to say that interpretation of the Evangel and the Evangel itself must necessarily coincide. The crux of the present unhappy tension between what is termed "Modernism" and what goes by the name of "Evangelicalism" is not merely what the content of the Gospel is, but what that content implies. As in the first place there is diversity of opinion regarding the articles which compose the Gospel, so again there is disagreement concerning what the Gospel means. The practical issue, however, for both schools of thought and for every type of mind is how best to preach a living and saving evangel to this present

generation. Dr. W. B. Selbie in his recent publication, *Freedom in the Faith*, writes in the preface:

“It is a plea for a modern presentation of the Christian message as one of the most urgent needs of the hour and an indispensable element in post-war reconstruction. A revival of religion means a revivification of theology such as can only be brought about by the liberal temper and outlook. A new liberalism both in politics and theology is therefore our most clamant need.”

I do not feel—and there are many likeminded—that for this task of present-day presentation a sharp breakaway with the past is essential.

Among the author's last words at the close of his work he says:

“It is their experience of the work of the Holy Spirit guiding, revealing, and quickening that can alone account for the vigour and spontaneity of the religious life and witness of the early Christians. Their followers today are greatly handicapped by a traditionalism which endangers both their liberty and their life. The Churches today are like the dry bones in the valley of Ezekiel's vision. They need to be clothed with flesh and blood and to have new life breathed into them before they can do their work.”

Here traditionalism is censured for the lifelessness of present-day Christianity. I have as frequently heard the blame assigned to liberalism. It is a grave warning to avoid two extremes. On the one hand it is possible to conceive of the Gospel as hide-bound, a cast-iron system void of the change which life implies, imprisoned in categories of thought and rigidly contained in worn-out phraseology, a virtual denial of the Spirit's ministry. On the other hand, and as it seems to me the greater peril in our day, the Gospel can be so modernised that it is evaporated of its very essence and is no longer God-given, but man-made. The faith once delivered unto the saints and its alleged development or interpretation are so different that they cannot be identified as the same. The tendency in this extreme is to adapt the Gospel to the carnal mind of “the natural man” and make room for his pride and independence of mind in the face of the demands of a holy and sovereign God.

Avoiding, if possible, both of these extremes, we pursue the problem of presenting the Gospel to the world of to-day. What are the best notes to strike? The past mode may be ineffective. It is agreed by many who have been observers of the age that “hell-fire preaching” has no appeal. The people have no conscience in this direction. They do not believe in hell; yet they use the word often enough, especially in this war period.

Such preaching is like whipping a dead horse. There can be no result. This criticism does not imply that there is no hell or that those who make it do not themselves believe in hell. The point is simply that it may be a wrong approach in the atmosphere of everyday thought. The preaching of inevitable judgment is quite another matter, and it should not be shirked. Modern literature is full of retribution, the consequence of sin or wrongdoing. There may be many other phases of the Gospel which do not "cut any ice", but the present-day evangelist may never preach less than the Gospel which is "Thou shalt call His name Jesus for He shall save His people from their sins"; and sin is a tremendous reality. As we think of the mode of the Gospel's presentation, some accents which may arrest the age in which we live, or meet its urgent need, may be suggested.

(1) *The Divine Saviour*. Biography finds its way to-day into the minds and hearts of most men and women, and whatever magnifies Jesus in the days of His flesh is profitable preaching. It is in the way of an introduction to One Who seeks for individual souls. I believe that a bold assertion of our Lord's Deity should be made. Once I remember preaching upon the unknown chapter of Christ's life, His "dwelling in the bosom of the Father", when a young hearer told me this idea of pre-existence before being born into the world was perfectly new and made a deep impression. The significance of His life, likewise, that He came "to seek and to save that which was lost", cannot detract from the hero-worship which is given readily to great men of our age. To glorify the Lord, if not just what our age wants, is what it needs.

