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# Evangelism in the Changing Context of India

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## Some Personal Reflections:

**S**igns of the recent revival were still there at the Asbury Theological Seminary in the Blue Grass land of Kentucky, where I spent the years 1972 to 1975 for the first phase of my theological studies. Key '73 brought a sense of renewal to my own commitments to Christ, the Gospel and Ministry. Soaked in the evangelical and holiness interpretation that was super prevalent at ATS, when I returned to start as a theological teacher at the South India Biblical Seminary in Bangarapet, *I was deeply concerned to "evangelise"*.

But the claims of the commitment to evangelise that were assumed as the value and ethos of the seminary soon appeared remote and useless. We were found to be experts in "hit and run" evangelism with our weekend preaching and outreach package, Sunday schools and Summer Schools of Evangelism.

We concentrated on the rural sector. Twenty or more villages and nearby towns were targetted for Saturday evening outreach and Sunday Schools through students teams which were systematically assigned as from the Field Education Department. Villagers blamed us for our comfortable campus life from which we went "preaching at them", They said: "You only think of us as targets when you need us... You really do not care for us... You do not try to understand our struggles or empathise with our pains...". As I took student teams to various villages, I heard these remarks and felt they sounded right! These poor and illiterate villagers were supersensitive to perceive *our shortfalls in motives*.

Later we started a community development scheme with foreign aid. But this did not take us deep into the context or

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its transformation — it was all peripheral, superficial and skin deep. The work force got their salaries out of these programmes, the budgetted monies were spent, the children and adults were mere targets, just numbers for our reports and — as the experienced and saintliest amongst us whispered to the novices, “to be kept at a distance”.

Disheartening! Time passed in slow motion in this rural sector unlike even in the cities of India. Later, I remember, we shifted gears from the rural emphasis to two new areas.

One, to develop a “Christian Muslim Friendship Society” as an interaction between the Muslims in Bangarapet town and us, the Seminary community. This was the inter-religious dialogue movement at an evangelical setting. Sam Bhajjan, Dwight Baker, Acharya Daya Prakash Titus and such others were invited to share with us alluding to the common elements and riches of our faiths. Our students prayed hard that some Muslim will convert to Christ out of this but the ardent articulations steered clear of any such “conversion” motto. Honestly, I think, the seminary was pushed into this new mode of relating to the Muslim community by the initiative of few students (one in particular, who was no academician but drawn from a factory labour union leadership into a commitment to Christian ministry). The seminary was neither set for such inter-religious relationships despite evangelical fervour, nor prone to absorb the new trends of dialogue developing concurrently within the ecumenical institutions.

The second was to get involved with the Lions and Rotarians who represented the merchants and middle class men and women. Inviting them to a cultural programme ending in a modernised dramatic presentation of the story of the Prodigal Son brought a response breaking the years of separation as one merchant said “I had supplied rice and grains for over 20 years to you all but this is the first time I had come into your campus!” I said to myself, “well then, thus far, with the greatest fervour for evangelism, my colleagues seem to have done a fantastic, but fruitless, remote control, evangelism from a distance” and wondered about the ways to get closer to the actual people, who could make a difference to the town and thus to its surrounding villages.

As a result of these two ventures, we were definitely getting closer to the local community of Hindus and Muslims. It was then that the community persuaded us to start a quality convent-style educational institution for their children. "You Christians are good in providing good education" they said and called us to serve them! A Macedonain call!! This should open a wide opportunity to influence the society and infiltrate the non-Christian community with Christian input. The decision to start the school was made.

At this time my sabbatical leave took me to Scotland where I enrolled for a Ph.D. in Missiology. I chose to research into the history of theological education in India,<sup>1</sup> and to evaluate the impact of the twin foci of the theologies of mission that were developed in the post-independence India by the evangelical and ecumenical streams. The polarisation among the two intensifies with hardened hearts in both camps while lip service is done in consultations wherein words are mouthed about working together and holding together. My research study built within me a deep desire to disown the polarised identities and to strive towards a balance, a holism, a holistic understanding of the gospel, ministry, mission and the Church. The British set up awakened new concerns within me. The question of the poor and the need for promoting the establishment of an organised socio-political set up of proper structures to build prospects for the poor in India — this was one such new concern. I was certainly determined to enable theological education from a holistic perspective without yielding to the subtle temptation of getting sucked into the polarised understanding of either extremes of interpretations.

Upon return I was saddled with the administrative load as Principal of the seminary and yet carried the responsibility for shaping the school for the children as requested by the parents. There were children of the town's leading doctors, business families, municipality chairman, bankers, factory workers and anybody who was somebody in that area! Also the children of the well-to-do villagers came from all the nearby villages to our school and within a short time, the school obtained the kind of reputation that started to put pressure on us to expand the school to accommodate more children.

