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Toward a Social Evangelism (Part II)

by David Lowes Watson

David Lowes Watson has clarified and challenged the church's agenda by countering many contemporary definitions of evangelism and by using John Wesley as a paradigm. "The doctrine of justification by faith is the source for ethical behavior," he wrote in Part I of this article. "For Wesley, sanctification did not dispense with the ongoing need for justifying grace."

In this concluding section, Watson works to integrate eschatology with our understanding of evangelism. Introducing a helpful category of justification which is corporate as well as personal, Watson is able to use eschatology as a framework for showing the relationship between evangelism and social change.

The premise of our argument is that evangelism is primarily the verbal communication of the gospel as a feature of holistic ministry. To identify it with its own implications must be regarded as an unnecessary confusion, the result of which is to blunt the critical challenge of the message itself. If the gospel is identified with the ethical behavior of its messengers, if the church confuses social ethics with the activity of evangelism, it surrenders the efficacy of the critical word which convicts of sin and offers divine pardon and reconciliation.

However, the critical word is accountable to holistic ministry, and for the purposes of this discussion, ethically accountable in particular. The question therefore becomes whether it is possible to have an evangelism contingent on a doctrine of justification that is social as well as personal. The issue is not, as David Bohr suggests, the identification of evangelism as two movements, the first being to proclaim the good news, and the second to live it.[1] For a clear phenomenology of a social evangelism, we must ask whether we can communicate a message that necessarily calls to a social as well as personal repentance.

At first sight this might seem to be a task already well accomplished. In recent decades an evangelistic urgency has emanated from the new social and global awareness of the extent and depth of human sin. Foundational work was of course done by Barth, Brunner and the Niebuhrs, among others, in their response to the challenge of Marxian thought during the 1920s and 1930s.[2]. But it was the post-World War II preparatory work for the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948 that placed it firmly on the agenda of the church.[3] Repentance was a call that once again was not only for persons, but for nations and churches.[4]

Evangelism and Eschatology

The definitive account of these developments is Hans Margull's remarkable book, *Hope in Action*. Tracing the work of the nascent World Council, as well as the significant ongoing work of the International Missionary Council, Margull shows how, through the discussion of the Christian message in its eschatological dimensions, the hope of *shalom* as the wholeness and integrity of the realm of God, concretely in the world, became widely adopted in ecumenical thinking about evangelism.[5] Fundamental to this was the work of J. C. Hoekendijk, who, as Secretary of Evangelism for the World Council, introduced and developed the comprehensive evangelistic perspective of *kerygma, koinonia* and *diakonia*.[6]

This has become a classic approach to evangelism, and has further, in the hope of *shalom*, made eschatology an inescapable dimension of the evangelistic message.[7] Yet this has also brought sharply into focus the extent to which justification by faith had lost its fullness in the practice of evangelism, most especially in the United States. Margull notes, for example, that the American report on the IMC Willingen Conference of 1952 seemed to show "great uneasiness—understandable in America—concerning terminal-historical eschatology, which has been repeatedly misunderstood as apocalyptic."[8] It was evident, he continues, that "the majority of the American commission was unable to combine any biblically appropriate conception with that of eschatology. . . . In fact, the conception of eschatology is greatly lacking in clarity in broad segments of the theology of the Anglo-Saxon world. And in some areas, it is a totally alien concept."[9]

When sin is diagnosed primarily through social analysis, not to have a doctrine of social justification comes close to a denial of grace.

Yet eschatology is perforce a focus for evangelism in a world where time has invaded the cathedral.[10] Hoekendijk's diagnosis was as disturbing as it was challenging:

> To put it bluntly, the call to evangelism is often little less than a call to restore "Christendom," the *Corpus Christianum*, as a solid, well-integrated cultural complex, directed and dominated by the church. And the sense of urgency is often nothing but a nervous feeling of insecurity, with the established church endangered; a flurried activity to have the remnants of a time now irrevocably past. . . .
>
> In fact, the word "evangelize" often means a Biblical camouflage of what should rightly be called the reconquest of ecclesiastical influence.[11]

Over against this protective shell of the *corpus Christianum*, the "shock-breaker" which, according to Hoekendijk, has filtered outside influences and intercepted condemnations hurled at the church, an eschatological perspective for evangelism has two implications. The first is that Christ, not the church, is the subject of evangelism. The second is that the aim of evangelism is to be "nothing less than what Israel expected the Messiah to do: i.e., establish the *shalom*. And Shalom is much more than personal salvation. It is at once peace, integrity, community, harmony and justice."[12] Evangelism can be nothing but "the realization of hope, a function of expectancy."[13]

