

How Popular Is Real Evangelism?

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Evangelism is the watchword of the hour. It has become a popular subject for conversation even in religious circles which a few years ago bitterly opposed it. Now scarcely can any kind of church assembly adjourn without making some stirring pronouncement upon this subject. It would almost seem that to be respectable in the church today, one must appear to be devoted to this cause. However, remembering the humanistic emphasis of many of these churchmen in the period before the last world war, one cannot help suspecting that some have subscribed to the new fashion from expediency rather than from personal conviction. Doubtless, not a few have accepted the evangelistic terminology only after it has been interpreted to accord with their own suppositions and prejudices. They use it more to exalt their piety than to challenge their dedication. Unfortunately, disgruntled liberals are not the only ones to be deceived. Many sincere men, committed to uphold the historic Christian faith, have unwittingly forced evangelism into a rather narrow mold. Through nearsightedness or stubbornness, these have sometimes failed to distinguish between true evangelism and erroneous applications of it. While the work goes on, the cause is hampered, and sometimes actually stymied, by this distorted perspective. In short, those who speak of evangelism, whether they be genuinely disposed to it or not may not always know what they mean, or intend to mean what they say. The language used to express the evangelistic concept may be simply an accepted part of the popular religious jargon.

1. In essence:

What is meant by evangelism? Does the word immediately awaken in the mind a positive and wholehearted proclamation of the Evangel of Christ? This is evangelism in its essence -- the Evangel manifesting itself. Basic to this definition are the elements of (1) action and (2) personality. Evangelism is the demonstration of the power of the Gospel. Or to put it another way, evangelism takes the Evangel out of theory and puts it into practice. The "good news" must be made known to be proved. The redeeming Word must be expressed to become a Gospel. It must be given away or it cannot be truly possessed. As one has said, "The water of life must be kept flowing or it will end in a cesspool." Moreover, this action is always expressed through personality. God does not redeem His creation through machines or programs, but through

persons. He revealed His own personality in the Son, Who in turn made the Father known to the disciples, that they through the Holy Spirit might manifest the Gospel to every creature. The Evangel must have people to make it known. It was first incarnated in Christ, and now by His Spirit the Evangel continues to speak in the life of the redeemed. This action of the Evangel in a dedicated person is evangelism. The explanation may seem simple enough, but the application of it may present a problem today. At least, when evangelism is related to the everyday work of the church, there is often a wide discrepancy between the real thing and the accepted practice. Each of us would do well to re-examine his understanding of what it means in terms of his own experience.

2. In relation to authority:

Evangelism is the objective of all of Divine Revelation, not merely an emphasis in the Christian religion. The Sovereign will of God to redeem that which He has made, fully expressed in Christ, and now operative through His Spirit, is the controlling purpose behind every inspired word of Scripture. It is not a facet of truth which can be turned on and off, nor one segment of Revelation separate from another. Everywhere man is seen to be lost and undone, a creature by nature and choice far short of the glory of his Creator. Yet God in Christ actively intervened in human history to effect the redemption of His people. This "good news" issues from the compassionate nature of the Holy Trinity, and is manifest wherever the creative love of God is known. Thus, at any point at which one might choose to fix his attention in the Word of God, when he really gets to the bottom of it, he will find evangelism. No sermon, no song, no Christian prayer is complete unless it throbs with this love. Moreover, this concept means that here is the one place to which all Christian theology will ultimately emerge. In this sense, evangelism can be said to reduce theology to its lowest common denominator, or to state it more appropriately, to its highest mission. If Christians cannot agree at this point, they never can. This is not to say, however, that the fundamentals of the faith can be compromised. Those doctrines which are incarnated in the Evangel, including the conception of Christ by the Holy Spirit, His vicarious suffering and blood atonement upon the Cross, and His bodily resurrection from the grave, can never be denied without destroying the objective authority of the Gospel.

Evangelism is historical as well as ecumenical. Some contemporary thinkers, seeking to show appreciation for both traditional orthodoxy and classical liberalism, have tried to fashion a new theology, which is Christ-centered and which admits the supernatural, but which ignores the direct and final Revelation of the

Bible. Ultimately, this view makes the Gospel merely the proclamation of the love of God received by faith and experience; it is utterly divorced from the historic validity of the incarnate life of the Son of God. Christ is accepted as experimentally divine, but not inherently so. While this neo-orthodox movement may use the terminology of evangelism, it is evident that the words are not intended to mean what they once did. Popular or not, it is only destined to produce confusion and suspicion. It is presumptuous to think that God will bless a Gospel effort to redeem perishing men when the Revelation of that "good news" to man is not believed to be historically true and perfect. Such a system of thought has never produced strong convictions of repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; and our modern predicament is but another demonstration of this fact.

