

The Elevation of the Evangel

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"Today as never before there is being laid upon the heart and conscience of the Church the burden of Evangelism."

So writes Professor James Stewart in a persuasive and passionate little volume called *A Faith To Proclaim*.

Yet there are difficulties. One of Dr. Stewart's fellow-Britons, Erik Routley, writes: "Evangelism...ought to be the most heartening and comforting of words in the Christian vocabulary. To me, it is one of the most frightening. During my fifteen years in the Christian ministry I have come to hate the sound of it."

Desirable as it may be, it is not probable that *allof* the Church's sons will fall in love with the word "evangelism." Concessively, we must say that it is not in any accepted version of the English Bible. On grounds that may be more esthetic than anything else, some find offense in virtually all of our words that end with "ism." (A waggish objector has expressed the wish that all of our "isms" were "wasms.")

Still, "light is sown for the righteous." The task of clarification is far from thankless. Often with clarity comes the sense of beauty.

What we must not do is to fancy that because "evangelism" is a widely used word in Christian circles it is a well understood word. Douglas Webster, in his *What Is Evangelism?*, remarks that "once a word has become fashionable and entered into accepted jargon, confusions can very easily arise." It is a fair observation. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin tells of a missionary who "talks about evangelism, but, when you inquire what he means, he talks about breeding improved strains of pigs and poultry." Although this could be, if rightly motivated, pre-evangelism, it reminds us of the admonition given by the late W. E. Sangster: "When we say that everything the Church does is evangelism, we are close to saying that nothing that the Church does is evangelism."

Christian evangelism is nothing if it lacks character and focus. Diverse it may be in method and approach; definite it

must be in motivation and target. Was it ever, I wonder, more cogently or compellingly set forth than in the language of St. Paul? "This is from God," he passionately proclaims, "who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation... So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We beseech you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (II Corinthians 5:18, 20).

Evangelism has character. Character is the sum of characteristics.

How may this be applied in the case of evangelism and the Church that proclaims it?

I.

To begin with, evangelism is something *supernatural*.

Some of the popular overtones of that word are not to our purpose: phenomenal, unpredictable, magical, occult. It is an essential Biblical supernaturalism that is meant.

Let me quote from a European theologian who has recently written a little book entitled *Towards a Theology of Mission*. If any reader is helped by substituting "evangelistic" for "missionary," let him by all means make the change. The meaning is the same. Says Professor Wilhelm Andersen:

The triune God himself is declared to be the sole source of every missionary enterprise. Essential in the missionary purpose of God are the sending of the Son and the sending of the Holy Spirit. God did not cease to participate in the missionary enterprise with the sending of his Son once for all in the flesh. He did not make a beginning, which must then be carried forward by human efforts; he did not lay down a pattern after which men were to develop their missionary enterprises. With the sending of the Holy Spirit--who proceeds from the Father and the Son--he has made it evident that he retains the missionary enterprise in his own hands and does not surrender it to any human authority. Therefore God is, and remains to the last day, the One who alone carries on the missionary enterprise, the One of whom alone such terms can with propriety be used.¹

¹Wilhelm Andersen, *Towards a Theology of Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1955).

Evangelism, then, is something that redeemed men do, and yet it is not their doing. It is the doing of the Holy Spirit of God in them and through them. It is important to grasp this. It is important to act on it. The acknowledgement of it must be more than a verbalism: it must be a vitality.

II.

Evangelism is something *practical*.

A Roman Catholic priest, Abbe Michonneau, working aggressively among Parisian pagans, said: "Since 95% of our people do not come to us, we must direct 95% of our efforts to them. Not merely by sighs and wishes, but by real activity."

"Not merely by sighs and wishes"!

"If wishes were horses," runs an old proverb, "beggars would ride." The lazy and the irresponsible are skilled in the bootless art of wishing. Far too often this is the extent of the evangelistic contribution made by pious people who pre-empt our pews.

Word-play, I know, can be perilous, but surely there is something illuminatingly suggestive in the fact that our Lord did not say, "Go ye *around* all the world, and preach the gospel," but rather, "Go ye *into* all the world." Christ's people, who at one level have been delivered *from* the world, must at another level be entangled *with* the world. They must get "into" it with their witness, their compassion, their understanding, their services of genuine love, to meet the spiritual, social, and physical needs of those who are without the knowledge of the redeeming Lord.

Here, for example, is a pastor who goes to a congregation where for years evangelism has been "the lost chord." Wishing the situation were different, which he did, is certainly better than being complacent about it. But wishing is not enough. Concern finds expression in prayer. Prayer gives birth to guidance. Guidance leads to the sounding of positive notes in the preaching. It leads also to the formation of a small *koinonia* couples-group. It meets in a private home. It offers opportunity for Bible study, shared prayer, and group discussion--all of it related to the new life Christ gives, the outreach toward others prompted by that new life, and the power of the Holy Spirit to make it all effective.

And things begin to happen! Membership becomes fellowship. Faith becomes a flame. Formality becomes vitality. The

confession of a creed becomes the communication (to others) of a Life.