All of which renders the task of the contemporary evangelist demanding and, in certain parts of the world, freshly hazardous. Not only must the integrity of the gospel be maintained in the midst of worldly exigencies, but the workings of the Holy Spirit in the world must be discerned at a time when "the stream of particular grace has broken all the dikes and spilled out all over the world." This is one of the vivid metaphors cited by Alfred C. Krass in his book, *Five Lanterns at Sundown*, one of the most important texts for North American evangelism to have appeared in recent years.[14]

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Using the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids as an underlying motif, Krass argues for an evangelism as eschatological announcement, and calls for an active expectancy as the appropriate attitude for the church.[15] Evangelism cannot be a celebration of the past so as to expect nothing from the present, nor yet a spiritualizing of the future predicated on the demise of the present. To understand evangelism biblically is to see that in evangelism "we are called to invite people to participate in a present reality, to respond to God's present working as well as to his past acts, and to hope for the fulfillment of this present history in the future. Biblical evangelism is calling people to active repentance and faith, calling them into solidarity with a community which knows itself commissioned to participate in God's present activity as he creates history."[16]

Those who first responded to the call to repentance in the gospel, argues Krass, had an inward experience that was "a totally new understanding of themselves as related to God's dawning history.... [It] awakened them to a realization that the salvation long spoken of as future had begun and that God had called them to be his agents."[17] Grace, no less than sin, was at work in the world, and the signs of it were everywhere around for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. It still is, and it becomes the task of the evangelist to discern these signs and to announce them abroad.[18] The church's doctrine of sin and grace must be large enough to cope with our new understandings of society, but a doctrine of sin and grace it must nonetheless be.

The question Krass raises first of all is whether it is possible to regard social institutions and behavior as integral to God's redeeming work in Christ. In spite of the eschatological vision at Amsterdam in 1948, there were reservations. In asking the question, "What is Evangelism?" the members of the Assembly Commission on "The Church's Witness to God's Design" concluded that, even though the church is a redemptive influence in society, the purpose of evangelism is not the redemption of society. Reinhold Neibuhr put it pointedly in the opening paper of the Assembly's commission on "The Church and the Disorder of Society":

> The Kingdom of God always impinges upon history and reminds us of the indeterminate possibilities of a more perfect brotherhood in every historic community. But the sufferings of Christ also remain a permanent judgment upon the continued fragmentary and corrupted character of all our historic achievements. They are completed only as the divine mercy, mediated in Christ, purges and completes them. Our final hope is in "the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting."
>
> Applied to our present situation this means that we must on the one hand strive to reform and reconstruct our historic communities so that they will achieve a tolerable peace and justice. On the other hand, we know, as Christians, that sinful corruptions will be found in even the highest human achievements.[19]

Yet, millenarian technics aside, it is clear that in times of religious revival in the United States, when personal salvation has been central to evangelistic preaching, it has also been affirmed that the grace of God has broken into human history to bring an immediate expectancy of the kingdom. Indeed, so elemental was this expectancy that it has been, to use H. Richard Niebuhr's words, "a constant source of astonishment to many modern interpreters of the Evangelical movement that its leaders paid so little attention to politics."[20] The reason, he suggests, is that they had little faith in progress toward a true peace by any means save those of Christian revolution.[21] The kingdom, the New Age, would not be engineered by human endeavor, but would be the occasion of a corporate *metanoia*, and Neibuhr's indictment of romantic liberalism has become a *dictum*: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministration of a Christ without a cross."[22]

Corporate Repentance, Justification and Sanctification

Central to an *evangel* of eschatological hope, there must be the crisis of repentance, the acknowledgement of sin, social as well as personal, and the realization of total inadequacy and despair.[23] And while it is important, as we shall argue, to affirm the imminence of the New Age, there must also be the offer of present pardon. Carl Braaten has demonstrated convincingly that this is something of a blind spot in much of liberation theology.[24] Conscientization may bring hope to some and guilt to others, but it frequently is not linked to a present justification by faith. And when sin is diagnosed primarily through social analysis, not to have a doctrine of social justification comes close to a denial of grace. Indeed, it is this very issue which still divides evangelical and ecumenical evangelism: on the one hand, an eschatological hope that calls for a social repentance, but which is perceived as denying a present justification; and on the other hand, an offer of present justification that is perceived as failing to acknowledge the depth of social sin. If we are to evince a social evangelism, our task must be to forge a synthesis.

To pray for the coming of the kingdom obliges us to expect an answer which must not be restricted to a political present, nor relegated to an eternal future.

