

The Biblical Foundation of Evangelism

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Abstract *Despite the enormous temporal distance, the need for the proclamation of the gospel today is not less critical than in the period of the beginning of the Church. The gospel can be proclaimed in many ways. The good news needs to be proclaimed primarily because the world is lost, because it is sinking in its own sin. Proclamation is indubitably the most essential task of every Christian.*

In the beginning, after God created the world and put humans in it as the crown of his creation, the Bible records the first command which the Creator utters to the creature created in his likeness: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth ...” (Gen 1:28). This command bears a remarkable resemblance to the one which Jesus gives to his disciples and the one which is recorded by all three synoptic gospels. They contain the express will of the Creator of the new world: „Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit“ (Mt 28:18-19); „Go into all the world and and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned“ (Mk 16:15-16); „... and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem“ (Lk 24:47). The proclamation of the gospel or evangelism is not the invention of the Church, but a clear demand from God. In its essence, evangelism is not a mere spreading of an idea, but true creation which can only be compared with the creation of life. Thus in the beginning of the world all „living souls“ (Gen 2:7; 1 Cor 15:45) were commanded to populate the world with „living souls.“ Christ, „new Adam,“ that life-giving spirit“ (1 Cor 15:45) as he is called by Apostle Paul in First Corinthians, starts the process of the creation of the new world. The newly-created or „born from above“ (Jn 3:3,7) have been „populating the world“ for almost two millenia proclaiming the gospel.

Despite the enormous temporal distance, the need for the proclamation of the gospel today is no less critical than in the period of the beginning of the Church.

In our time of the so-called pluralism of opinions and views about life it is particularly important to further the spreading of the word of God in various ways, so that it might truly reach every individual, and fulfill the desire of the Creator of the new world. This is because the gospel is not only the message, but the Word incarnate which was with God in the beginning and is always one with him.

When we speak of the purposefulness and necessity of the spreading of the good news, we cannot but pause to consider the words which Apostle Paul wrote in many places in his letters, the greatest missionary and proclaimer of the gospel in the Early church. Already during his first missionary journey to Cyprus, and then on to Antioch, Paul spoke to the Jews of Antioch in a synagogue on a Sabbath about what he and Barnabas actually did: „We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers, he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus from the dead. As it is written in the second Psalm: ‘You are my Son; Today I have become your Father’“ (Acts 13:32-33). The Apostle experienced on his own skin that the proclamation of the good news, despite its life-giving power, is often faced with rejection even before it has been thoroughly heard and thought over. The gospel can be understood only when it is accepted by faith. Therefore, the good news can only be preached successfully and worthily only by those who truly believe in the living God, and who then in turn themselves become God’s emissaries.

The gospel can be proclaimed in many ways. It is not true that all people must go to the streets and shout out verses from the Bible. Neither is it true that the proclamation must be done verbally or in writing. God equally approves of the proclamation which is done through the works of orderly and honest living. Apostle Paul draws attention to a very important consideration: „For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake“ (2 Cor 4:5). It happens that some who proclaim the good news publicly start considering themselves as a kind of leaders or tribunes, and usurp the right to the authority which they have forged themselves. Consequently their manner of presentation relegates the good news to the background, and they themselves emerge in the forefront. A worthy proclamation of the gospel includes inevitable corroboration of the message by the proclaimer’s living and conduct.

Many issues and manifestations successfully vie for people’s attention. An individual uncritically assumes certain opinions and consequently considers life in an one-sided way, either as beautiful or as ugly if he or she had experienced various difficulties and troubles. The good news teaches that the essence of life lies in neither of those. The gospel gives answers to many dilemmas which befall an individual seeking to be the centre around which the existing universe revolves. All that and many other things Apostle Paul had in mind addressing young Timothy, his „son in faith“ in Second Timothy: „In the presence of God and of Christ

Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction“ (2 Tim 4:1-2). This is followed by words in which the Apostle in a shocking way depicts our own times, the beginning of the 21st century, which follows the century of the most dramatic scientific and technological advance, but which was also the century of the world wars, atomic weapons and merciless crimes. The Apostle advises: „For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry“ (2 Tim 4:3-5). These words do not need further commentary because the good news can overcome their sharpness.

