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The Evangelist Works with the Local Church

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1. Introduction

Fifteen years ago, in September 1985, Dr. Billy Graham visited Romania and preached in my church. It was a historical event in my life and in the life of the Romanian believers. In spite of serious restrictions imposed by the Communist authorities of that time, there were about 60,000 people in the auditorium, on the streets and on the rooftop of the surrounding build-

ings. It took all our loudspeakers of the church to be placed on the trees and the surrounding buildings in order for the crowd to hear the message of salvation in Christ (the healing of the blind man Bartimaeus—Mark 10:46-52). Even today there are people who ask to be baptized in our churches as a result of that event. That September evening, these people were in the crowd and accepted Christ as their Lord and Saviour. After years of struggles and hesitations, they are still aware of the decision they made to follow Jesus, and realize the need to join a local church. Somehow, in their minds there is a clear association of the message of salvation with the local church.

My message today is about the relationship between the evangelist and the local church. I do believe that such a topic has both theological and practical implications for the contemporary church. However, instead of a sociological, pragmatic, and prescriptive approach to this issue, in this presentation I will focus on some theological aspects concerning

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the church, evangelism and the relationship between them. It is my belief that a clear theology generates clear praxiology.

2. The Nature of the Church

Although, since Schleiermacher, some have accepted the idea that the church is 'a society which originates only through free human action and which can only through such action continue to exist', or that the church is a 'communion or association relating to religion or piety', it can be argued that the church is not simply a human institution at a horizontal level (like a trade union, an association of fishermen, or a local club).

The being of the church is closely related to the being of God, of men and of the world. Using New Testament language, one can affirm that the church is simultaneously a divine-human organism and a historical-eschatological community.

a) The Church is a divine and human organism.

The divine dimension of the church is given by Christ who is the Head of the Body and by the Holy Spirit who is the life of the Body. Therefore, the apostle Paul could say to the Colossians: 'And he is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the first born from the dead, that in all things he may have the preeminence' (Col. 1:18; cf. Eph. 4:15). The human dimension is constituted by saved sinners who are baptized by the Holy Spirit into the Body as members. The apostle Paul affirms: 'Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it' (1 Cor. 12:27), due to the fact that 'by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body' (1 Cor. 12:13).

The body metaphor teaches the headship relation between Christ

and believers in a clear ecclesial, corporate setting and not as isolated believers or disjointed members. The source of everything in the body is Christ, the head and the life giving Spirit. The glory and the strength of the church resides in the Head and the Spirit. The weakness and the frailty of the church resides in the members. However, there is a relation between the Body and the Head. The Head is not without a Body and the Body is not without the Head. Yet it must be underlined that the Head and the Body do not share the same prerogatives. The Head is divine, infallible and all-powerful, while the members of the Body are human, fallible and weak. Some are inclined, however, to believe that since the church is the Body of Christ, whatever is true about the Head is true also about the members of the Body in its institutional structures. The risk of such an approach is to develop a sort of triumphalistic institutional ecclesiology with dramatic consequences for praxiology.

The New Testament analogy of the body makes a clear distinction between the Person of Christ and his Body, the church. Christ is declared to be the Saviour of the Body (Eph. 5:23). The body receives its nurture and unity from the head (Col. 2:19). The Body is to grow and mature in every respect in him who is the Head (Eph. 4:15).

Alternatively, some believe that the church is simply a voluntary human organization with religious purposes on horizontal level. Consequently, the church is not an essential part of the Christian life: to belong to a local church or not is an optional matter. Since, salvation is a personal relation with Christ, belonging to a local church is a secondary issue.

The metaphor of the body offers a clear vertical dimension to the church. Believers are personally and corporately 'members of Christ himself' (I Cor. 6:15). Moreover, the church is Christ's instrument in this world: 'He put all things under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all' (Eph. 1:22-23).

The understanding of the church as a simultaneous human-divine organism offer a clear perspective on evangelism. Thus, evangelism is not an additional work to the being of the church, but its very mode of being. It would be difficult to biblically substantiate a non-salvific relation between Christ and the Holy Spirit, on the one hand, and the lost world, on the other. If that is true, the presence of the New Testament church in this world must be evangelistic. Speaking about evangelists we have in mind simultaneously all the believers and the specially gifted believers in the ministry of evangelism. In both senses of the term, the evangelist is not and cannot be an isolated member of the body in his/her private relation with Christ. This aspect is further emphasized by the historical-eschatological dimension of the church.

b) The Church is simultaneously a historical-eschatological community.

Another analogy the apostle Paul uses to explain the mystery of the church was drawn from the Old Testament idea of the people of God. Schnackenburg argues that in Hebrew thought, the people constituted a whole, a corporate entity to the extent that the individual was perceived to be involved in the future of the entire community, even in a

supra-temporal way. As with their Hebrew predecessors, a corporate personality characterizes the new people of God, the community of those who trusted in the risen Christ. Behind the establishment of this new people of God was the reality of the risen Christ, 'who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good' (Titus 2:14).