The answer lies in retaining the centrality of justification by faith, but traditioning it in the context of what we now know about social dynamics and global self-awareness—neither of which diagnostic criteria were available to the evangelistic giants of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but both of which are frequently ignored by their successors in the twentieth. As diagnostic criteria, what they do of course is to give us a whole new understanding of human sin. The *evangel* in our time must clearly call for corporate as well as personal *metanoia*, a call which is impossible to avoid in the message of Jesus himself (Mk. 1:14–15; Mt. 4:12–17; Lk. 4:14–15, 18–19). Our *evangel* must also proclaim the merits of Christ's righteousness for human society as well as human persons, and call for a response to this in faith. The faith to which we call is faith in the sure hope of the fulfillment of Christ's work in the New Age, the *basileia*. Not to have faith in this eschatological redemption is not to have faith in the merits of Christ. Social sanctification as God's promise must be proclaimed, not as an indictment of the present, but as the fulfillment of God's eschatological promise; until which time, through the merits of Christ, and through the *metanoia* which leads to justifying through faith, human persons in human society are acceptable to God and are freed for joyful obedience.

It is on this point of social sanctification that the dialectic of a just society which is never more than penultimate cannot provide an adequate eschatology for a social evangelism.[25] It must of course be affirmed that God's *novum*, the hope to which the *evangel* calls all people, cannot be predetermined, nor yet can it be contrived. It is God's future out of which the New Age will come in its fullness, and to usurp that prerogative with misapplied and misunderstood apocalyptic is, to say the least, rank bad manners. But on the other hand, God's *novum* must not be limited in any way. To pray for the coming of the kingdom, as Christ taught us to pray, obliges us to expect an answer that must not be restricted to a political present, nor yet relegated to an eternal future. The New Age has broken into human history in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It continues to break in. It grows like a mustard seed, and it judges the present age, which it renders obsolete and moribund. And it will come to fulfillment, on earth as in heaven (Mt. 6:10).

Justification and Social Change

Yet the tendency of this eschatological announcement, as we have noted, is to minimize justification by faith, the very doctrine we have argued should be central to the *evangel*. How does the evangelist announce the New Age with a doctrine of present justification and yet call to a social *metanoia*? How can the *evangel* bring to each man and woman a conviction of social sin over which they feel they have no control and for which they therefore feel no guilt or remorse? The prophetic call of the *evangel* in our time has done much to fuse the sense of personal and social sin. It has further brought an urgency to the call for repentance by affirming the imminence of the New Age. It must,

however, be joined anew with the call to personal repentance and the offer of a present pardon, a present fulfillment, a present relationship with God which, through the merits of Christ, is whole and complete, moment-by-moment. It is this present justification that is the mainspring of faithful discipleship, and it is in this power that God's social redemption will also be fulfilled. Our evangelism must include both, so that the crisis of repentance can lead to faith in the merits of Christ's righteousness for sin in *all* of its dimensions.

We are now close to the synthesis for which we are seeking, but we must take one further step. We have noted Reinhold Neibuhr's profoundly dialectic view of social justification, and we have also asked whether this realism imparts a sufficiently urgent expectation of the *basileia*. His warnings remain timely, that historic human communities will never achieve more than tolerable peace and justice. But we have shown that the *evangel* imparts an ultimate hope—that God's *shalom* will one day prevail on earth as in heaven. Social endeavor cannot be substituted for social grace, but social expectancy must not concede the hope of the New Age here and now. To do so debilitates the conviction of social sin by withholding God's judgment at the point of social obligation. The *evangel* is clear: *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously just and sinner) is the critical dynamic of the New Covenant, but it also has a purpose. It is the birthpang of God's new creation (Rom. 8:22). All things will be made new, and to the extent that we do not expect this here and now, we fail to grasp the fullness of the gospel.

The step we must take, therefore, is to accept the *sinfulness* of the not-yetness of the *basileia*, precisely because we can do nothing about it. We understand so much about personal sin today that we have all but outgrown our faith in the merits of Christ's righteousness —a topic for evangelism in and of itself. Social sin, on the other hand, is an overwhelming burden that no one in an affluent culture can handle in his or her own strength. The merits of Christ's righteousness afford pardon for this sin also; for the social sin we are powerless to overcome, the sin only Christ can cancel, the power of which only Christ can break.

It is at this point that a social evangelism becomes of paramount importance for the North American context. It is not enough to present the gospel as an imperative of what ought to be done for the world, with the censure of an affluent lifestyle that offers the limited options of perennial guilt or parochial gratitude. Nor yet does the *evangel* of an alternative lifestyle strike the nerve of the North American religious consciousness, tempered as it has been by the doctrine of personal sin and justification by faith. What is needed is a social incision *into* these doctrines, so that accountability to human society becomes an inescapable demand of the evangelistic message.