The proclamation of the gospel is indubitably the crucial task of every Christian. The world around us is the most convincing proof that many do not know God. That is why Christians must not keep silent. They must not keep silent because the essence of Christian life consists of announcing God’s goodness, mercy and sacrificial love. All this is not possible to do with our mouths shut. We need to speak about God. The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, who accepted the Word of God and spoke in the name of the Lord and Creator of the world, convinced the people of his time that they should listen to God. He proclaimed everything that God told him. He thus spoke day after day, and as he himself states in one place in his prophetic book, he became the object of mockery of all. He finally had enough of this mockery, so we find these words in his book: “I will not mention him or speak any more in his name” (Jer 20:9). It was only a temporary and passing weakness, because the Word of God and the strength of truth, which abides in it, does not allow silence. In the following words of the same verse the strength of the life-giving Word is manifested: “I will not mention him or speak any more in his name, his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot” (Jer 20:9). The awareness about the need to speak about the truth was stronger. Prophet Jeremiah continued to speak what God commissioned him to speak about. Although he was surrounded by people who did not accept his words and who laughed at him, prophet Jeremiah did not keep his silence.

The Bible speaks about many who were willing to speak God’s truth irrespective of consequences. Jesus was the supreme example. Wherever he went, and whomever he met, he was always ready to speak that which God told him to speak. In John’s gospel Jesus explained it in this way: „As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work“ (Jn

9:4). When the Jewish religious leaders prevailed upon Jesus to stop his disciples from speaking, he replied: „I tell you,... If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out“ (Lk 19:40). The disciples and followers of Jesus never stopped talking about the highest truth which had reached human ears – about God who in the person of Jesus Christ demonstrated how to live a life worthy of a human.

From the very beginnings of Church, Christians have been convinced that that gospel had to be preached to all people. Nothing has changed today in this respect. The good news needs to be proclaimed primarily because the world is lost, because it is sinking in its own sin. Prophet Isaiah depicts the state of the lost man: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way” (Is 53:6). Is this not an accurate picture of modern, alienated world which wanders through the wilderness of its own disobedience?

Is there any chance for anything better? Here is the fullness of the good news which confronts the harsh reality of human existence with magnificent truth: „For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life“ (Jn 3:16). God wants to help everyone. And that is a truly good news.

Can anyone keep quiet about this? The mission of Jesus on this earth was to seek and save those who were lost. Every single individual matters to him. He does not want to neglect anyone. He has come to redeem every human being.

If the good news does not carve its way into human heart, he or she remains in total darkness. This activates powers antagonistic to God’s benevolent influence. Apostle Paul writes about this: „And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God“ (2 Cor 4:3-4).

God gave people the primary ability of decision-making and discernment. The Word of God must be and remain the source of all wisdom. Wisdom is manifested in listening and obedience to God’s instruction. At the beginning of the book of Proverbs we find these words: „Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out, in the gateways of the city she makes her speech: ‘How long will you simple ones love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge? If you had responded to my rebuke, I would have poured out my heart to you and made my thoughts known to you’” (Pr 1:20-23). Where lies the secret of successful evangelism? The basic presupposition is to understand the calling and accept it in the depths of one’s heart. Jesus issued very specific invitations to his disciples. To follow Jesus meant following, e.g. emulating his life.

Why are there so many pseudo-Christian religions today which exist to gather people for short-term excitement, for shallow spectacle? Why have some preach-

ers become the magicians of the mass-media? Why are people's talents used and abused in precisely that manner? Because people want it. People want that shape of things. That does not involve them nor does it demand their commitment. There are groups which devote more time to discussing each other's dreams than what the Word of God says.

The next important predisposition for an authentic and effective evangelism is consistent faithfulness to the life and principles of Jesus. The lives and conduct of the followers of Jesus must be in keeping with the life and conduct of Jesus. The words „...the radiance of his glory and the exact representation of his being...” (Heb 1:3) do not refer only to Jesus' relationship to the Father, but to all children of God and their relationship with the Father. That is why the process of proclamation includes transforming into the likeness of Christ. Only this keeps people from a schizophrenic, two-faced life consisting of a „theatrical performance“ directed outwardly on the one hand, and on the other of a clandestine life lived within the boundaries of one's „kingdom.“ Only a firm decision for Christ, accompanied by God's life-giving encouragement, is the guarantee of the effective defence against two-facedness and double standards.

