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Evangelism

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EVANGELISM

Two centuries ago William Carey squelched the founding of a mission society. Said Mr. Carey to the young man who had proposed such a missionary outreach: "Sit down, young man. When God is pleased to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid, or mine!" The idea of taking the initiative in going out to find men of all nations for Christ struck the old warrior as improper, and indeed, presumptuous. After all, is it not true that it is God who saves, and that He saves according to His own purpose, and does not take orders from man in the matter? Dare we suppose that without our help God would be helpless? In this manner many take the Church's evangelistic responsibility very lightly. We dare not forget that God's way of saving men is to send out His servants to tell them the Gospel, and that the Church has been charged to go into all the world for that very purpose.

In our Lord's parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30), the "good and faithful" servants were those who furthered the master's interests by making the most enterprising lawful use that they could of what was entrusted to them. The servant who buried his talent, and did nothing with it beyond keeping it intact, no doubt imagined that he was extremely good and faithful, but his master judged him to be "wicked," "slothful," and "unprofitable." For what Christ has given us to use must be put to use; it is not enough simply to hide it away. We may apply this to our stewardship of the Gospel. The truth about salvation has been made known to us, not for us simply to preserve and contend for and keep it in its truth and purity (though we must certainly do that) but also--and primarily--for us to spread. The light is not meant to be hidden under the bushel. It is meant to shine;

and it is our business to see that it shines. "Ye are the light of the world . . ." (Matt. 5:14-16) said our Lord. He who does not devote himself to evangelism in every way that he can is not, therefore, playing the part of a good and faithful servant of Jesus Christ. On the basis of Scripture we shall now try to answer the following three questions concerning the Christian evangelistic responsibility. What is evangelism and its message? What is the motive for evangelizing? By what means and methods should evangelism be practiced?

I. What is Evangelism and Its Message?

Too often evangelism is defined in terms of an effect produced in our hearers, not in terms of the message delivered. It is not evangelism to teach general truths about God's existence, nor the moral law; evangelism means to present Christ Jesus, the divine Son who became man at a particular point in world history in order to save a ruined race. It is not evangelism merely to present the teaching and example of the historical Jesus, or even the truth about His saving work; evangelism means to present Christ Jesus Himself, the living Savior and reigning Lord. It is not evangelism merely to set forth the living Jesus as Helper and Friend, without reference to His saving work on the cross; evangelism means to present Jesus as Christ, God's anointed Servant, fulfilling the tasks of His appointed office as Priest and King. "The man Christ Jesus" is to be presented as the "one mediator between God and men," (I Tim. 2:4) "who suffered for sins . . . that he might bring us to God," (I Peter 3:18), the One through whom, and through whom alone, men may come to put their trust in God, according to His own claim: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." (John 14:6) He is to be proclaimed as the Savior, the One who "came into the world to save sinners," (Gal. 3:13) and

"redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us" (I Thess. 1:10)--"Jesus, which delivereth us from the wrath to come." (I Thess. 1:10) And He is set forth as King: "for to this end Christ died, and lived again, that he might be Lord of both the dead and living." (Rom. 9:9) There is no evangelism where this specific message is not declared. This is the essence of evangelism. To many the essence of evangelism is to present Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, that men shall come. This is to define evangelism in terms of an effect achieved in the lives of others, which amounts to saying that the essence of evangelizing is producing converts. Evangelism is man's work, but the giving of faith is God's. There are many missionaries who labored for a lifetime and saw no converts; must we conclude from this that they were not evangelizing? There have been false preachers through whose words it would appear great numbers have been converted. Must we conclude from this that these preachers were evangelizing after all? We ought not to define evangelism in terms of achieved results. Evangelism is just preaching the gospel, the evangel. It is a work of communication in which Christians make themselves mouthpieces for God's message of mercy to sinners. It is not to ask whether conversions are known to have resulted from your witness; it is rather to ask whether you are faithfully communicating the gospel message to sinners.

