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‘Tell it as it is’—some reflections on Evangelism today

Donald English

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I am grateful for the privilege of giving this lecture. I gladly pay tribute to Sir John Laing—whom I did not have the honour of knowing—and I hope that what I offer will be in harmony with his intentions. Connoisseurs of sermon and lecture titles will have assessed tonight’s title as belonging to the long-range genre. It is given so far ahead that it must be specific enough to be identifiable but general enough to leave room for maximum manoeuvre as the day draws near.

In one sense the title also reflects part of my own recent experience. Having spent, in all, fifteen years lecturing in theological college I now find myself head of the Home Mission Division of the Methodist Church. Two years ago this would have been a much more academic lecture. This evening I am more concerned about our current evangelism—albeit from a standpoint of academically based theological study and reflection.

1

I believe the time is right for us to be asking serious questions about our understanding and practice of evangelism.

In some main-line denominations there is a recovery of nerve about evangelism. The forms such evangelism should take are not so clearly perceived.

Mission to London and Mission England have not only stirred up much excitement and activity; they have also raised in sharp form the issues facing a missionary church—not least the question of how we may adequately address our complex culture.

The emphasis on relating full-time evangelists to continuous evangelism by the local church has placed pressure on pastors and leaders to provide adequate training of local members for witness. The nature of such training is at present an area of considerable experimentation.

In the past few decades we have experienced a series of new developments—or renewing of old ones—which have enlivened the life of the Christian church at large. None comes without questions.

The Charismatic Renewal with its emphasis, as Tom Smail put it so excellently, on ‘receiving’ as well as ‘believing’, raises the question of how one recognizes authenticity in the experience we share in our witness.

The flowering of the performing arts as expressions of worship and

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evangelism, (dance, mime, drama, modern music, visual and electronic aid), have added to our worship and witness a new breadth, and sometimes a new depth. We cannot engage in

such developments, however, without facing a permanent question of where to mark the centre spot for the lively tension between continuity of the message which remains true to its original content, and relevance to the current age which enables the message to be heard intelligibly. If Charismatic Renewal raises the question of *authenticity*, use of the performing arts raises the question of *appropriateness*.

The extension of radio and television as media for communication provides yet another area for both opportunity and heart-searching. To engage such avenues of witness simply to turn up the volume and extend the audience, while doing and saying precisely what we have previously done and said, may be to miss the fundamental point about such media. The medium itself offers scope and has limitations not present in a meeting or church service. It raises questions about how far a person can truly receive a life-changing communication while fundamentally cast in the role of observer. It also invites examination of the capacity to communicate deep truth via a medium committed to short answers, entertaining presentation and popular ratings appeal. Conversely it may—if it is a successful avenue of gospel communication—demonstrate that it is our method of communicating which is defective, or limited, or prejudiced. In short, alongside the questions of *authenticity* and *appropriateness* we add the question of *effectiveness*.

A fourth dimension of this subject is provided by the Church Growth Movement. Even on a very limited view of that movement one can see the value of linking a biblical view of the missionary God to the insights of social and statistical sciences. It may be more questionable, however, if predictable receptivity to the gospel is established as a criterion of priority in determining missionary strategy. We may argue that such a criterion—negatively applied—led Jesus to advise disciples to leave Jewish villages which rejected them. One might equally argue, however, that such a criterion would have prevented him from coming to the Jews at all. Whatever answer is preferred, we must add the question of *objectives* to our list for consideration.

Perhaps most controversial of all in recent developments are the attempts to share evangelism by groups originating from different denominations or theological persuasions. The Nationwide Initiative in Evangelism, now the Standing Committee on Evangelism of the British Council of Churches, is the most striking example; though this kind of attempt was being made before N.I.E. came into being, and is associated with the campaigns of some evangelical evangelists. I am only too aware of the strong and deeply-felt convictions on both sides of this discussion. At present I simply wish to register the question it raises, namely, the *integrity* of the proclaiming group in relation to the message it proclaims. Is there

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more integrity in limiting the group in terms of the truth of the gospel content, thus ensuring clarity, conviction and impact (but at the price of excluding large numbers of Christians who do not see it that way); or is integrity better preserved by seeking to include all Christians in the proclaiming group, thus demonstrating the reconciling power of the gospel (though at the price of tensions within the group and confusing variety in the proclamation)?