3. In relation to Christian calling:

Evangelism is designed to be the work of every Christian, not just of some specially ordained church workers or a few pious saints of the church. Each must have his own religion, and if he has it, he must share it. A Gospel that does not gladden the hearts of its adherents and make them eager to pass it on to someone else is manifestly no "good news" at all, nor is it likely to be attractive to anyone to whom it is offered. Whoever is entrusted with the Gospel must witness. Certainly the pastor should set the example for his flock, but every member of the fold is commissioned to witness. Clergyman and laymen alike must come to see that if the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is to mean anything, it must mean that every Christian is called to be a witness to his faith. Jesus was not speaking merely to a few Galileans when He said, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19). The invitation was extended through them to all of every age who would follow in His steps. Repeatedly, by word and deed, He heralded this truth. Even as Christ was sent of the Father "to seek and to save" (Luke 19:10), so He likewise sent his followers (John 20:21 Cf. Mark 16:15). We are called to be sent. No one may transfer this responsibility to another.

The sentimental idea that the pastor is a sort of religious general engaged to do the fighting for the men in the ranks, while they sit at ease, is as absurd as it is unscriptural. Yet, ridiculous as it may seem, this notion persists among millions of laymen. Doubtless, the rather vague way in which many of the clergy have understood their own evangelistic responsibility has not helped the situation. There has been a growing sense of lay concern in the church in recent years, yet a tragic state of affairs still exists. It must be remedied if the church is to fulfill its appointed mission.

Any attempt to minimize the obligations as well as the privileges of every Christian to evangelize will inevitably frustrate, if not actually repudiate, the work of Christ.

4. In relation to follow-up:

Evangelism calls for bonafide disciples, not only converts and church members. Such is the commission of Jesus (Matt. 28:19). The conversion of sinners is, of course, the initial purpose of the Gospel. But new converts brought into the fellowship of the church are still "babes in Christ" (I Peter 2:2), "unskilled in the word" (Heb. 5:13); they need to be brought to spiritual maturity. This requires spiritual parental care or follow-up work. A task of this nature may be less spectacular than winning new converts, but it is no less important. Jesus spent three years personally training His twelve disciples, yet when He finished with them, all but one went out to carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Likewise, our converts must be followed-up until they can reproduce their life, and train their converts in turn to reproduce (II Tim. 2:2). This process of training may be called Christian education if one pleases, but the point is that the end product is evangelism. Neither education nor evangelism can be justified unless they produce evangelists. A Christian is born to reproduce, and the incarnate Evangel is never fully manifest until this happens. The fact that many converts are allowed to rest content in their conversion is the reason so many of them fall away. Most of these spiritual casualties of the church could be avoided if more diligent attention were given to their instruction in "all that the Lord commanded" (Matt. 28:20). Christ ordained us to bring forth fruit, and He intended that this fruit should remain (John 15:16). If contemporary evangelism were as much concerned with making disciples as in counting professions of faith, the rising statistics of church membership would give more occasion for rejoicing. The truth of the matter is that Christians, no matter how high their profession, who do not show the fruit of their experience have need of asking if they themselves are completely evangelized.

5. In relation to society:

Evangelism involves the transformation of the whole realm of human experience, not just the individual needs of the soul. The Evangel rings with the proclamation of the Kingdom, which brings every social relationship of life under the dominion of God. Of course, this comes only as men are redeemed one by one. The attempt to make the Gospel primarily social, a fashion particularly popular in the last generation, utterly subverts the plan of salvation. The Evangel is personal and is addressed to individual persons. Society can never be permanently changed until the individual mem-

bers of society are born again. Personal sin is the ultimate cause of all evil, and the depravity of society as a whole is only a reflection of this deeper problem. However, once a man has been redeemed by the power of the Gospel, his life must express itself in every social relationship. The Evangel would not be adequate unless it brought "good news" to the totality of human experience. The family, the community, the government, in short, every part of life must come under the rule of God.