For a complete picture of what the New Testament means by evangelism, we need not look further than the apostle Paul's account of the nature of his own evangelistic ministry. Paul's work was by and large centered in the cities of Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia, Thessalonica and Rome. Paul was commissioned as a representative of the Lord Jesus Christ. He says: "Christ sent me . . . to preach the Gospel." (I Cor. 1:17) He saw himself as Christ's steward. "Let

a man so account of us (myself and my fellow-preacher, Apollos) as of ministers of Christ, and (in that capacity) stewards of the mysteries of God." (I Cor. 4:1 RSV) "A dispensation of the gospel (i.e. a commission to dispense it: "a stewardship," RV) is committed unto me." (I Cor. 9:17) Paul saw himself as a bond slave raised to a position of high trust, as the steward of a household in New Testament times always was; he had been "approved of God to be intrusted with the gospel" (Titus 1:3), and the responsibility now rested on him to be faithful to his trust, as a steward must be (I Cor. 4:2), guarding the precious truth that had been committed to him (as he later charges Timothy to do (I Tim. 4:20; II Tim. 1:13)), and distributing and dispensing it according to his Master's instructions. The fact that he had been entrusted with this stewardship meant, as he told the Corinthians, that "necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!" (I Cor. 9:16) The figure of stewardship thus highlights Paul's responsibility to evangelize. Again, Paul saw himself as Christ's herald. Paul in his own estimation was not a philosopher, not a moralist, not one of the world's wise men, but simply Christ's herald. Paul did not give his own ideas about anything, but simply delivered God's message. Therefore, "I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified," and "my speech and my preaching (heralding) was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power; that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." (I Cor. 2:1-5) The figure of the herald thus highlights the authenticity of Paul's gospel.

Paul considered himself Christ's ambassador. He speaks not in his own name, but on behalf of the ruler whose deputy he is, and his whole duty and responsibility is to interpret that ruler's mind faithfully to those to whom he

is sent. Paul used this figure twice, both times in connection with his evangelistic work. Pray for me, he wrote from prison, "that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak." He wrote again that God has "committed unto us the word of reconciliation. We are ambassadors therefore on behalf of Christ, as though God were intreating by us: we beseech you on behalf of Christ, be ye reconciled to God." (Eph. 6:19f.; II Cor. 5:19f. RV) Paul called himself an ambassador because he knew that when he proclaimed the gospel facts and promises and urged sinners to receive the reconciliation effected by Calvary, it was Christ's message to the world that he was declaring. The figure of ambassador thus highlights the authority that Paul had, as representing his Lord.

In his evangelism, then, Paul consciously acted as the slave and steward, the mouthpiece and herald, the spokesman and ambassador, of the Lord Jesus Christ. But the commission to publish the gospel and make disciples was never confined to the apostles. Nor is it now confined to the Church's ministers. It is a commission that rests upon the whole Church collectively, and therefore upon each Christian individually. All God's people are sent to do as the Philippians did, and "shine in the world; holding forth the word of life." (Phil. 2:15f.) Every Christian, therefore, has a God-given obligation to make known the gospel of Christ. And every Christian who declares the gospel message to any fellowman does so as Christ's ambassador and representative, according to the terms of his God-given commission. Such is the authority, and such the responsibility, of the Church and of the Christian in evangelism. We need to bear in mind the relationship of pastor to people expressed in Ephesians--pastors are "to prepare all God's people for the work of Christian service . . ." (Eph. 4:12 TEV) "The

universal priesthood of all believers" and "equipping the saints for ministry" and "bearing one another's burdens" in the "Body of Christ" need more fully to be realized and practiced so that these terms do not become a lot of theological jargon.

Evangelism, if it is to be effective, dare not depend solely on one overworked pastor. What we must strive for is to develop a whole churchful of pastors. We need to get our lay people to become actively, meaningfully involved in ministry. One of the big problems of the church is that we so often exclude people from the really central and exciting work of the ministry of evangelism. We let them usher, count money, attend council meetings. We also need to get them involved in the ministry of evangelism. Here the pastor's role is a crucial one. He is truly to become a "pastor to pastors." Evangelism is not the private possession of the professional minister. Every Christian, regardless of his or her station in life, is to share with all other Christians the privileges and responsibilities in preaching and teaching all nations. Lay people grow as they minister--and the pastor's ministry is multiplied.