It must be obvious, and a cause of some relief, that one cannot attempt to offer answers in all these areas. To identify the questions is itself a valuable exercise and I suggest that high on the agenda must be the issues of authenticity, appropriateness, effectiveness, objectives and

integrity, with the understanding that our methods of evangelism and our training for witness must be governed by our conclusions.

2

Having set out what I believe would be referred to as the scenario in the modern jargon, I now wish to offer three comments on our place within it as evangelical Christians.

During the decades when much of the Christian church had lost the conviction, the content or the motivation for evangelism, the evangelical constituency has in the main applied itself to the task with commendable zeal, patience and perseverance. Now that the church at large is increasingly facing the call to evangelize, evangelical Christians have a great deal of experience, expertise and supportive material to offer, and there is considerable evidence that others are willing to learn from us. This depends, of course, upon our willingness to share it, (itself a risk), and to offer it in a spirit which makes it capable of being accepted.

However zealous and persevering we may have been in addressing our evangelistic task, few of us would claim the success for which we prayed and hoped and gave. The parable of the sower notwithstanding, the returns in terms of new births in relation to the enormous amounts of time, prayer, energy and money invested is, at best, disappointing. Even the degree of success we claim—and every evangelical pastor or leader I talk to claims to be ‘encouraged’—even that success does not seem to me to be borne out by its influence on our culture or our society. Indeed, one common factor for unity of the whole Christian church in Great Britain is our common failure to evangelize as we ought. Since we know that the love of our heavenly father for the world he created does not diminish; that the gospel message is still ‘the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes’ (Romans 1:16), and that the need of men and women for that gospel is as great as ever; it is at least arguable that blame for failure rests with us. We may be less to blame than other Christians for failure to evangelize, but by the same test we must be more to blame for failure in evangelism. I am suggesting that the current setting in Great Britain, as

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outlined above, provides us with a renewed and God-given opportunity to look at ourselves again in this matter.

After decades of very necessary defensiveness for the evangelical cause we may thank God for the firm establishment of evangelicalism in our country, both within and without most of the major denominations. Even those of us who are not ancient can testify to a striking change in our own lifetime. Maybe God is giving us some space to be less critical of others and more critical of ourselves, in order that through us he may offer more to the rest of Christendom and even through the others offer more to us. For the rest of the lecture I wish to explore that possibility.

3

My purpose is to offer some perspectives on the questions with which I began, by exploring three areas where I believe our evangelical outlook needs reviewing and strengthening in face of the current opportunities and challenges presented to us. They relate to our concept of God, our perception of the Atonement, and our concern for the unsaved—all, you may feel, somewhat central to our evangelistic understanding and activity.

We begin with our concept of God. At the turn of the last century, when the onslaught of biblical criticism was first felt, evangelicals were naturally concerned to preserve what they believed to be the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith. In particular, Scripture, as God’s out-breathed word, and the person and work of Jesus Christ were rightly seen as basic. Thus God as inspirer of Scripture and God as redeemer through Jesus Christ were the centres of the battle. The question of God as creator was easily subsumed under detailed questions about the inspiration, reliability and exegesis of Genesis chapters 1 to 3. In this way the struggle did little to bridge a basic divide within the Christian church between those on the one side who stress creation, incarnation and sacrament (generally subsumed under the heading ‘Catholic’) and those on the other side who emphasize redemption, atonement and word (equally generally defined as ‘Protestant’). The former group are usually world-affirming. They seek to be at home in their culture, to baptize it into Christ. They see the Incarnation as affirming human life. They see Jesus’ main work as offering a totally human life to God. Their understanding of the church is often expressed in terms of salt. They do not labour the differences between those within the church and those outside it. Their difficulties are in demonstrating the distinctiveness of the Christian experience, adequately allowing for the sinfulness of human nature, and accounting for the emphasis in the gospels on the passion of Christ.

The latter group tend to be suspicious of culture as dominated by worldliness. They easily become world-rejecting. Their aim is to convert to Christ. They stress the distinctiveness of the church. The converts are gathered, almost all inclusively, into the life of the church. Their under-

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standing of the church has more to do with the light on the lamp-stand, the city on the hill. Their difficulty is how to enable new Christians to remain in lively effective contact with their culture and their previous relationships. There is also a tendency to spiritualize all aspects of life and to neglect social and political issues, except on a personal level. Neither side will be pleased with that description: it is meant to outline general trends.