Evangelism thus has something relevant to say to every social problem. War, public dishonesty, the liquor traffic, sex perversion, the race question -- whatever the social perversion may be it comes under the jurisdiction of evangelism as it seeks to make its message immediately practical in everyday living. In this connection, it is not without significance that many of the great social reforms of our civilization have had their roots deep in evangelical revivals of religion, including the abolition of slavery and child labor, the trade union movement, women's suffrage, the temperance movement, the concern for literacy and education, and many other noble humanitarian causes. The Gospel is individual in application, but ultimately social in its outreach. Failure to keep this perspective has often brought reproach upon the cause of evangelism, and the situation in the present day is no exception.

6. In relation to the church program:

Evangelism must be at the heart of the whole church life, not just a special phase of its program. When evangelism is accepted as the Gospel in action, it must be the center around which every activity of the church revolves. Any part of the church which is not actively expressing the saving Lord is simply not living in the sphere of the Gospel. The church is no mere organization; it is an organism, the continuation of the incarnate Body of Christ. Controlling its life should be the same evangelistic passion which motivated the body of her Lord. In this sense, one can say that to the extent the church allows other things to take preeminence over evangelism, to that extent she has allowed human instincts to crowd out the divine. Why have a Sunday School or a Boy Scout Troop in the church if these are just for the purpose of accumulating knowledge or fostering fellowship? What purpose does the ladies' society or a church supper serve if the chief objective is the promotion of good public relations? In fact, why conduct any program in the name of the church if the evangelization of the world can get along without it? The point is that all of these church organizations and activities in their own way should contribute to the redemptive work of the church itself. An old lady focused the issue exactly when she turned to the professional guide showing her through West-

minster Abbey and said, "Young man! Young man! Will you stop your chatter for a moment and tell me -- has anyone been saved here lately?"¹ Saved in Westminster Abbey? Why not? It is the church's business to save. How tragic it is when the concern for fellowship, civic improvement, intellectual attainment, or some other secondary consideration, becomes the controlling passion of church life.

This confusion of priorities is doubtless one of the most bewildering problems confronting the contemporary religious society. It is not easy to keep first things first in the church, but it is even harder to face the consequences of not doing so. It is a truism that whenever evangelism is relegated to an incidental place in a church's program, that church has lost its real Christian validity.

7. In relation to time:

Evangelism is a force that is continually at work; it does not progress with spasmodic intervals of inspiration. One cannot keep the Gospel from moving any more than one can stop a tornado from blowing. The moment it ceases to expend itself, it ceases to be. Evangelism by its very nature is action; and when there is no action, there is no evangelism. So long as God is pleased to speak "good news" to dying men, the story must be told to the ends of the earth and to the end of time. There is no discharge in this work on this side of eternity. Consequently, every church must ever be in a state of mobilization.

The routine, as well as the special, worship of the church must be alerted to this need. "In season and out of season", the work must go on. A big revival meeting or visitation program once or twice a year is to be commended to every church, but these of themselves are no assurance of an adequate evangelistic concern the year round. Sometimes, in fact, these special campaigns have a way of soothing the conscience of a congregation who otherwise do nothing the rest of the year to rescue the perishing. There are, of course, advantages in making special efforts at evangelism during periodic intervals in the church calendar, but these should only be an intensifying of an emphasis which is constant. There are multitudes of people not reached during these special seasons of concern. Many of them could be won if the church would maintain a wise and continuous vigil for souls. The popular practice of a church going all-out for evangelism in some kind of an annual event, and then letting the work rest until the next year, would be amusing if it were not so pathetic. Immortal souls are in the balance. Unless the church is always seeking to save the lost, she is not always true to her task.

8. In relation to methods:

Evangelism seeks to get results, not merely to promote techniques. Methods are important only as they are instrumental to getting the Evangel to every creature (and seeing that something is done about it.) Any method which God is pleased to use in the salvation of a soul is a good evangelistic procedure for that person. Jesus was willing to use any method which was suited to the situation, whether it was preaching to multitudes in the open air, organizing systematic visitation campaigns, or just counselling with a lonely soul along the road. The apostle Paul summed up this example when he said that he was made all things to all men, that by all means some might be saved (I Cor. 9:22). The same should be true of every disciple. One constrained by the love of Christ should be willing to employ any strategy necessary to convert a sinner from the error of his ways. Whether the particular plan is endorsed by his denomination or not is entirely beside the point. The question is, Will it work?