The monthly parents meetings drew the parents in big numbers to interact with us on "values" and we were shaping the thought patterns and challenging the parents to a value based understanding of the educational process and their role along with us in the growing of their children, the future citizens of the town and villages of our area. I was excited with the thought that a decade or two will see a vast change for the impact of the Gospel on my people. Children will absorb Christian values. They will know the scriptures and the truth of the Word — the truth will set them free. Their parents also will open up. Mission and evangelism will happen with less resistance. I do not know what the educational missionaries of yester years expected. But I dreamt of brighter days ahead.

But the dream was shattered. An alien chairman who came from a different part of the country and understood evangelism in its narrow definitions influenced the seminary board to close the school with his pious (but foolish) jargon "our calling is to train evangelists and Church planters, not to run primary schools". The shattering of the dream had large impact on my thinking. It aroused in me questions on the way evangelism needs to be understood in the Indian setting.

### **Should it be "Evangelical Evangelism"?**

Defining "what is evangelism" at Berlin in 1966 and strategising "how to evangelise" at Lausanne in 1974 (later at Pataya in 1980 and at Manila in 1989), the Lausanne evangelicals<sup>2</sup> have gained momentum to promote evangelism with a wide variety of emphases and methods. They insist that all evangelism should result in the conversion of the people to Christ as the only way and in the building up of the Church in every land. Evangelical Evangelism has remained true to the authority of the scripture and to the uniqueness of Jesus as the only Christ from God. It learnt to ride the colonial horse but also to disembark and strive alongside of the natives as exemplified by the Newbigin variety. It moved from soul concerns to the body concerns setting up its many structures for relief and development which pumped millions into the mission fields. The rise of the radical evangelical thought and practice under people such as Carl Henry, John Stott and Ron

Sider was simultaneous with the rise of world networks for evangelism through Crusade ministry of Billy Graham's Evangelistic Association, Literature Ministry of George Verwer's Operation Mobilization, Jesus film ministry of Bill Bright's Campus Crusade, Youth ministries of Loren Cunningham's Youth With A Mission, Strategic ministries of Luis Bush's AD 2000 and Beyond Movement and many more. Peter Beyerhaus' defence against the ecumenical evangelism; Donald McGavran's authorising of caste based and ever splitting Church for the sake of growth; Ralph Winter's pragmatism of the growth impulse; John Robb's war against territorial spirits; Paul Eschleemann's saturation evangelism and a score of other images and emphases caricature evangelical evangelism around the world. Incidentally, much of this appears North American in origin. With dollar power, these quickly internationalise themselves and work positive wonders for evangelism, while yet defeating the many attempts at unity since often new American denominations go international to build their own denominations in the name of building the kingdom of Christ. Much confusion results in this denominational upsurge not only within the body of Christ but to the other sheep who are yet to be brought in.

### **Should it be "Ecumenical Evangelism"?**

Exactly a century after the unfulfilled dream of William Carey, the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 desired to evangelise the world within a generation. But for the delay and pessimism that followed during the two World Wars and the economic depression, the men of the twentieth century could perhaps have accomplished this desire. Skepticism of this period led to rationalism as reflected in the processes of rethinking missions with William Hocking, reinterpreting orthodoxy, christianity and biblical tradition with Barth, Brunner and Bultmann, repenting political ideologies with Bonhoeffer and CF Andrews. There was the major readjusting of the self understanding of Christian faith in the midst of other faiths with Hendrik Kraemer at Tambaram 1938 when evangelism was understood from a non-traditional pattern. The disembarking from the colonial horse

from the late forties let the world missionary enterprise to take on board the study of the implications of the rapid social change that the world was going through; and to plan for the participation of the Christian Church in the task of nation building. The fifties and sixties saw the worldward journey of the ecumenical theology of mission with a methodological revision of the mode of theologising. "Doing theology in context" became the driving force guiding a worldwide change of mission strategy. Mission, in the biblical model of the logos becoming flesh, became interpreted as incarnational. Theological Education Fund engineered this metamorphosis in the third world seminaries. Contextualisation, motivated by the culture orientation in hermeneutics and political orientation in the pursuit after the socio-economic justice for all, began to emerge as the large theme in theology and the dominant theme in missiology.

Ecumenical evangelism took the shape of political action for some and dialogue for others. The first meant entering into the arena of the struggles of people and spelling out liberty and justice in political terms whereby the structural modifications were called for either peacefully or, if need be, violently. The second meant to dialogue at philosophic, religious and practical levels with an intent to learn and mutually influence, not necessarily to demand crossing of boundaries. To ecumenical evangelism, to ensure the growth of the gospel influence was superior to the growth of the number of the converts. Baptism as a communal rite was redundant and the boundary lines of the Church was mythical. Hence, whether somebody had the opportunity to hear the gospel or no, whether he/she believed in Jesus or no, ecumenical evangelism felt fulfilled in as much as it could see that it existed and co-lived in peace and harmony with some amount of social interaction. It may appear crude but acceptable to say that ecumenical evangelism attempts to be "a gospel-less evangelism propagating a cross-less Christ to develop a Church-less christianity for anybody anywhere without prescribing the option of membership."