In the tension between these two broad positions we must ask whether we evangelicals have not been too neglectful of a fully orbed theology of creation, incarnation and sacrament. The battle to defend what is precious in redemption, atonement and preached word easily produces imbalance overall. Yet the canon of Scripture presents us first with God as creator. The New Testament—particularly in John’s Gospel, Colossians and Hebrews—sees the Christ not only as the clue to the created universe, but as somehow an effective agent of its origins. God’s breath creates and sustains the world and God’s breath creates and sustains the church. One powerful description of the ‘in Christ’ experience is ‘a new creation’. Jesus communicates his message of the kingdom by a series of simple stories whose materials were common knowledge to all his hearers. Yet from his lips they offer windows onto the kingdom through which the eyes of faith may perceive the nature and activity of God himself.

Perhaps most significant of all is John’s use of such a method in recording the coming of the Greeks to Jesus, in John chapter 12. Having underlined the importance of the hour not yet having come, John records Jesus’ declaration ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified’ (John 12:23). As they wait for the manifesto of the kingdom they hear ‘Unless an ear of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it

produces many seeds.’ John places that saying at Passover time, as they began the fifty days leading up to Pentecost, harvest festival. We quickly notice how in successive verses he shows that the ear of wheat illustration applies to himself, for he goes on to speak of his own death in these terms. We are the harvest which answers to his being the ear of wheat. It is equally clear that the ear of wheat applies to disciples, too, for he says ‘The man who loves his life in this world will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me...’ (John 12:25-26).

What I am asking, however, is whether we have not rushed too quickly to the application to Jesus and to his followers, and neglected the first step in this teaching. Is the grain of wheat only an illustration? Or is it a principle, written into creation, embodying a way in which God works? Is this interpretation not much more in harmony with our Lord’s use of parables as the foundation of his teaching; of the creation/redemption links referred to above, and of the Johannine, Pauline and Hebrews teaching listed earlier? Our concentration on Jesus’ death and resurrection, and on our dying and rising with him, properly underlines a fundamental discontinuity between nature and grace; a discontinuity which has its roots in the

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presence of evil in the world. But the ear of wheat principle may well be pointing to a fundamental continuity also. Nature and grace are not, and cannot be, totally discontinuous. The incarnation of Jesus alone denies such total discontinuity.

But must we not go further in this case and accept that Jesus is saying something of profound significance which is wholly in harmony with the rest of his teaching? He is saying that the divine principle of death and resurrection is already written into the universe, if only we had the eyes to see it. His ministry is one of seeking to open the eyes of his hearers to see what was there already, if only they had faith to perceive.

If this exegesis—so briefly offered—is accurate, then a whole set of conclusions tumble after it. The first is that the uniqueness of Jesus’ ministry of death and resurrection was not the uniqueness of a new principle introduced into God’s world. The uniqueness of Christ’s death and resurrection was the uniqueness of the person who so died and rose, and the uniqueness of what he therefore achieved by dying and rising, namely salvation for all who would believe. But this principle of God’s working was already present in creation. The details of the parables are not just the interesting, homely illustration to hold the interest—they are truly part of the theological content, for they describe how God’s world operates.

A second conclusion is that we Christians need not, and must not, be dismissive of apparently good deeds, beautiful acts, truthful discoveries outside the life of the church. Although much of it is vitiated, in part, by sin and selfishness, and often even turned to wrong ends, it remains evidence of God’s presence in and with his world, a continuing testimony to his creative grace. Our approach will not be ‘You may do great, profound, truthful deeds, but you don’t know God’. It will be ‘You do great, profound, truthful deeds, and I’d like to introduce you to their originator, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Alongside Paul’s testimony to Corinth ‘I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified’ (1 Corinthians 2:2), we must learn to put into practice Paul’s words on Mars Hill, ‘What you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you’ (Acts 17:23).

The third conclusion we may draw is that our mission can and must begin where people are: be concerned with what they now know and do; and speak in language which they understand, so that they might be led to where we pray they will end up. Again the ministry of our Lord is the supreme example. To a woman at a well he talks of water. To a man with a withered hand he speaks of healing. To a man up a tree he suggests a better juxtaposition to facilitate proper conversation. For the world outside the church is not wholly alien territory. God has not left himself without a witness. The Magi are not the only people needing help to follow the light they have till they reach the point where the challenge of revealed knowledge is put to them. We must learn to listen to the words, the questions, the statements, the cries of the unsaved world if we are to know where to begin in

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communicating God’s answer in Christ.