Conscientization may bring hope to some and guilt to others, but it frequently is not linked to a present justification by faith.

Let us take a practical example. Have we eaten today? Then we have been guilty of social sin, in that millions have not.[26] Without a radical expectancy of the New Age, the use of guilt in this context might be questioned, even though we have known the needs of others and have done little to adjust our lifestyle accordingly; for if our expectancy is that of imperfect social structures here and now, we are eschatologically protected, so to speak, by present and personal justification. But if our *evangel* announces that the New Age which renders such anomalies obsolete is imminent, that time is short, that now is the critical moment, the guilt of our unreadiness becomes unavoidable. The *evangel* calls us to repentance for this sin, and offers forgiveness through the merits of Christ's righteousness. But then—and it is here that Wesley's distinction is of such importance—we must proceed with good works of obedience in order to maintain our justification, works not merely of grateful obedience, but necessary obedience, disciplined obedience. And our justification is such that we must continually repent of our sin as it is revealed to us, a repentance that is social as well as personal. Only when we have accepted that our very existence in human society is sinful until the coming of the New Age in its fullness, have we acknowledged our real need of the merits of Christ.

We have no help in us. We are utterly insufficient, despicable and odious, precisely because there are those who are naked, starving, in prison, hungry and thirsty, and we do not help them. It is only through the merits of Christ that we are justified for that which it then becomes our obligation to do. And our *evangel* is that, in spite of our social as well as our personal sin, we are accepted by God and empowered for service (Rom. 12).

FOOTNOTES

1. David Bohr, *Evangelization in America* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), p. 127.
2. On this, see the important study by Charles C. West, *Communism and the Theologians: Study of an Encounter* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1958; New York: Macmillan Company, 1963).
3. The four volumes of these documents were collectively published as *Man's Disorder and God's Design: The Amsterdam Assembly Series* (New York: Harper & Brothers [1949]).
4. See, for example, H. Richard Niebuhr's paper, "The Disorder of Man in the Church of God," *ibid.*, 1:78–88.
5. Hans J. Margull, *Hope in Action: The Church's Task in the World* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), pp. 52ff.
6. J. C. Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out*, ed. L. A. Hoedemaker and Pieter Tijimes, tr. Isaac C. Rottenberg (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966).
7. *Ibid.*, p. 19ff.
8. *Hope in Action*, p. 20.
9. *Ibid.* Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr would have to be regarded as important exceptions to this assessment of North American theology. See Ronald H. Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), pp. 235ff.
10. So Walter H. Capps, *Time Invades the Cathedral: Tensions in the School of Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).
11. *Church Inside Out*, p. 15.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 22. Several theologies have now provided systematic and critical reflection on these eschatological visions. See authors such as Ernst Bloch and Jurgen Moltmann. A volume illustrating Third World insights and the influence of Vatican II is *Puebla and Beyond*, ed. John Eagleson and Phillip Scharper (New York: Orbis Books, 1979).
14. Alfred C. Krass, *Five Lanterns at Sundown: Evangelism in a Chastened Mood* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 161.
15. See especially pp. 66–87.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 68–9.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 162ff.
19. *Man's Disorder and God's Design*, 3:26. Cf. *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932; paperback edition, 1960), pp. 68–9.
20. *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), p. 149.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
23. So David J. Bosch, "The Melbourne Conference: Between Guilt and Hope," *International Review of Mission* 69 (October–January 1981): 512–18.
24. *The Flaming Center: A Theology of the Christian Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), pp. 149ff.
25. A point made dramatically by Karl Barth in his 1938 essay, *Rechtfertigung und Recht*, translated with the title "Church and State," and published in the volume *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays* (Reprint edition, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968). See especially pp. 147–48.
26. See "An Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle," *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 4 (October 1980): 177–79.

NORTH AMERICAN NETWORK OF THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS

During the summer of 1983 there will be an ecumenical student conference in conjunction with the World Council of Churches' Sixth Assembly in Vancouver, British Columbia. Although there is no official connection between the WCC and the student gathering, participants will be able to learn from church leaders who are in the area for those meetings. This is the first major event organized by the North American Network of Theological Students in an attempt to start an ecumenical network of seminarians. The conference aims to provide an ecumenical environment for reflection on North American theology and theological education, to expose North American theological students to the global Church, and to stimulate continuing ecumenical activity among theological students. The conference will be held in two sessions, July 23–30 and July 30–August 6, 1983. For more information about the conference or about opportunities to participate in organizing it, write Tim Anderson, NANTS Coordinator, 5555 S. Woodlawn Ave., Chicago, IL 60637.