There are numerous social values in the mission activity of ecumenical evangelism. But bereft of the soul, it can only

promote prosperous and polished corpses. The soul of being “made a new” and “made alive” in Christ when lacking, as Paul narrated to the Ephesians, people will but remain dead in sin. If there be any other way for sin to be atoned, then the historic claims of the cross of Christ becomes all vain. Thus ecumenical evangelism stands in need to clarify the place of the cross, the importance of Christ, the meaning of the Church, the method and significance of belonging to it and the purpose and mission of the Church in relation to the purpose and mission of Jesus.

### **Evangelism in the Indian setting:**

Evangelism can be considered “evangel”ism, a “good news”ism, wherein evangel is a universally applicable message, which in spite of undergoing necessary local applicational modifications, will remain true to its basic definition emerging from the canon of Christian faith. Not only the principle of good news is seriously to be considered but also the person of the good news. It is in the presentation of the person of Jesus Christ that true evangelism shall happen in India as elsewhere. In the fullness of time, Christ came. The gospel enters a prepared soil at *kairos* time. Times keep changing. But gospel does not keep changing. It enters into every turbulent situation to bring the calm and peace, the hope and joy.

India keeps changing. Yet evangelism in India happens coping with the national changes. I shall attempt here a quick summary of evangelism in India — in outline form without details and notes.

*The Traditional phase:* AD 54 — St. Thomas at Kerala and Madras.

*The Roman phase:* The Sixteenth Century: Francis Xavier at Goa.

*The Protestant pioneer phase:* The Eighteenth Century

1706 — the German Lutherans Ziegenbalg and Pultschau at Tranquebar;

1793 — the Baptist Englishman Willaim Carey and his team at Serampore;

1790s onwards — the British chaplains such as Henry Martyn;

*The Colonial phase: The Nineteenth Century.*

The arrival of various mission societies: The Anglicans (CMS, SPG, CEZMS).

The Congregationalists (LMS),

The Reformed Churches: The American Board, The Scottish Presbyterians

The Methodists (MMS).

The Basel Mission and others.

The Beginnings of the Christian Mass Movements (Madras and Andhra).

The Decennial Missionary Conferences

*The Ecumenical phase: The Early Twentieth Century.*

The formation of united theological training programmes (UTC 1910).

The formation of the National Missionary Council (1914).<sup>3</sup>

Evangelistic Forward Movement (Sherwood Eddy, KT Paul, HA Popley).

The Mass Movement Study by Waskom Pickett (1930-32)<sup>4</sup>

The Lindsay Study of Christian Higher Education (1929-30)<sup>5</sup>

The participation in national independence

*The Indian Church phase: The Mid-Twentieth Century*

The birth of the Church of South India (27 September 1947)<sup>6</sup>

The history of the churches and their involvement in evangelism.

RW Scott, *Evangelism in India*, Geneva: WCC Ecumenical Studies, 1952.

NCC sets up studies on Rapid Social Change leading to CISRS formation 1957.

Church's concern for Nation Building, CISRS, 1962.<sup>7</sup>

Hunger for Justice, CASA, 1970.

Church and Social Justice, CSI, CISRS 1972.

*The Evangelical phase: The formation of the Evangelical Fellowship of India, 1951<sup>8</sup>*

Parachurch structures: 1952 VBS, 1953 Union Biblical Seminary;

1954 YFC &UESI; 1960s OM, EHC, FEBA, FMPB, IEM, etc.,

“Mushrooming of indigenous missions” 50s, 60s, 70s.

1973 Federation of Evangelical Churches of India.

1977 India Missions Association.

Evangelical separatist trends on the rise: FECEI, AETEI, ATA<sup>9</sup>

*The Holistic phase: The 1980s — 1990s*

### ***An interpretative summary***

The mass movement conversions were a large enough phenomenon that the National Christian Council initiated a study of it in the 30s. The mass movements were sporadic and regional. In the second half of the century, evangelism has become predominantly the task carried out by the parachurch evangelical structures and the indigenous missions. When compared with them, the Church of the mainstream is extremely limited in its direct evangelism. New (mostly American) Church denominations have arrived in India and are active in evangelism (part of which is more of sheep stealing from the mainstream churches). On the whole there is a lot of evangelism happening in the country of which we could say:

India is still wide open for the gospel of Jesus Christ  
Opposition is there but not as large as to hinder the growth of the Church.

The Church is not as active as she needs to be in evangelism.

The Parachurch structures have a lot of activities and training for evangelism.