This brings us to a fourth, and very important conclusion. If Christ is the clue to the created world—as John, Paul and the writer to the Hebrews claim—then it must follow that none of the world’s great problems will or can be answered without reference to that which his life and teaching, death and resurrection, ascension and second coming reveal. Problems of starvation and ecology, racism and deprivation, war, unemployment, injustice, genetic engineering and a host of other issues will find no final solution until addressed by the truth as it is in Jesus. I do not mean that a degree in theology is all the training one needs to deal with such complex and perplexing issues. Would that some of our speakers would learn that lesson! But I do mean that only in the truth as Jesus has embodied and taught it will solutions be found.

Christians who engage themselves in dealing with such issues must not, therefore, be viewed as handling peripheral issues. They are contending for the truth about Jesus. They are representing the breadth of God’s love. Evangelicals from the Third World who rebuke us for neglect of such matters, and those in this country who work in inner cities or establish institutes for study of society are pointing us to central issues, not issues of the circumference. They do not threaten the importance of preaching Jesus Christ crucified and raised for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of new birth. Nor are they simply adjuncts to such a message. They, too, are part of the significance of Jesus Christ, who is greater than any of us has yet realized.

To take our doctrine of creation seriously broadens immensely our understanding of God. It also deepens it profoundly. It is time for us, as evangelicals, to learn this lesson more extensively.

I ask, secondly, about our understanding of atonement, and again I am concerned about balance. I do not wish to call in question our evangelical defence of the biblical teaching on the meaning of the death of Jesus. Indeed, I believe that such work is more necessary than ever if we are to combat the theological minimalism which dominates much Christian discussion and proclamation today.

We can, however, usefully ask ourselves once more whether, in defence of the content, we may have neglected and narrowed down the significance of our Lord’s death. We make it our business to learn about the words and concepts which lay at the heart of the biblical teaching on the meaning of the cross, and who among us will ever be out of debt to men like Leon

Morris for their masterly studies? The two points which need highlighting, however, concern the original materials and their subsequent use.

The theological content of the biblical teaching leans heavily on concepts and words which were familiar in the first century, and which conjured up history and practice both sacred and secular. Words like ransom, sacrifice, propitiation, blood, lamb, were signal words. They conveyed a whole range of ideas and uses, and the preachers, teachers and

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evangelists sought to indicate how Jesus Christ’s work was to be understood in the light of them. They were more than metaphor. They were certainly analogy. They even qualify as descriptions of the divine work, although it remains a mystery to be ever more deeply perceived.

We face a situation, however, in our culture today, when these words and thoughts have largely lost that original meaning for ordinary people. ‘Washed in the blood of the lamb’ does not conjure up for the average Englishman a picture of sacrificial acts to make forgiveness for sin available. Lest we take a wrong turn I share at this point my conviction that such words and concepts did not just happen to be available. I believe it is part of ‘the fulness of time’ of which Paul speaks, that such words and their meaning were readily available—prepared by God—as avenues for understanding and response. I believe we must also notice, however, that much of their purchase on the hearers and readers depended on their basic intelligibility and significance which was already shared by speaker and hearer. That the Spirit communicates the truth of the gospel to the hearer’s mind and heart we may readily accept. Few of us would decide, however, on the strength of that belief, to preach to an English audience in, say, Cantonese. We may have to work very much harder than we have so far done to discover models, concepts, images, symbols which will enable us to communicate the biblical truth in non-biblical, though in no sense anti-biblical, language. Shouting louder will not do. To the teaching/preaching task must be added a task of genuine communication.

It is here that a second observation concerning proper understanding of biblical teaching on atonement enters in. At different points in the history of the church a particular biblical insight has been seen to be of great relevance. Such contributions as those by Anselm and Luther and Calvin readily come to mind. Here the original biblical teaching engaged the cultural setting and assumptions of the age in a fruitful way to produce deeper awareness. Evangelicals have more recently been less ready for such exploration, largely because they judged that in work like that of McLeod Campbell (using the father-son relationship), or Horace Bushnell (concentrating on vicarious sacrifice); or R. C. Moberly (focusing on relationships), or F. W. Dillistone (looking at alienation and recurring patterns for dealing with it); in such work evangelicals felt that a particular insight was being sought over against other biblical teaching; or even contrary to biblical teaching altogether.

Yet we neglect the task at our peril. The death of Jesus Christ was not primarily intended as a basis for theological discussion nor for understanding in a limited number of times and places. Nor is it intended that we who have enjoyed its blessings should keep it to ourselves—or even require people to come to it precisely as we did.