Carnegie Samuel Calian puts it this way: "Prior to Emperor Constantine's reign, the primitive Christian church was viewed largely as a lay movement....During the course of the church's history this essential biblical concept of the priesthood of all believers was submerged under layers of lethargy....Normally, laity are trusted with counting the money after the service and preparing for potluck meals at church." (Today's Pastor in Tomorrow's World) Perhaps one of our greatest weaknesses is the failure of the church to give the reins of evangelism into the hands of the laity. Have we underestimated the gifts of God's people? Perhaps we need to dust off old phrases about "the priesthood of all believers" and give them a new shine and

fresh reality. Earlier we pointed out how wrong it is to define evangelism too broadly, and fall into assuming that the production of converts was our personal responsibility. However, there is an opposite mistake which we must also avoid-- that is, of defining evangelism too narrowly.

We also dare not define evangelism institutionally, in terms of merely holding evangelistic seminars at which testimonies are given and an appeal is made at the close for some outward sign of having received Christ, such as raising the hand, or standing, or walking to the front. There are many ways of bringing the gospel before the unconverted in order to win them, besides getting them to meetings of one type or another. There is, to start with, the way of personal evangelism, by which Andrew won Peter, and Philip won Nathanael, and Paul won Onesimus. There is the home meeting, and the group Bible study. Also, and most important, there are the regular services Sunday after Sunday in our local churches. Insofar as the preaching at our Sunday services is scriptural, these services will of necessity be evangelistic. It is a mistake to suppose that evangelistic sermons are a special brand of sermons, having their own peculiar style--evangelistic sermons are just scriptural sermons, the sort of sermons that a man cannot help preaching if he is preaching the Bible biblically. In other words, there can be evangelism without special meetings. Wherever, and by whatever means, the gospel is communicated with a view to conversion, there you have evangelism. Evangelism is to be defined, not institutionally, in terms of the kind of meeting held, but theologically, in terms of what is taught, and for what purpose.

II. What is the Motive for Evangelizing?

There are two motives: The first is love to God and concern for His glory; the second is love to man and concern for his eternal welfare.

Do all to the glory of God! Men glorify God by obeying His Word and fulfilling His revealed will. The first and great commandment is: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God." (Matt. 22: 37f.) We show love to the Father and the Son, who so richly loved us, by obeying Him. Our Lord said: "He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me." (John 14:21) "This is the love of God," wrote John, "that we keep his commandments." (I John 5:3) Evangelism is one of the activities that the Father and the Son have commanded. Christ tells us: "This gospel of the kingdom shall (according to Mark, "must") be preached in all the world for a witness." (Matt. 24:14; Mark 13:10) And before His ascension Christ charged His disciples in the following terms: "Go ye . . . and make disciples of all nations." (Matt. 28:19f.) To this command He added at once a comprehensive promise: "And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." The phrase "even unto the end of the world" makes it clear that the "you" to whom the promise was given was not solely and exclusively the eleven disciples; this promise extends to the whole Christian Church throughout history, the entire community of which the eleven were, so to speak, founder members. The task laid upon the eleven is the Church's constant task. And if it is the Church's task in general, then it is your task and my task in particular. If, therefore, we love God and are concerned to glorify Him, we are constrained to follow His instructions to evangelize. God is glorified when His mighty works of grace are made known. The psalmist exhorts us to "show forth his salvation from day to day. Declare His glory among the heathen, His wonders among all people." (Ps. 96:3) For a Christian to talk to the unconverted about the Lord Jesus Christ and His saving power is in itself honoring and glorifying to God.