This new reality is a historical community of concrete living persons in the flesh, living in time and space. Yet, it must be emphasized that although the church lives in this world is not of this world, it is an eschatological community with its gaze fixed on the Parousia. Moreover, the historical people of God are simultaneously citizens of their lands and 'citizens of heaven'. In other words, the church is part of this age and the age to come, history and eschatology.

The simultaneity of history and eschatology in the life of the church underlines also, the simultaneity of its historical and eschatological mandate. The historical mandate is 'Go into all the world' (Mark 16:15), while the eschatological mandate is 'Come you blessed of my Father' (Matt. 25:34). Although the life of the church is multifaceted and needs a careful study, it could be argued here, in general terms, that the dynamic of the church is determined by the relation between 'Go' and 'Come,' or between missions and worship. Historically speaking, some have over-emphasized missions to the detriment of worship, while others have emphasized worship to the detriment of missions. In other words, some 'Come' but never 'Go', while others always 'Go' and never 'Come'. A balanced church empha-

sizes both worship and missions.

The interplay of the divine-human and historical-eschatological dimensions of the church provides a theological frame of reference for the relation between evangelism and local church. Evangelism is the way of life of a worshipping community. The evangelist is not a lonely ranger on earth, but a member of the ecclesial community. However, before we explore this aspect, it is important to look at the nature of evangelism.

3. The Nature of Evangelism

The Bible uses a number of clues to explain evangelism, such as the proclamation of the gospel, making disciples, bearing witness to Jesus Christ, fishing for men, being the salt of the earth and the light of the world, bearing fruit that remain, being the aroma of Christ, the ministry of reconciliation and declaring the wonderful deeds of God. However, due to the complexity of the subject and the variety of methodologies, Christianity is far from having a universally accepted definition of evangelism. Moreover, J.I. Packer argues that:

There is confusion about evangelism in the modern church. The trouble comes from our habit of defining the activity institutionally and behaviourally rather than theocentrically and theologically. Some give the name of evangelism to any kind of meeting in which the leader works up an altar call of some sort, never mind what has or has not been affirmed before the calls comes. Others will equate evangelism with any activity that expresses goodwill to persons outside the church . . .

The following definitions of evangelism will illustrate this fact:

The 1918 Anglican definition affirms that:

To evangelize is so to present Christ Jesus

in the power of the Holy Spirit, that men shall come to put their trust in God through Him as their Saviour, and serve Him as their King in the fellowship of His Church.'

One of the most quoted definitions of evangelism is D.T. Niles' 1951 definition: 'It is one beggar telling another beggar where to get food.' The context of the definition is this:

Evangelism is witness. It is one beggar telling another beggar where to get food. The Christian does not offer out of his bounty. He has no bounty. He is simply guest at his Master's table and 'as evangelist', he calls others too. The evangelistic relation is to be 'alongside of' not 'over against.' The Christian stands alongside of the non-Christian and points to the Gospel, the holy action of God. It is not his knowledge of God that he shares, it is to God Himself that he points. The Christian Gospel is the Word become flesh. This is more than and other than the Word become speech.

The 1977 Church Growth definition argues that:

To evangelize is to proclaim Jesus Christ as God and Saviour, to persuade people to become his disciples and responsible members of his church.

The Lausanne Covenant defines evangelism as follows:

To evangelize is to spread the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and that as reigning Lord he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gift of the Spirit to all who repent and believe. Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is that kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand. But evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God. In issuing the Gospel invitation we have no liberty to conceal the cost of discipleship. Jesus still calls all who would follow him to

deny themselves, take up their cross, and identify with his new community. The results of evangelism include obedience to Christ, incorporation into his church and responsible service in the world.

George Hunter gives the following definition of evangelism in his 1979 volume, *The Contagious Faith*:

Evangelism is what *we* do to help make the Christian faith, life and mission a live option to undisciplined people, both outside and inside the congregation. Evangelism is also what *Jesus Christ* does through the church's *kerygma* (message), *koinonia* (fellowship), and *diakonia* (service) to set people free. Evangelism happens when the *receiver* (receptor, respondent) turns (1) to Christ, (2) to the Christian message and ethic, (3) to a Christian congregation, and (4) to the world, in love and mission—in any order.

Delos Miles in his book, *Introduction to Evangelism*, gives the following definition:

Evangelism is being, doing and telling the gospel of the kingdom of God, in order that by the power of the Holy Spirit persons and structures may be converted to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

And finally, L.A. Drummond defines evangelism as:

A concerted effort in the power of the Holy Spirit to confront unbelievers with the truth about Jesus Christ and the claims of our Lord (Acts 2:22-24, 31) with a view to leading unbelievers into repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21) and thus into the fellowship of His church so they may grow in the Spirit.

From the perspective of the relation between the evangelist and the local church, it can be argued that in spite of different theologies of evangelism enshrined in these definitions, there are some common trends:

First, the role of the local church in evangelism is being perceived almost exclusively as the place where the converts should be directed for fel-

lowship and discipleship after evangelism, and not as the agency that actually does evangelism. Secondly, evangelism is defined either in impersonal or individualistic terms and not in corporate terms. And finally, evangelism is defined in the context of the kingdom of God and lordship of Christ with no clarification regarding the relation between the kingdom and the church.