Evangelism appears still foreign funded and denominational.

A lot of cooperative networking is taking shape in the 1990s.

### **A Case Study: Holistic Evangelism**

In 1995 when I inherited the role of directing the work of the Karnataka Evangelistic Association, as a missiologist, I

wished to undertake an experiment and develop an example of what mission work in the Indian setting should be. Slow and steady we have attempted to develop a holistic mission activity wherein the fight against the forces of darkness (in terms of the invisible forces causing fear and illness — which are cast out through fastings and prayers) and the forces of social evils (in terms of the visible forces causing economic exploitations, social stratifications and religious opiiums) are carried on. Simultaneously, the fight against illiteracy, unemployment and wasteful social customs are carried on through adult literacy classes, job oriented training programmes and teaching sessions. Whereas all this is good for the people and when they receive our ministry well and change for the better (economically as well as socially), it is indeed good news! But on top of this, we present the claims of Jesus Christ that he stands at the door and knocks, "If any... hears and opens..." he will develop a relationship leading to atonement, adoption and assurance. The way to the Father, the abundance of life in Christ (after the cleansing and justification), and the power of the Holy Spirit (to live in the light) are offered for free acceptance. Almost every alternate month there are groups of people from the Lambadi tribals, the local Kannadigas and the migrant Tamils and Telugus who enter the fold of the Church through baptism in one or the other of our mission fields. There is no compulsion.

In the last baptisaml service it was my joy to see 6 Kannadigas among whom was a graduate farmer and his wife and mother in law, a lorry driver, a professional thief who has come to new life in Christ and a mother whose grief at the loss of a married daughter led to search and find peace in Christ.

We in the KEA partner with all other agencies: literature work with the Bible Society, Scripture Gift Mission, Operation Mobilization; cassette ministry with the World Cassette Outreach of India; radio ministry with the FEBA and TWR; film ministry with the GIFTS of Karnataka and the Campus Crusade for Christ; crusade ministry with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association; adult literacy work with EFICOR; development work with SKIP and Church work with existing Church denominations. In establishing such partnerships, we experience the body to which we belong in Christ. Such is the

holism that we instill within our structure and we find this fulfilling.

To build coordination with all other organisations, we developed a series of annual mission conferences for the whole state of Karnataka from which is now born a new structure for coordination: *The Karnataka Missions Network*. Through this attempts are being made to do relevant research into the needs and people groups of Karnataka, to set up district level activities to revive the Church and to set up mission stations, to enable service to the uplift of the poor and to enlarge the Church in the state of Karnataka.

What we attempt is holistic evangelism. In 1996, I attended the National Consultation on Evangelism, held at Hyderabad. About a hundred organisations working all over India were represented through their Directors or Secretaries, who shared reports of their work and indicated what they were planning as their target for the next few years. It was full of positive information and courageous faith and vision. I came away from this consultation with a sense of awareness that evangelism is alive in India.

There were references to oppositions and problems in parts of India.

But they were not large enough to stop the work anywhere. The opposition was largely from groups such as RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh), BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad).

It also came through clear that

Evangelism is being well planned by many agencies in India.

It is enabled by international input, mainly from evangelical structures.

There are statewide networks for evangelism formed by AD 2000 movement.

Many local congregations are involved in active evangelism.

### **Challenges from the Changing situations of India:**

1. "Hit and run" or irresponsible evangelism will not be acceptable as political trends are popping up a communally based Hindu government under BJP.

2. "Holistic evangelism" where the care of the people and the provision of skill development are foremost in the agenda will suit Indian needs.
3. "Local Resourcing of the Local Congregations in Mission" should be explored.
4. Foreign funds should be strictly used for developmental work alone.
5. Participation in the nation in terms of nation building should be taught at local congregational level to involve in local education, panchayat administration, slum and rural development, political participation in building stable government, etc.,
6. The Church should continue her educational, medical and relief involvements.
7. The Church should not compromise her faith while yet striving to build harmonious relationships with people of other faiths.
8. The Church should inculcate into the context and set an example of service, sanctity and good living to authenticate her gospel, eradicating corruption and power politics.
9. The Church should speak and take lead for the welfare of other communities also and not only be concerned for its own welfare needs.
10. The Church should develop a sense of urgency as there is much openness and reception to the gospel from among the poor dalits and tribals as well as OBCs.

Fears are many among Indian Christians as to the bleakness of the future in India for the process of Christian living and witness. The coming to power by parties that have a fundamentalist and fanatical religious mandate frighten the minorities and cause anxiety. But as much as history teaches us, the gospel always penetrated into hard contexts and faced unwelcome situations. Higher the persecution, greater was the growth of the faith community. Hence, perhaps one should rejoice in the hope that the Church's witness in India may have a brighter future and evangelism may happen in better ways in the twenty first century.

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