The second motive is love to our neighbor,

and the desire to see our fellowmen saved. To win the lost for Christ is a natural, spontaneous outflow of love in the heart of everyone who has been born again. Our Lord confirms the Old Testament command that we should love our neighbor as ourselves. "As we have therefore opportunity," writes Paul, "let us do good unto all men." (Gal. 6:10) What greater need has any man than the need to know Christ? What greater good can we do to any man than to set before him the knowledge of Christ? Insofar as we really love our neighbor as ourselves, we shall of necessity want him to enjoy the salvation which is so precious to us. This, indeed, should not be a thing that we need to think about, let alone argue about. The impulse to evangelize should spring up spontaneously in us as we see our neighbor's need of Christ. It was the nature of Andrew, when he found the Messiah, to go off and tell his brother, Simon, and for Philip to hurry to break the good news to his friend, Nathanael. They did not need to be told to do this; they did it naturally and spontaneously, just as one would naturally and spontaneously share with one's family and friends any other piece of news that vitally affected them. Paul declared that "the love of Christ constraineth us." (II Cor. 5:14)

True, evangelism is a task that we are not all called to discharge in the same way. We are not all called to be preachers; we are not all given equal opportunities or comparable abilities for personal dealing with men and women who need Christ. But we all have some evangelistic responsibility which we cannot shirk without failing in love both to our God and our neighbor. To start with, we all can and should be praying for the salvation of unconverted people, particularly in our family, and among our friends and everyday associates. If, then, we love God--Father, Son, and Spirit--for all that They have done for us, we shall muster all

our initiative and enterprise to make the most that we can of every situation for Their glory. And one chief way of doing this is to seek out ways and means of spreading the gospel and obeying the divine command to make disciples everywhere. Similarly, if we love our neighbor, we shall muster all our initiative and enterprise to find ways and means of doing him good. With Paul we say: "Lord what would Thou have me do?" And then we will see what the possibilities are and give ourselves wholeheartedly to the task.

Evangelism is the enterprise of love which shows a genuine respect for our neighbors and a genuine friendliness toward them. One sometimes meets a scalp-hunting zeal in evangelism, both in the pulpit and on the personal level, which is both discreditable and alarming. It is discreditable, because it reflects neither love and care nor the desire to help, but arrogance, and conceit, and pleasure in having power over the lives of others. We should not try to violate personalities or exploit their weaknesses or ride roughshod over their feelings. What we should be trying to do, rather, is to show them the reality of our friendship and concern by sharing with them our most valuable possession.

C. G. Trumbull wrote a book entitled Taking Men Alive. He tells us of the rule that his father made for himself in this matter. It was this: "Whenever I am justified in choosing my subject of conversation with another, the theme of themes (Christ) shall have prominence between us, so that I may learn of his need, and, if possible, meet it." The key words here are: "Whenever I am justified in choosing my subject of conversation with another." Personal evangelism should be courteous. Personal evangelism needs normally to be founded on friendship. First give yourself to him in friendship and establish with him a relationship in which he feels that you respect him, and are interested in him, and

are treating him as a human being, and not just as some kind of "case." With some people, you may establish such a relationship in five minutes, whereas with others it may take months. But the principle remains the same--the right to talk intimately to another person about the Lord Jesus Christ has to be earned, and you earn it by convincing him that you are his friend and really care about him. The indiscriminate buttonholing, the intrusive barging into the privacy of other people's souls, the thick-skinned insistence on expounding the things of God to reluctant strangers who are longing to get away--these modes of behavior should be written off as a travesty of personal evangelism. "Impersonal evangelism" might be a better name for this. It creates resentment, prejudices people against Christ. One of my Jewish friends told me that he had been completely turned off from Christianity by this type of evangelism that was practiced by the "Crusaders for Christ" on a university campus. We need to pray for the gift of friendship; a genuine friendship is in any case a prime mark of the man who is learning to love his neighbor as himself.

III. By What Means and Methods Should Evangelism be Practiced?

Here there is much controversy. Some are criticizing, and others are defending the type of evangelism that has been a standard feature of English and American evangelical life for almost a century. Everything is well-planned to create an atmosphere of warmth, good humor and happiness. There is a good deal of music--choirs, solo items, choruses, and rousing hymns heartily sung. Emphasis is laid on the realities of Christian experience. The meeting gradually leads up to an appeal for decision, followed by an after-meeting or a time of personal counseling for the further instruction of those who have made a decision in response to the appeal. Of course, our main objection to this type of