It was God's doing, to be sure. It was not merely "organized." But it *was* implemented. Measures were adopted. Steps were taken. Tactics were employed. And God gave the "increase."

Evangelism must be rescued from the sentimental. It must become, in the best practical sense, operational.

III.

Evangelism is something *obsessional*.

Definition, please! A mind can be neurotically, or even psychotically, haunted, and it evokes nothing but pity--and the best attempt to cure it. That is one form of "obsession."

There is another possibility. A mind can be creatively inflamed by a motivation that is at once worthy and commanding. This is its "magnificent obsession."

Jesus had it: "We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work" (John 9:4).

St. Paul had it: "To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (I Corinthians 9:22).

George Whitefield had it, and had it to the end, so that when, on September 29, 1770, he was urged by his solicitous friends not to preach in his ill and exhausted state, he replied in a prayer: "Lord Jesus, I am weary in Thy work, but not of it. If I have not finished my course, let me go and speak for Thee once more in the fields, seal Thy truth, and come home, and die!"

The "rank and file" in the apostolic Church had it, for which reason Professor E. S. Scott is able to say, in the Moffatt New Testament Commentary: "During the great age of expansion which followed the death of Paul we do not hear of the name of a single outstanding missionary. The real work was done by countless obscure men and women who made it their first duty to spread the message in their own circle of friends and neighbours."

Note the words, "...who made it their *first* duty"!

So it was their magnificent obsession.

Only if the twentieth century Church is renewed from within, by the quickening Spirit in response to confessed unfaithfulness,

will we witness a fresh manifestation of that same evangelizing urgency.

IV.

Evangelism, finally, is something *eschatological*.

That the nature of time, viewed philosophically, is difficult to define, may be freely admitted. What is *not* difficult is to determine from the Holy Scriptures that there is a distinctly Biblical, or preferably Christian, *view* of time. According to this view, and quite unlike that of Hinduism or Buddhism, history is not *cyclical* but *linear*. It is a significant process moving to a purposeful end.

Why is it that in parts of Asia you have trouble ascertaining the age of any building that is older than the oldest inhabitant of the community? One guesses, in reply, that there are no records, and one is right. But why no records? Because for centuries history has had no other measurement than that contained in nature's most basic rhythms: day and night, summer and winter, birth and death. And this in endless repetition.

All this is changing, as the technological culture of the Christian West is taken over by Africans and Asians. Why, for example, should free India evolve a series of five-year plans, as in fact she has since independence? It is done, whether she is conscious of it or not, under a sense of history that is alien to her religious and philosophical heritage. History *can* be changed. A new destiny *can* be achieved.

Now Biblical revelation takes up this matter of the meaningfulness of history and sets it within two important contexts: (1) the sovereignty of God who, no matter what appearances may say, is the Lord of history and Whose will of righteousness, though often defied, will not be ultimately defeated; and (2) the relative brevity of the period with which any given generation of His people must do their responsible work of making known the Gospel of His grace in Jesus Christ the Redeemer.

The evangel is in the hands of the Church. The Church is in the hands of her Lord. The age between the advents--the first and the second comings of Christ--is the known (yet unknown) period of the Church's opportunity.

Hence the target of missions and evangelism is not the slow, sure, firm establishment of the Church in such a way that all human society shall be brought within its boundaries. In vain

do we search our New Testament for any such ecclesiastical imperialism as that.

What do we find?

This: "the time is short."

And this: "fields that are white unto harvest" and laborers that are "few."

And this: "let us go on to the next towns."

And this: "occupy till I come."

"It is the church that is living on the frontier," says Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, "that will be ready to advance in strength."

That is where the evangelizing church is always living. It has its growing edge hard up against the frontier of man's desperate need of a Savior and the frontier of God's sovereign purpose to unveil Christ, in the consummation of history, as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Herein--seeing it as something supernaturally given, practically implemented, passionately pursued, and withal eschatologically secured--stands the elevation of the evangel.

Herein, moreover, lies the distinction which we his friends have long found in J. C. McPheeters.

Twenty years ago, in his "Warrack Lectures" on preaching, Professor A. J. Gossip included a tribute to a beloved Scottish preacher, the Rev. W. M. MacGregor, of whom he wrote:

This man was a preacher because he had heard incredibly good news which he could not keep to himself, but had to speak; because he knew Christ intimately, and exulted in this Friend of his of whom he was immeasurably proud. Not seldom during his sermon his face would break into a smile. Sometimes, I think, it was the artist's joy in the wonderful God Whom he was seeking to reveal. It was indeed an irresistible Christ he preached. And, as one listened, how could one keep from wondering adoration of a God shown to be so adorable.²

Some such salute I gratefully make to my esteemed friend, whose name we honor in this commemorative issue, and whose life-long work (happily in excellent prospect of continuing!) has taken him into several fields but into none more effectively than that in which he has *elevated the evangel*.

²A. J. Gossip, *The Making of a Preacher* (London: SCM Press, 1945).