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THE GOSPEL: Public or Private?

Evertt Huffard

The ministry of Jesus in Galilee, his teaching in the temple courts, and his crucifixion in Jerusalem publicly revealed the glory of God in grace and truth. Cleopas leaves the impression that everyone in the city knew about Jesus when he asked, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days" (Lk. 24:18)? Some days later, Peter appealed to this public fact to explain the mission of Jesus and to call all Jerusalem to repentance (Acts 2:22,32). Paul also declared the death and resurrection of Christ publicly in Jerusalem, Antioch, Athens, and Ephesus (Acts 20:20).

Public Preaching

Nowhere in my experience have I witnessed as public a proclamation of the Gospel among unbelievers as experienced by Paul. I vaguely remember attending a tent meeting or two when I was young and thinking how embarrassing this will be for everyone to hear the singing and preaching with the flaps of the tent rolled up. Years later, I was impressed by the openness and boldness of the "street preachers" in Kenya.

The first time I felt some kinship to the minis-

try of Peter and Paul occurred while preaching under a large tree in Eastern Kenya. Tim Talley and I spoke to about a hundred Giriama men, women, and children at a new preaching point. None of them were Christians. In fact, this time was only the second trip Tim had made there to preach. What a joy it was to make public the Gospel to people who had invited the missionary to help establish a church in their village.

Culture and Evangelism

What makes evangelism in ancient Ephesus or remote Kenya different from evangelism in America? Why do we not make the Gospel more public in such a free country? Although many reasons could be given for this, I want to call attention to only one factor—our privatization of the Gospel. Privatization is a process by which we make decisions, develop our values, and explain our faith in an individualistic society. Individualism excluded the Gospel from the public, locking it in the cells of private faith.

In a post-modern society, the Gospel has been so privatized that it no longer functions in the domain of public fact. This privatization is the consequence of social values that claim no one has the right to influence another person's religious beliefs. Each person must come to faith on his or her own, as if belief in Christ and the criteria for artistic beauty share the same domain—personal preferences and self expression. If the Gospel were a public fact, then we would have as much a right to make it public as the Surgeon General does to warn publicly against the

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hazards of drugs and smoking. Obviously exceptions are made to social rules. Only with undeniable evidence will an individualistic society allow public facts to confront openly and challenge personal habits and lifestyle.

Two powerful forces are at work against the proclamation of the Gospel: ghettoism of the church and marginalization of the church by society. The church too easily isolates itself from the world, assuming spiritual piety requires withdrawal from politics, education, and community life. Christians often break relationships with unbelievers rather than cultivate them. In so doing, they try to

protect their own personal salvation but exercise little influence on the people of the world. A world Christian overcomes the force of isolationism, assuming every person in the world deserves at least one Christian friend. World Christians want to communicate the Gospel to all as a public, universal fact.

The second force is the marginalization of the church by a contemporary value system that continually moves the church further from the center of community life. It replaces dependence on God with self-reliance. The separation of church and state has successfully forced spiritual matters to the fringe of public life. Then, as religious beliefs become a private matter, any attempt to make public the Gospel meets resistance.

Eighty percent of the American people surveyed by the Princeton Religion Research Center moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches."¹ This privatization discredits evangelism and confines the Gospel to a private world that many protect and guard "religiously." It is a world without proclamation. Any attempt to proclaim faith in Christ seems offensive and out of place.

The church has yielded to these cultural values in both the desire to keep the Gospel private and a privatization of the message. We speak of "personal salvation," "personal Lord," and "personal evangelism." The smallest unit in Paul's pattern of evangelism was not described as "person to person" but "public" and "house to house." The difference in our approach to Paul's is in thinking we can influence the world one at a time and privately rather than in the

public view of households, groups, and tribes. One approach thinks in terms of individuals, the other is much more likely to start a spiritual movement that could change the history of a community or nation.

Personal Savior or Public Servant?

The privatization of the Gospel has many negative consequences. First, making Christ one's

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"personal Savior" does not bring about the change in life that submission to him as a disciple or servant would bring. The message becomes so anthropocentric that God is expected to meet one's needs, save one's soul, keep

one comfortable, and give one anything else needed. What else would one expect from a close personal relationship? Lesslie Newbigin calls this a "privatized eschatology" that grows particularly compatible with an affluent society.² Dyrness argues that the cultural values that hinder the communication of the Gospel in America are the same values that erode friendships and marriage.

A major problem with a preoccupation with my individual development is that it provides no intrinsic value "for you," except as an environment for my growth. Friendship is the arena for pursuit of personal goals. Marriage is seen primarily as a relationship that facilitates my growth (my rights), rather than an opportunity for service and mutuality (my responsibilities).³

The parallel between an understanding of marriage and a serious relationship with God surfaces in popular evangelistic efforts. Some evangelists sound as if they are trying to get the lost to court God and "fall in love" with him! In the West, this seems to be the assumed pattern of close relationships. So, it is only natural that we try to adapt God to our world. Nevertheless, the references to "personal salvation" will be difficult to find in the Gospels or Acts. It is far removed from the message of repentance, obedience, and the kingdom.