evangelism is its religious unionism. But there are other objections. The entertainment aspect and the glamorizing of Christian experience in the testimonies give a false romanticized impression of what being a Christian is like. The long-drawn-out wheedling for decisions and the deliberate use of luscious music to stir emotions tend to produce "conversions" which are simply psychological and emotional upheavals, and not the fruit of spiritual conviction and renewal at all. Appeals for decision will often be made on the basis of inadequate instruction as to what the decision involves and will cost. Also the synergism involved must not be overlooked in this type of ministry. We never read in the New Testament that Christ converted a crowd en masse; rather, when the truth came out, they went back and walked with Him no more. The masses finally crucified Him. If you turn a publican into a Pharisee (the error which we might call "good-resolutionism"), you make his condition worse, not better.

In the final analysis, there is only one agent of evangelism: namely, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is Christ Himself who through His Holy Spirit enables His servants to explain the gospel truly and apply it powerfully and effectively; just as it is Christ Himself who through His Holy Spirit opens men's minds and hearts to receive the gospel, and so draws them savingly to Himself. Paul speaks of his achievements as an evangelist as "those (things) which Christ wrought through me, for the obedience of the Gentiles, by word and deed . . . in the power of the Holy Ghost." (Rom. 15:18 RV) "Belief cometh of hearing," Paul tells us, "and hearing by the word of Christ." (Rom. 10:17 RV) ("Faith awakened by the message, and the message that awakens it comes through the word of Christ." Rom. 10:17 NEB)

The best method of evangelism is the one which serves the gospel most completely. It is the one which bears the clearest witness to the

divine origin of the message, and the life-and-death character of the issues which it raises. It means preaching and teaching the Word of our Lord in season and out of season; it means giving thorough instructions of the good news of Christ and His cross and the most exacting and searching application of it. It means preaching and teaching the whole counsel of God. Just what the best method is in each case, you and I have to find out for ourselves. While we study techniques, we must admit that we have so often been disillusioned in thinking that any evangelistic technique, however, skilled, could of itself guarantee conversions. We must recognize that because man's heart is impervious to the word of God, it is no cause for surprise if at any time our evangelism fails to result in conversions. We must remember that the terms of our calling are that we should be faithful, not that we should be successful. We must learn to rest all our hopes of fruit in evangelism upon the power of God's grace in Christ alone. God does what man cannot do. God works by His Spirit through His Word in the hearts of sinful men to bring them to repentance and faith. Faith is a gift of God. "Unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ . . . to believe on him," (Phil. 1:29) writes Paul to the Philippians. "By grace are ye saved through faith," he tells the Ephesians, "and that not of yourselves; it is a gift of God." (Eph. 2:18) Repentance is the gift of God. "Him did God exalt," says Peter to the Sanhedrin, "to be a Prince and Savior, for to give repentance to Israel, and remission of sins." (Acts 5:31 RV)

When the Jerusalem church heard how Peter had been sent to evangelize Cornelius, and how Cornelius had come to faith, they said: "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life." (Acts 11:18) You and I cannot make sinners repent and believe in Christ by our words alone, but God works faith and repentance in men's

hearts by His Holy Spirit. We may not trust in our methods of personal dealing or running evangelistic services, however excellent they may be. There is no magic in methods; our trust must be in God who raises the dead. Our part is to be faithful in making the gospel known, sure that such labor will never be in vain.

Let us be bold, for no heart is too hard for the grace of God. Paul was a bitter opponent of the gospel, but Christ laid His hand on Paul, and Paul was broken down and born again and became the greatest of all missionaries. You and I should never write off anyone as hopeless and beyond the reach of God if we believe in His all-surpassing grace.

And we need to be patient. God saves in His own time, and we ought not to suppose that He is in such a hurry as we are. "One soweth and another reapeth." (John 4:37) As He kept Abraham waiting 25 years for the birth of his son, so He often keeps Christians waiting for things that they long to see, such as the conversion of their friends.

The way ahead for us in evangelism is that we should be taught afresh to testify to our Lord and to His gospel, in public and in private, in preaching and in personal dealing, with boldness, patience, power, authority, and love; and that with this we should also be taught afresh to pray for God's blessing on our witness with humility and importunity. It is as simple--and as difficult--as that.

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