Lest we seem to leave these issues on a theoretical note, let me suggest two possible areas of fruitful exploration for our culture. One is the interrelationship of and life-giving tension between two of our Lord’s utter-

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ances on the cross—the cry of dereliction, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ and the triumphal, ‘It is finished.’ Our age desperately needs to know the secret of both experiences in the service of God—few church groups know how to offer both. The triumphalism of some attracts the achievers but is the despair of the downtrodden. The acceptance of constant uncertainty by others may attract the lowly but does little to lift them. The Christian experience is a compound of weakness and strength. Our understanding of the cross needs to help us with both.

A second area needing study is the significance for our age of 2 Corinthians 8:9—‘For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.’ In a world torn by injustice and inequality, with avowed desire but not the heart to put things right, this verse as a commentary on the meaning of the death of Jesus might well herald a new understanding of timeless truth.

Finally we turn to a third area of proper concern in our evangelism. We considered our understanding of God. We have looked at a single doctrine in the light of its surrounding culture. We now complete that movement by asking about our understanding of the men and women whom we seek to win for Christ.

No-one could doubt our evangelical heritage of caring for those who are without Christ. In recent centuries literally hundreds of people risked, and many gave their lives in foreign countries because they could not rest at home for the thought of millions dying without Christ. Though they often receive reflective criticism today for their part in imperialist expansion, most believed themselves to be doing good to the peoples amongst whom they worked. It is easy to be wise after the event.

The question we must address is whether we are showing nearly as much concern for those without Christ in our own culture. There is space only to indicate some possible lines of action.

There is the phenomenon of folk religion and of the widespread claims to religious experience made by those right outside the church. The work of Professor Alister Hardy, and those whose research grew out of his, is particularly significant. Sometimes over 60% in controlled experiments claimed quite specific religious experience. The difference between such figures and the statistics of church attendance would suggest a vast need for interpreters as well as witnesses and preachers. Like the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8, they need someone to explain what God is doing in their lives.

Then there is the need to occupy middle ground between the church and the world of our culture. The parable of the sower, as has often been said, might be better described as the parable of the soils. The message seems to be that however good the seed it will not grow in alien environments. Part of the burden of this lecture is that we have been excellent at seed preservation and only moderate at sowing techniques. We have been very bad at

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soil technology. The parable, in our setting, challenges us to ask what chance there is of people responding to the gospel when middle ground is unoccupied. Our need for communicators, poets, novelists, musicians, painters to fill this middle ground, is intense. Nor must we ignore the task of serving, even Christianizing, a society so that the soil is tilled for the sowing of the seed. We are still guilty of crass scattering of seed which will not flourish.

Thirdly, we must ask whether our evangelistic plans really take seriously the varying ways in which people normally get in touch with reality. Our Lord’s capacity to meet people where they were is again a challenge to us at this point. So is the way in which the New Testament writers and preachers chose their starting point with such accuracy. The current debate about whether there is one recognizable gospel message, or a number of divergent ones, may well be solved in this direction. It could be simply that there was one gospel, widely accepted in its main context; but that there were many starting places. And the starting place was determined, not by the predilection of the preacher, but by the need, condition, experience and capacity of the audience. A glance through Acts, or a comparison of the various New Testament letters, will demonstrate this striking versatility. We evangelicals do well to ask whether our worship and our evangelism, our fellowships and our organization make it possible for people with varying routes into reality to pursue those routes into Christianity. Most of our communication in and out of the church depends heavily on verbal articulation and conceptual grasp. How many of our nation actually are in touch with reality that way? How much do we cater for the intuitive, the volitional, the activist? Bishop Lesslie Newbigin has recently suggested that we may be witnessing the end of an era, the age of enlightenment. We do well to ask what the new age is, and to ask God to prepare us to witness in it.

The tasks to which I have alluded in this lecture are only some of those which lie before us. I believe God has given us the opportunity, and the strength, to do them. I also believe that we shall only achieve this task wholly when the whole Body of Christ demonstrates its oneness in the world. Then we may have more chance to have a more adequate doctrine of God, a clearer perception of the Atonement and how it relates to our time and greater sensitivity to the real needs of those whom we wish to win for Christ. Till then we can at least commit ourselves to these very necessary tasks. All are part of our proper evangelical heritage, all demand our utmost in commitment and skill. God will provide the grace.

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