When it is apparent that the old method is not getting results, a church desperate for souls should be willing to try something new. Perhaps a street meeting, a youth retreat, a city-wide evangelistic crusade, an all-night prayer vigil, cottage meetings, a healing service, or something else effective is reaching those people who have failed to respond to the gospel. Surely we must believe that God has some way in which He can touch every heart. He is not willing that any should perish. A Christian then dare not give up until he has tried everything. Nevertheless, one of the stifling problems confronting us today is the staid way in which the church has been reluctant to accept new and different evangelistic methods. Almost all of us have a tendency to get so obsessed with the two or three methods of evangelism which have been particularly effective in our experience that we neglect other ways of achieving our goal. Some even become critical of those who prefer different methods to theirs. Some churches act as if their perpetuation were dependent upon a certain type of evangelism. Churches which fail to enlarge their horizons concerning the evangelistic approach are not likely enlarging their boundaries. But the seriousness and urgency of the work allows no one an opportunity to cast aspersions upon a brother. Evangelism is too big for that. Actually, it is time that each of us give ourselves unreservedly to winning the world for Christ, and quit bickering about how it is to be done, or who is to get the credit for doing it.

9. In particular:

Evangelism indicates specific action, not just general random activity. Of course, evangelism should be the motivating impulse

of the whole church, but it will not function thus unless it is made the definite concern of the congregation. The Gospel does not speak in generalities or abstractions. It is a definite and final action of God which demands in man a clear-cut repentance and faith, issuing in a life of obedient service. Conversion and reproduction do not happen by accident. The work of bringing lost sinners into the Kingdom of God is far too serious ever to be taken for granted. All too often the feeling that "evangelism is everything" boils down in practice to the fact that it is nothing in particular. This popular notion has a way of becoming an excuse for indolence and indifference. For many modern forms of Christianity that have lost their faith and vision, it has become the justification for religious programs which clearly make no honest effort at evangelism. Giving this kind of lip service to the Evangel without giving it specific implimentation is downright hypocrisy.

Moreover, a constant whirl of activity in the church is no assurance that the work of evangelism is being done. Crowds may come to the Sunday Services (especially the morning worship hour), new people may join the church and Sunday School, large building programs may be completed, a tremendous energy of promotion may be exerted and evangelism may be missing. Mere exhaustion in church work is no sign that souls are born again. A pious life is no certain evidence that this work is going on. No Christian has any right to assume that he is doing the work of an evangelist unless he is consciously doing such work. A good life, a knowledge of Scripture, a love for the souls of men, and many other worthy things may be considered prerequisites for evangelism, but they of themselves will not get the job done. Evangelism requires deliberate action, and the sooner we recognize this in practice, the sooner we can get on with the work of God.

Evangelism! There is no contemporary word fraught with so much pathos and misunderstanding; yet when we come right down to it, I suspect that our basic problem is not so much in understanding the term as in being willing to pay the price of evangelism. It will yield its full meaning only to one intensely devoted to it. Evangelism is hard work. It demands all our resources. It takes the best of our mind, and soul, and strength. It means laying aside every prejudice, and every self-appointed way. It involves the highest sacrifice. It cost Jesus His life. The worldly-minded religious leaders in the presence of our suffering Lord ironically stated the truth when they said in derision, "He saved others; Himself He cannot save" (Matt. 27:42). Of course He could not save Himself. He had come "not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). The Saviour of the world could not save His own life and still redeem a people

bound for death and Hell. Nor can we.

There is no easy way to do this work. It is a labour of love, which reserves nothing for itself nor calls anything its own. Evangelism is the way of the Cross. If we refuse the Cross, we will miss the Evangel; and in so doing, we will lose our own souls. Dare we take this matter lightly? It is easy to talk about, but we must do more than this to make lost sinners know that we mean what we say. Mere resolutions of church conferences and findings of study commissions, however convincing, can never save a soul. Initiating a multitude of church programs can never redeem this world for God. There is a Cross before us, and there will be no real evangelism without it. Who is going to pay the price? This is the real question, and its answer will reveal how popular evangelism really is.

¹Peter Emmons, *Pattern of Things to Come*, ed. by D. McConnell, Friendship Press, 1955, p. 4.