Evangelism and Incarnation

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In his commentary on John's Gospel Origen writes: "Jesus himself preaches good tidings of good things which are none other than himself."[1] Jesus not only preaches the good news of the coming of God's kingdom but, as the Messiah, albeit hidden, he is the good news. Jesus is the Gospel. But if Jesus is the evangel, surely this has consequences for evangelism? The essential unity between the evangel which is Jesus and the evangelism which stems from, or rather streams from, his life, death and resurrection, and the sending of the Spirit, is the clue to a theology of evangelism which is true to the complexity of the New Testament.

Jesus is the Word made flesh, the Word incarnate. A great deal of contemporary "theology of evangelism" is an evasion of, or a protest against, this ancient scandal. The two oldest heresies of the Church constantly reappear in treatments of the subject. On the one hand there are those for whom the Word is the only true reality. The American evangelist Peter Wagner is an example of this type. He distinguishes between "presence," "proclamation" and "persuasion" evangelism, and he leaves us in no doubt as to which is respectable and which is not. By "presence" evangelism he means such things as "redeeming social structures," "arousing the oppressed to take arms against the oppressors," "restoring manhood as reflected in Jesus." He makes quite clear that in his book these activities do not count for evangelism at all, and he conveys his disapproval in a comparison with proclamation evangelism. "A wide river of difference" separates these two. "They represent two different philosophies, with two different starting points. Christian presence asks the world to set the agenda; proclamation takes its agenda from the Word. Presence sees the root of the problems of mankind in society; proclamation sees it in sin... presence attempts to arouse a social conscience; proclamation attempts to arouse spiritual conviction."[2] Condemnation could scarcely be less equivocal. In proclamation evangelism, on the other hand, which is commended, the Word is told "orally and intelligently" whilst persuasion evangelism goes one better in making men pew-filling cheque-giving members

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[1] Origen, *Comm. on John*, ch. 15.

[2] In *Christ the Liberator*, ed. Stott, London, 1972, pp. 97-98.

of the Church. But whilst Wagner at least begins with a three-fold distinction, many writers are ignorant of any except a verbal dimension to evangelism.[3]

It is also clear that this *sola Verbi* gospel also subscribes to the kind of political ideology which makes this convenient. The concentration on Word alone reflects a radical disjunction between gospel and world, religion and society, social conscience and spiritual conviction. This disjunction permits the innocent or not so innocent, but anyway passionate, affirmation that, as Escobar puts it, politics is worldly whilst business is not, membership of a union is wordly whilst membership of a group of real estate owners is not, giving alms to the poor is godly, organizing them to fight the causes of poverty is not.[4] Such a combination of flight from and acceptance of social reality is probably always characteristic of docetism. A more profound objection was stated by Edwin Muir :

> How could our race betray
> The Image, and the Incarnate One unmake
> Who chose this form and fashion for our sake?
>
> The Word made flesh is here made Word again,
> A word made word in flourish and arrogant crook.
> See there King Calvin with his iron pen,
> And God three angry letters in a book,
> And there the logical hook
> On which the Mystery is impaled and bent
> Into an ideological instrument.[5]

The Word made flesh becomes a verbal weapon for bludgeoning others into submission, evangelism becomes a verbal crusade. But if flesh is denied in one area it inevitably reasserts its rights three times as vigorously in some other. In this instance this reassertion takes the form of a spiritual or ethical legalism, and in the bondage of the Word to the ideology of the *status quo*, all the more secure for being unnoticed.

The opposite tendency is represented by those for whom proclamation and preaching, let alone proselytization and Church extension, are almost blasphemous as representing a failure to recognize the Holy Spirit at work in the world and in other religions. Thus Harvey Cox says that " any distinction between evangelism and social action is mistaken, " whilst for J.G. Davies evangelism is essentially " identifying God's action in the world and joining with it. "[6] Davies casti-

[3] For instance, Stott considers only verbal evangelism in *Our Guilty Silence*, whilst Stewart, in *Evangelism Without Apology*, seems to attribute other ideas of evangelism to Satan.

[4] In *Christ the Liberator*, p. 105.

[5] Edwin Muir, *The Incarnate One*.