A second problem with privatization relates to balance in teaching. The focus of "personal evangelism" often separates the benefits of the Gospel from the responsibility of the Gospel. In *Be My Witnesses*,

Darrell Guder identifies this major problem in the natural growth of the kingdom. The Gospel message calls for both an understanding of the blessings in Christ and a call to service. The separation of the two explains the prevalence of nominal Christianity. A “personal Savior” may answer the question of how one might be safe or saved, but not how one may be useful to God.

The consequences of a focus on the blessings particularly are shown in the lack of evangelism and withdrawal from the world. These values become more obvious as Christians grow older. Newbigin believes a “privatized eschatology encourages us as we grow older to turn our back on the struggle and conflict of public life and to withdraw into a purely private kind of piety.”⁴

Churchless Christianity

The privatization of the Gospel with its message of a “personal Savior” develops a churchless Christianity. Tele-evangelists appeal to an American public that assumes faith is a personal matter with God. While much of our faith is personal, the public proclamation of the gospel and fellowship with believers will always be a necessity for spiritual growth and the growth of the kingdom. Through the church, the Lord provides encouragement, nurture, and wisdom. The will of God in the community and world is fulfilled through the ministry of the church. The task is too great for any one individual. Evangelists circumvent the church in practice when they create the electronic churches. Circumvention of the church could also happen in our own congregations when we make baptism such a private event that we deny it of its public witness. I encourage new believers to invite all their family and friends to attend their baptism. If baptism takes place when the church is assembled, the church is incorporated into the life of the new Christian from the beginning. Since conversion is a life-time process, it cannot be maintained without the church.

The church needs as public a ministry as Christ had to revive the growth of the kingdom. Leslie Newbigin defines the ministry of the church as the fulfillment of the Lord’s public ministry.

The church is nothing other than that movement launched into the public life of the world by its sovereign Lord to continue that which he came to do until it is finished in his return in glory. ... The Church can never settle down to being a voluntary society concerned merely with private and domestic affairs. It is bound to challenge in the name of the one Lord all the powers, ideologies, myths, assumptions, and world views which do not acknowledge him as Lord. If that involves conflict, trouble, and

rejection, then we have the example of Jesus before us and his reminder that a servant is not greater than his master.⁵

Because Christ died for all, the universality of the Gospel is assumed. I fear that there are too few people of the world who really see it that way. The poor think churches are private suburban clubs. Muslims argue that Islam is more universal because the mosque is never closed and that church buildings are only open a few hours a week. The dedicated Muslim does not hesitate to pray in public five times a day. The silence of each new day is broken by loud speakers making public the fact that Allah is great and worthy of prayer.

A recent visit to three Buddhist temples and a Hindu temple in Singapore impressed on me the open public nature of these oriental institutions. Their services are in full view of the public. The large temple doors are opened wide so all can see and hear the chants to Buddha. Even the crematorium is always open for anyone to walk in and observe cremation in rows of furnaces. Religious expression is also open and communal in Africa. African groups meet in public under large trees, pray on mountain tops, and march through city streets. Their “church” is unashamedly public.

Public Witness

If Christ died for all and we are called to serve the Lord among all nations, then the Gospel and the church become public witnesses to that fact. We can make our ministry more public. I suggest only a few

The early church respected the Gospel as a matter of both public fact and personal faith. A public ministry without personal faith is hypocrisy. A personal faith without public witness is selfish. The Gospel is for all.

ways that we might become more public.

1. Allow baptism to be a public witness to the glory of God. Any attempt to relegate it to a private ceremony, especially in our context of religious freedom, cheats it of its power to proclaim the public fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Invite friends and relatives to a baptism. Treat it as the once in a life time

event that it is.

2. Give the kingdom of God priority in daily life. In daily speech, a Christian publicly gives God credit for all the blessings he or she enjoys. Attend worship and fellowship activities with regularity.

In so doing, one keeps the church from being marginalized in their own life by freely discussing their faith, inviting friends to church activities, and open involvement in the life of the church.

3. Cultivate a meaningful relationship with at least one non-Christian. As one comes to know a faithful Christian, the Gospel becomes public. The public nature of the death and resurrection of Christ as well as the universality of the Gospel gives every person a right to at least one Christian friend. As the lost experience the unconditional love of God working through the lives of His servants, the message of the cross will make sense.

4. Because the Gospel is a public fact, seek a very public ministry. The community will know the church exists and appreciate what it does. Like the church in

Jerusalem, the public ministry of the church today can find favor in the eyes of all the people.

Evangelism becomes a natural ministry of the church that genuinely seeks to serve the community and the world. The focus of the ministries of a church that believes the Gospel is a public fact will be as much external as internal.

Luke concluded his account of Paul's ministry in Rome with a report of many people listening to Paul tell of the kingdom "openly and unhindered" (Acts 28:23-31). Luke seems to attribute church growth in Acts more to boldly proclaiming the Gospel than to human strategy and goal setting. He planted the Word in the open fields and the harvest followed.

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