Moreover, due to the fact that some fail to understand the relation between the local and universal church or between what has been referred to as visible and invisible church, there are evangelists with no clear church affiliation and accountability, and churches with no commitment to evangelism. Additionally, there is an urgent need to distinguish between post-denominationalist type of evangelism and inter-church cooperation type of evangelism. A coherent theology of church and evangelism could avoid some of the contemporary issues in this area.

Dr. L.A. Drummond has made significant steps in this direction in his book *The Word of the Cross: A Contemporary Theology of Evangelism*. Evangelism is explored both theologically and practically. From a theological perspective, evangelism is rooted in the being of the Triune God. The trinitarian perspective on evangelism not only re-emphasizes the richness of the trinitarian gospel, but also offers the perfect ontological foundation for a simultaneous personal and corporate evangelism. Unfortunately, Dr. Drummond does not extend his trinitarian definition of evangelism to the people of God who are simultaneously, personally and corporately called to evangelism.

A definition of evangelism that is both trinitarian and ecclesial could

be:

A concerted effort of the people of God simultaneously personal and corporate in the power of the Holy Spirit to confront unbelievers with the truth about Jesus Christ and the claims of our Lord (Acts 2:22-24, 31) with a view to leading unbelievers into repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21) and thus into the fellowship of His Church so they may grow in Spirit. (M. Erickson, *Christian Theology*)

4. Local church and evangelism

If the church is simultaneously a divine-human organism and a historical-eschatological community, then evangelism is a mode of being of the church. The church was not created to be an end in itself, but to perpetuate Christ's ministry to the world. Erickson argues that the function of the church is fourfold. *First*, evangelism which is an imperative of the Great Commission: the church exists to make disciples of all peoples. *Second*, to edify believers through fellowship, teaching and the practice of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. *Third*, worship—praise and exaltation of the triune God. Worship should always precede evangelism and edification. And *fourth*, to demonstrate a social concern for believers and non-believers alike.

Assuming that few would deny the fact that there is divine-human cooperation in the spreading of the gospel, it must be underlined that evangelism is also simultaneously historical and eschatological. Not only that the church is the body of Christ (personal and corporate), but the believers are also called to be a kingdom of priests (I Peter 2:9). In this kingdom the individual is not swallowed up by the crowd and the

community is not threatened by individual members. Although limited and imperfect, the ecclesial community is a historical mirror of the Trinity. The 'one' and the 'many' co-exist in harmony. This is beautifully illustrated in the Book of Acts through the words 'all...and each and everyone'. The relation between the 'one' and the 'many' in the theology of Acts avoids both individualism and collectivism.

Another aspect of concern is the balance between the 'priesthood of all believers' and special callings according to the gift(s) of the Spirit. Some may be inclined to downplay the role of the 'many' priesthood believers in favour of the 'one(s)' specially gifted evangelists; or alternatively to belittle the ministry of the gifted 'one(s)' in favour of the ministry of the 'many'. When such things occur, not only is there tension in the church, but the witness of the whole body is affected in a negative way. In such cases, some gifted believers in the area of evangelism may consider the independent route as the best alternative. However attractive this model might be, it must be observed that the apostles did not abandon the church in times of crisis. Rather, they worked under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to correct the distorted theology that generated the crisis, in order to heal the church.

Therefore, bearing in mind the sinfulness and limitations of human and historical dimension of the church, there must be both personal and corporate accountability to Christ. This may sound anachronistic, bearing in mind the fact that the culture of post-modernity breeds individualism and relativistic ethics. Regardless the pressure of history, the church must constantly maintain the balance between history and eschatology,

between this age and the age to come. Consequently, it can be argued that biblical evangelism is both historical and eschatological. The Manila Manifesto of July 1998 argues that:

Every Christian congregation is a local expression of the Body of Christ and has the same responsibilities. It is both 'a holy priesthood' to offer God the spiritual sacrifices of worship and 'a holy nation' to spread abroad his excellences in witness (1 Peter 2:5, 9). The church is thus both a worshipping and a witnessing community, gathered and scattered, called and sent. Worship and witness are inseparable.

As a pastor and evangelist, I am aware of the fact that pastors, teachers, evangelists and missionaries and local churches are not perfect, yet. However, there is the promise that Jesus 'gave himself for her (the church), that he might present her to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but

that she should be holy and without blemish' (Eph. 5:25-27). Such an eschatological perspective is calling upon us to commit ourselves afresh to our triune God, his church, and the Great Commission.

5. Conclusion

Speaking about the relation between the church and evangelism, the Lausanne Covenant affirms:

We affirm that Christ sends His redeemed people into the world as the Father sent Him, and that this calls for a similar deep and costly penetration of the world. We need to break our ecclesiastical ghettos and permeate non-Christian society. In the church's mission of sacrificial service, evangelism is primary. World evangelization requires the whole church to take the whole Gospel to the whole world. The church is at the very centre of God's cosmic purpose and is His appointed means of spreading the gospel.

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