[6] J. G. Davies, *Dialogue with the World*, London, 1967, p. 58.

gates the Church for being "monological," too preoccupied with the sound of her own voice to hear the voice of others. Proselytization is the paradigm monological activity as far as he is concerned, and for this and other reasons he considers that evangelism "cannot" mean drawing people into the Church. In her speaking, her dialogue, the Church must always face the possibility that her gospel is mistaken. In its own way this gospel of the "mere man" also represents a protest against the involvement of God with flesh. It excerpts belief in the Church, the continuing involvement of God in flesh through the Holy Spirit, from the creed. Flesh is cramping, limiting, imperfect, totally unsuitable for our vision of how a God who is "Spirit" ought to operate; it prefers a wider view of "universal Spirit" without limiting criteria. But to this the ancient stubborn watchword of the anti-Arians applies: not assumed is not healed. The orthodox belief of the Church has preserved the conviction that absolute Spirit is no gospel for the messy world of men.

It ought to be clear enough that this disjunction between Word and flesh should be avoided, as much in theology of evangelism as in Christology. As a general principle one might say that word and deed constitute a hermeneutic circle: the word is necessary to interpret the deed, but it is only the deed which authentically interprets the word. This is nowhere so clearly illustrated as in the account we have of Jesus in the Gospels. Jesus is a Rabbi, a teacher. We see him endlessly telling stories, preaching, instructing, arguing, catechizing, asking questions, listening. From the beginning to the end of his ministry we see him preaching and proclaiming in every situation, not with the tense strain of the revivalist preacher who "protests too much," nor with the sense of burden of a Jeremiah, but as one for whom speaking of God was the most natural thing possible. The English poet Keats said that poetry should come "as leaves to a tree" or it had better not come at all; in this way talk of God came to Jesus, and in this way it ceased to be something narrowly religious and acquired that secular character, that mirroring of daily life, which has so often been remarked upon. At the same time New Testament scholarship in this century has again and again illustrated the impossibility of the liberal attempt to distinguish between medium and message, the gospel of Jesus and Paul, the teaching of Jesus and his life. Christ's life and teaching are woven into one beautiful unity; they are a seamless robe. Jesus announces the kingdom: he heals the blind, the lame, and the deaf. He pronounces forgiveness of sins and in an acted parable tells the forgiven man to get up and run off home. He talks about the need for service: he washes the disciples' feet. He preaches good news to the poor: he feeds them with bread and fish. He teaches his disciples about the new covenant and at the same time breaks bread and shares wine. He abolishes the *lex talionis* and institutes the new law of love for the enemy: he dies on the cross. The final astonishing instance of the unity of Christ's word and deed: he speaks of the need of repentance, new birth, new life: he is raised

from the dead. Looking back the young Church understood what happened in Jesus largely through what he had said, in particular his pointing to the "Servant" texts in Isaiah; the word interpreted the deed. But as the position of the passion narratives in all four Gospels, and as the teaching of Paul and the author of Hebrews abundantly illustrate, it was even more the case that the deed interpreted the word. We cannot escape from this dialectic, expressed in Johannine terms as the Word becoming flesh.

Jesus is the *Word Incarnate*. At the beginning of his Gospel John, along with Paul, the authors of Hebrews, 1 Peter and 1 Timothy, takes us back to the origin of Jesus' mission in the eternal will of the Father.[7] The necessity which underlies evangelism is to be found, not so much in the imperative of the great commission but rather in the twofold divine sending of God: the sending of the Son into the Far Country and the sending of the Spirit on the New Israel as the earnest of the new age. If Christianity has indeed a revelation, then God Himself is a God of mission and missions, and the sending of the Church is a result and outworking of this primordial sending. Mission is part of the nature of God and *therefore* it is part of the nature of the Church. This twofold sending is the rationale of evangelism. On the one hand God sent his begotten Son, so we see sending "written in" to the nature of God. But in the sending of the Spirit, at least according to the account of Acts, we see God himself active in the Church's mission, intervening at every critical turn, enabling fellowship, preaching, healing and service. It is clear enough that a theology of evangelism must at the same time be a theology of the Spirit, but we are easily misled by the Idealist view of Spirit dominant from Plato to Hegel and now implicit in our common sense use of the term. A biblical theology of the Holy Spirit is not of Spirit opposed to flesh or sublimating flesh, but of a continuing humiliation (Phil. 2), a continuing embodiment of God in the deeds of flesh. It is a theology of the cherishing of creation by the Creator. What John expressed in terms of the Word made flesh, Luke expressed in the annunciation story in terms of the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary, itself a reminiscence of the brooding of God over creation in Genesis. Through Augustine we still have the lingering suspicion that God is a Manichee, but the Bible everywhere speaks of the involvement of God in flesh, of the involvement of the God who is Spirit. So far from Spirit being opposed to incarnation, it is the means of incarnation, and so a theology of evangelism which (rightly) looks to the Holy Spirit cannot on that account look away from involvement.