Effective evangelism produces people who effectively bear good fruit. Jesus used to teach through simple and easy-to-understand examples: „Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit“ (Mt 7:17-18). Or as the Evangelist Luke expands this illustration of Jesus: „Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks“ (Lk 6:44-45). Herein is a supremely tangible proof for all to consider: One has to become the person who goes into the storage of his or her heart to collect treasure so that it might be brought out of the storage and used. Nothing can be poured out from an empty vessel. In the same way an empty heart cannot produce anything.

So what is the origin of defiance to the good news? Is there a logical justification for the existence of unbelief as a universal phenomenon of today? What is achieved by unbelief anyway? At first glance – nothing. By not believing in God, or rather by refusing to accept that God exists, a human being creates an impression of freedom and control over himself of herself. This is the trap in which people have been caught from the beginning of time. People thus think that they can do whatever they desire and not be accountable to anyone! The gospel reveals deception behind this logic as well. That is why God's love and his limitless mercy are the starting point of the good news. It is not the law and regulations, not chains and fetters, but Christ's law of love.

The Bible is clear on this as well. In the letter to the Ephesians we read: „Remember that at one time you were separate from Christ,... without hope and without God in the world“ (Eph 2:12). These words are directed at Christ’s followers, the born-again children of God, in order to remind them of the state in which they were found before they accepted new life. The next verse makes this clear: „But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ“ (Eph 2:13). These words are directed to Christians, former unbelievers. Christianity brings meaning to life. Life ceases to be aimless wandering. Human beings find their true place with God in the enormous mosaic of human lives.

Lack of faith is destructive. By turning our back to God we turn our back also to people around us. In our desire to be free we become slaves. The Bible shows how from the very beginnings of humanity self-confident human beings fell deeper and deeper in sin. Of course, they were not content with their state for which they frequently blamed God in whom they did not believe in the first place. Long time ago prophet Isaiah wrote about this state in the Old Testament: “Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear” (Is 59:1-2). A human being turns on God, blames him for creating this world incompetently and pronounces him guilty for all evil, sickness, suffering and unhappiness. However, this accomplishes nothing. God created free beings – people who can discern good from evil and who are responsible for their own actions. Just as a Christian decides to believe in God and follow his instruction, so also the non-Christian decides not to believe.

People remain in unbelief until they are convinced of something else. That is the task of evangelism. This is what patrologist Bauer, an expert on Augustine’s writings, wrote in his commentary of Augustine’s work *De catechizandis rudibus* (St. Augustine, *Poučavanje neupućenih*, Makarska, Služba Božja, 1988):

The fallen man could not return to God by himself. He needed a mediator. The word fulfilled this mediatorial role before Christ. God invited human beings to repentance through the word. That was the work of the eternal Word of God and his Spirit.

The inspired redactors of the New Testament repeatedly emphasised the necessity of proclamation. In the letter to the Romans we read: „But what does it say? ‘The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,’ that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: ‘That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, ‘He who believes in him will not be put to shame.’ For there is no difference between Jew or Gentile –

the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How, then, can they call on the one day have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' But not all the Israelites repented to the good news. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard from the word of Christ" (Rom 10:8-17).

Biblical evangelism does not deal with politics, philosophy or science in general, but has at its centre Jesus Christ resurrected and his teaching.

"... but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles..." – exclaims Apostle Paul in First Corinthians (1 Cor 1:23). Because evangelism is revitalisation, the creation of new lives, and only that which is alive creates life. So also the living Word of God, mediated through the authentic and life-giving people of God, „populates“ the world. God's salvific mission is still under way despite many „ears which do not hear and eyes which do not see“ because “the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pt 3:9).

And herein lies the answer to every possible dilemma about the purposefulness of evangelism. The proclamation of the gospel does not have an alternative because the alternative is death, a lasting and eternal separation from the living God. And that is not the will of God.

Translated by Davorin Peterlin

Sažetak *Unatoč ogromnu vremenskom rasponu potreba za širenjem Evandjelja nije danas ništa manja od one iz vremena nastajanja Crkve. Evandjelje se može naviještati na mnogo načina. Radosnu vijest valja propovijedati prije svega zato što je svijet izgubljen, zato što tone u svom vlastitom grijehu. Naviještanje je nedvojbeno temeljna zadaća svakog kršćanina.*