(2) *The Cross*. In any time and circumstance this emphasis is inevitable. It is central and may not be neglected. The blameless life of Jesus culminated in His death, and the unity of life and death may never be ruptured without harm. The preaching of "the blood of Jesus Christ" is repugnant to the modern hearer, because he does not understand it as the surrender of the life. Of course the Cross is always an offence to the natural man, but the present-day preacher does not require to make it more offensive by an imperfect presentation. A frank admission that the atonement is beyond finite comprehension though not contrary to reason and not beyond faith, will not belittle the preacher nor his message in the presence of the intellectuals. The firm conviction of the evangelist that Jesus did on the Cross

what no man could do for himself will by the Spirit's aid accomplish its end. One thing never to be forgotten is that the primitive preaching, the Kerygma of the New Testament, was a proclamation of salvation procured by Christ, and not an apologia of its meaning or method.

(3) *The Source of Morality.* It is estimated that the morality of our age is deplorably low. This lamentable condition prevails in spite of the modern appraisalment of the ethic of Jesus. The teaching of Jesus on daily conduct is generally accepted as the best among all the religions of the world. But the vital sustaining power of the good life is not as widely recognised. In a discussion group of about twenty young folk in the Services, when religion was the topic, seventeen declared their belief that the Gospel Story ought to be superseded by the Ethic of Jesus, while the other three held firmly the necessity to adhere to what Jesus did for humanity as well as to accept what He revealed of the ideal life. Professor John Baillie in his *Invitation to Pilgrimage* warns that the noble ethic of modern youth is the legacy of the evangelical preaching and practice of the age of their fathers. Next age will see it disappear unless the Gospel be really experienced to-day as the living source of true morality. A train will run a good way after the steam is shut off, but assuredly it will stop. A personal experience of the living Christ alone will make religion real and morality sure.

(4) *The Values of Life.* The Evangelist will make his appeal above all to youth. It is a widely-recognised fact that the majority of conversions happen somewhere between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one. Youth is very ignorant of what constitutes the best in life. It revels in life, in the very joy of living. All lies before it like an uncharted sea. Can youth answer what is really worth while in life? The Gospel in no uncertain tones puts first things first. "What shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" A good time is not got by anything the world can give. There is a craving still unsatisfied. Only Christ can satisfy. He is the Supreme Value in life. The estimate of the spiritual as cheap is the Esau attitude, the attitude of the materialist and sensualist. Youth, to-day, has got all the values wrong. Sin, to take another sort of value, has not its place in life as an alien force. At best it is construed as a violation of the moral law only, and not supremely as an insult to the living God. Sin is freely courted as an experiment

and not as a soul-destroying force. Many play for safety first and are content not to be found out. Their slogans are, "I like to try everything once", and "If you can't be good, be careful". What must be sounded forth fearlessly is that sin is against God as well as against self and others, against the God with Whom we have to do, and that the only cure for sin is the forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

(5) *The True Transforming Power.* We are on the eve of reconstruction. Great hopes are centred in the future. The world-to-be is set in an almost Utopian light. Idealism is projected far and high. This is all to the good. But what of the dynamic? Here the Evangelist must proclaim Jesus Christ as the one Hope of the future and the desire of all nations. But the Evangel can only become a force when lived and not merely proclaimed. Applied Christianity in the power of the Holy Spirit is the burning need of the hour. There is no field wherein the Gospel may not enter. Religion is life. It informs politics, social life, science, art, literature, and all the modern problems of economics, master and men, housing, slums, the living wage, the employment of leisure and so on. The Gospel must be preached as it was in its earliest days by Jesus Himself as "the way of life" through Him Who alone can assert "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life". You may call this the preaching of the Kingdom of God, for so it is, that Kingdom which is supernatural and natural, a product of Pentecostal power and human effort. Evangelism must never at any time come under the charge of individualism, while it is equally true that we enter the Kingdom "one by one". "Ye must be born again" is the strongest and sternest individual demand of the Gospel, but it leads to a society of believers whose mission is the Kingdom of God upon the earth.

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