Jesus is the *Word* incarnate. Even if we cannot agree on the details of the so-called kerygma, it cannot be denied that every level of the New Testament agrees that the job of the Church is to *tell* people about *Jesus*. There is a *message* at the heart of the New Testa-

[7] Thinking of Col. 1: 15f., Heb. 1: 1-4, Pet. 1: 20, 1 Tim. 3:16.

ment. At the same time an examination of the three great New Testament words for this telling, *kerussein, marturein* and *euangeli zesthai*, leaves no doubt that this is never a *mere* word. For what is the "good news" which is "gospelled"? It is that the Messianic age has dawned. Jesus' citation of Isaiah 61 in the synagogue at Nazareth which involves both the verbs "to preach the good news" and "to proclaim," is clearly a key text. Jesus reads: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." And he concludes, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4: 17-21). In answer to the query of the Baptist, Jesus refers to the fulfilment of the Messianic promises. The kingdom which is the substance of Jesus' proclamation is the Messianic kingdom. But this involves the establishment of "peace" and "salvation" (Isa. 52:7), both with their rich practical content of the wholeness of man and the restoration of order and justice in society. The coming of the kingdom, the establishment of God's rule, is at the heart of the evangel. What, then, are the implications of the prayer "Your kingdom come on earth" for evangelism? Evangelism cannot simply be restricted to preaching. The same conclusion is reached by an examination of the verb "to proclaim." What is the *content* of this proclamation? "Release to the captives...," the acceptable year, the year of jubilee, when society will be put to rights, and exploitation and corruption exposed and punished. In his article on the word in Kittel's *Wörterbuch*, Friedrich writes, *vis-à-vis* Jesus' quoting Isaiah 61: "He proclaims like a herald the year of the Lord, the Messianic age. When heralds proclaimed the year of jubilee throughout the land with the sound of the trumpet, the year began, the prison doors were opened, and debts were remitted. The preaching of Jesus is such a blast of the trumpet."[8] It is true of course that Jesus changed the popular notion of Messiahship in terms of a conquest of the imperial powers oppressing Israel: but he *radicalized* the notion, he did not *spiritualize* it. The task of the new people he left behind him is to explore the full dimensions of this radicalization. We could say that this exploration was evangelism, and that this exploration was what was meant by the slogan "evangelism is liberation." Of course Jesus comes to set men free, but we have to be careful not to accept too superficial a view of liberation, not to go back on the renunciation of the third temptation. If we understand the Incarnate Lord as truth, then perhaps we can really plumb the depths of John's promise that "truth will make you free." It is in John's Gospel that we have the most frequent and the most important use of the third great New Testament word in the context, "to bear witness." The truth which frees is something that humanity is led deeper into through the witness of the Holy Spirit in and through the disciples. But we must also

[8] *Theological Word Book of the NT*, ed. Kittel, ET, vol. 3, p. 706.

notice that, apart from the witness borne to the truth of the Incarnate by the Father through the Spirit, we also have a document which brings together suffering and witness in the way that was to become classical. The witness of John the theologian is to say "No" to the pretensions of imperial Rome. Christianity conquered the Roman world, it has been said, with the simple declaration "Caesar is not Lord; Jesus is Lord."[9] This "No" was therefore a political act of the utmost consequence, the necessary shadowside (to use Barth's term) of the affirmative utterance, "simple" witness to Christ.

Jesus is the Word *Incarnate*. One of the surprising things about the epistolary part of the New Testament is the apparent lack of interest in the teaching of Jesus. We may discern his teaching at many levels beneath the texts but the principal appeal is to the "being" of Christ, the fact that he humbled himself, "took the form of a slave," "learned obedience through the things that he suffered," and died for us, "the godly for the ungodly." It is Christ's life-act which is the basis of the appeal of the New Testament, rather than his teaching. By "life-act" we mean something more than the record of his deeds and his death. Behind the "Christ hymn" of Philippians 2, behind the theology of the second Adam in Romans, behind the identification of the Lord with the Spirit in 2 Corinthians, behind the obedient Son who is yet the image of God and the effulgence of his glory of Hebrews is a response to the *being* of Christ which is what the theological use of the word "incarnation" seeks to point to. Christ witnesses by all that he is, he is word or teaching in all that he is, he is love and service in all that he is. To confess the Word incarnate is not to capitulate to some supposed Greek metaphysics (a claim which was always nonsensical, as 1 Corinthians 1 ought to have made sufficiently clear), but to respond to a vision of personal wholeness which for the first time makes some sense of the word "human," *precisely because* it understands what is human as being in the closest union with God. The difficulty of articulating this wholeness, which is nevertheless witnessed with a most powerful simplicity by all four Gospels, is seen in the christological controversies of the first four centuries. In *The Go-Between God* John Taylor attributes a similar wholeness to the Church immediately after Pentecost: "The primary effect of the pentecostal experience," he writes, "was to fuse the individuals of that company into a fellowship which in the same moment was caught up into the life of the risen Lord. In a new awareness of him and of one another they burst into praise, and the world came running for an explanation. In other words, the gift of the Holy Spirit in the fellowship of the Church first enables Christians to *be*, and only as a consequence of that sends them to do and to speak. It is enormously important to get this straight. Being, doing and speaking cannot in practice be disentangled, but if we put our primary emphasis on preaching or on serving we erect a functional barrier between ourselves

[9] M. S. Augsburger, in *Christ the Liberator*, p. 126.

and our fellow human beings, casting ourselves in a different role from the rest of men."[10] It is this unity of word and act which we indicate by incarnation, and which must, as Taylor says, mark our evangelism. "Being" in the world is not a silent presence; neither word nor deed can be absent; but the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. A possible paradigm for this understanding of evangelism is the Eucharist. In contrast to the Church of the second and third centuries which restricted the Eucharist to those who had passed through the catechumenate, we prefer to see it as the open table fellowship of the "already" of the Messianic kingdom. As such it can be, though it is not by primary intention, an instrument of mission. To this meal not only believers but sceptics and agnostics, Hindus and Muslims can come. Fellowship is extended in the name of the Lord who kept table fellowship with all sorts and conditions. The Word is preached and the great act of God in Christ rehearsed as the bread and wine are shared, but his preaching allows for dialogue and discussion, which occurs within the context of welcome and sharing. Here there is both word and action, but the whole is always more than the sum of these two, the miracle and the mystery of the descent of the dove. The mystery of the sacrament is not underplayed here but rather given greater emphasis.

Jesus is the Word Incarnate. When we say this we are saying that the content of the gospel we preach is not some truth above or behind Christ; it is not an incarnational principle, or liberation or revolution abstractly understood, nor any kind of spirituality or religion. We preach a person. And this indicates a further dimension to evangelism. Writing on Leonardo da Vinci, the nineteenth century art historian Walter Pater called attention to the "dimension of mystery" he possessed beyond the measure which attaches to all great human beings. That one cannot spell out the mystery is part and parcel of its remaining a mystery, but we can gain some insight into it nevertheless. With Leonardo his mystery is to do with his extraordinary insight into the unity of beauty and personality, his preoccupation, for instance, with that most secret thing, the very first beginnings of a smile. With Shakespeare it is to do with his intuition of the depths of the working of the human heart, an intuition which continues to take him effortlessly across cultures where countless laboured attempts to do this fail. With Mozart it is, as Barth has finely said, his hearing of a harmony beyond discord which takes us to the heart of theodicy.

Now certainly Jesus possesses this mystery to a very great degree, as is indicated by the constant failure, both of his contemporaries and of later ages, to categorise him. Rabbi, bon viveur, prophet, mystic, pacifist, revolutionary, teacher of a cultured gospel of Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man, apocalyptic visionary who cannot be understood in twentieth century categories. Every age and group seems to make him in their own image, but when we go back to the

[10] J. V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, London, 1972, p. 143.

Gospels the mystery shatters this image and we begin afresh. What is the source of this mystery? Again we can only point. It has to do with Jesus' oneness with the most beautiful of the objects of man's contemplation: God. The author of Hebrews puts his finger on it at the very beginning of his letter: Jesus is the very image and stamp of God, the shining forth of his glory. Keats' "Beauty is truth and truth beauty" may be dubious as an article of romantic philosophy, but it is certainly true as applied to God. The mystery of Jesus lies in the area of his reflection of the beauty and truth of God.

When we come now to turn to evangelism, we have a problem. We can, with a greater or lesser degree of success, strive to preach the Word and to do the works Christ commanded. But we cannot do anything about mystery. The mystery which is a stamp of authenticity is a gift for which we cannot even pray. But does "mystery" really attend evangelism? What kind of nonsense is this? The thing is that there is a kind of "evangelism" which is almost a form of spiritual exhibitionism, almost a kind of pornography. The Word is tricked out in the gaudy clothes of a cheap philosophy. ("A vote for America is a vote for God"); it is laid bare in the crudest terms. With all due respect to the Apostle's dictum that it doesn't matter how, as long as the Word is preached (Phil. 1: 18), there seems to be a real despising or dishonouring of the mystery here. Preservation of the mystery in evangelism means, ultimately, sharing in God's beauty, unless we take the image of the Church as a bride adorned for her husband as an article purely of future, never of realized, eschatology. Concretely it means such things as respect for persons, not using the Word as Muir's "ideological instrument"; it means that evangelism and compassion, which Simone Weil recognizes as one of the most elusive of virtues, cannot be separated; it means "the beauty of holiness," a spiritual self-discipline which is founded on joy; it means eucharist where at least the echo of the bridegroom's voice can be heard. Perhaps this is enough to point the direction of what we mean; we are after all speaking of mystery and, as we have said, this is not something to be "snatched at," but something which attends real obedience.

We have been speaking in terms of an analogy between the evangel and evangelism. Evangelism is response to the evangel, which is Jesus. Grace, gratitude and graciousness are the key words. Evangelism is fundamentally a response of joy and gratitude to God's grace in Christ. What this means is indicated by the very first evangelists, the angels who "gospelled" the shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem. In his "Mystic Nativity" the fifteenth century Florentine painter Botticelli offers us a whole theology of evangelism. At the centre is the infant Christ who is playing as he looks at his mother. The picture is full of angels. The majority are dancing, in extraordinary abandonment, over the stable. Others have brought the shepherds to adore. A small group, on the roof of the stable, are singing, providing the music of the dance, and delighting the baby and all the other

listeners apart from Mary, who is too absorbed in the child to notice. In the forefront of the picture the angels rush to embrace men in a rapturous and passionate kiss of peace, whilst the devils scurry away from beneath their feet. This is a wonderful and appropriately gracious picture of evangelism. The music is the Gospel, the good news, God's announcement of *shalom* for all creation. Christians, evangelists, are those who have heard the music, whose feet have started tapping, who are drawn into the heavenly dance, and who then seek others to draw them into the dance. So joy is the root of evangelism, joy and gratitude, response to grace. And so evangelism is a gracious activity, in the full sense of that word, respectful, cheerful, joyful, gentle, urgent with the urgency of song and dance which cannot be resisted. Its object is to bring peace, to establish *shalom*, the rule of God.

It is at this point, without for one moment retracting on the grace of evangelism, that the cross becomes central. "I, when I be lifted up, will draw all men to me." Preaching peace, establishing *shalom*, in a world of sin necessarily involves the cross, and his cross is laid sign and symbol of infinite attraction, so that God's music sounds also through this. Here perhaps we have the deepest mystery of evangelism. Preaching the gospel, establishing peace, is, as it were, cooperating with God's great enterprise of bringing good out of evil, triumphing even whilst taking upon itself the utmost that hatred and ignorance, all the signs of man's alienation from God and from himself, can do. Evangelism cannot remain abstract; true incarnation leads to an engagement with society which leads to the cross, in whatever form this manifests itself. And then the cross itself becomes evangelism: "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." Like all true mysteries, however, if we seek to state this as a general truth it becomes an unbearable platitude. Its truth is known in the concrete, and is recognised from the standpoint of the resurrection joy of the Church. The joy of the angels is certainly resurrection joy, for otherwise it would be unreal. This joy, of the incarnate, crucified and risen one, is the secret source of evangelism.