

Take a Fresh Look at Evangelism

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Essay

The regrettable truth is that discussions about evangelism often divide the church. On one hand, such division seems to be a denial of the heart of the new age which the coming of Jesus brought about. Jesus prayed that we might be one, yet we divide over the process of making this “new age” known among men. Even though the gospel is good news both etymologically, and even more - substantially, there are times when just the mention of the term produces “heartburn”. On the other hand, heated and passionate discussion is understandable when aspects of evangelism are neglected, abused, or distorted. There are deeply committed believers who justifiably become angry when they observe people being manipulated either to embrace a particular expression of “the way” or manipulated into attempting to “sell” the gospel through activities and processes adapted from the consumerism of the west. Still, serious followers of Jesus are surely correct in insisting that Jesus must be obeyed when he commands his followers to “proclaim the gospel, be witnesses,” and “make disciples.”

It is the belief of this writer that the church needs a discussion which is characterized by a desire to listen and learn as well as a determination to teach and be heard. Because it is “together with all the saints” that we come to “grasp how wide, long, high, and deep is the love of Christ” (Ephesians 2:18), we need the humble and honest understanding from all the saints in developing an effective and practical theology of evangelism. Although it is difficult, the biases caused by past experiences and the passions of unique understandings need to be laid aside so that meaningful dialogue concerning God’s will “that all men might be saved” can take place.

A fresh look at evangelism perhaps needs to begin with an honest assessment of the image evangelism has in both the non-Christian world and in the Christian community. In *Reimagining Evangelism*, Rick Richardson points out that, “The image problem for evangelism has gotten worse in recent years” (Richardson, 2006:1). Non-believers are afraid of people who think that they know the truth and that everybody else is wrong. Because of our very pluralistic society, many believers are as turned off by evangelism as the irreligious are. One lady, as she boarded a tram at the center of Zagreb, commented about a group out street

preaching, “I wish that they would stop shouting at me and talk to me. They do not seem to care about people, only their ideas. They really scare me.” A student asked a Bible teacher, “To be a good Christian, must I tell everyone how wrong they are? I do not really know what they believe.” Is the understanding which produced these comments anything like the evangelism of the New Testament or the evangelism that captured the attention of the Greco-Roman world of the first and second centuries?

A fresh look at evangelism might be helped by looking back to the New Testament. Michael Green argues that evangelism in the New Testament included a broad-based understanding which saw the gospel as “good news, as proclamation and as witness” (*Evangelism in the Early Church*, 48). It would be constructive to be reminded of the holistic approach as presented in the Acts and the Epistles. “Good news” was gossiped; it was proclaimed; and it was displayed in the life of the New Testament community. Contrasted with the religious ideas which the gospel confronted, the message and experience of Jesus was God in search of man rather than men and women in search of God. In his introduction to the revised edition of *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Michael Green affirms, “There is no other religion in the world that maintains anything remotely similar” (Green, revised, 22).

It was good news that God came to man “not to condemn, but to save” (John 3:17). Too often the “gospel” heard today is no longer good. Instead, it has a sour taste of condemnation. It was good news that, instead of failed attempts to change, Christ provided transformation. Instead of being burdened with more religious rules, the way of Christ was righteousness that flowed from a new heart (Hebrews 10:15-20; Romans 1:17; 2:29). Costly forgiveness is provided by a merciful God and fleshed out between persons in the community of Christ’s followers. The gospel that was spoken in the New Testament focused on the amazing “goodness” of the news.

The individuals and the community of believers in the New Testament bore witness to the goodness of the gospel through the testimony of life as well as the testimony of words. The pagan and the Jewish populace saw a theology lived out which was congruent with what was articulated. The New Testament affirms that holy living was a major evangelistic tool (1 Thessalonians 1:6-10). Peter challenges “God’s elect to be holy in all that they do because the one who called them is holy” (1 Peter 1:16). Again, the submission of slaves and wives becomes a catalyst for evangelistic conversation with masters and husbands. The “good news” lived out was surely the reason Peter admonished his readers to “always be prepared to give a reason for the hope within them” (1 Peter 3:15).

It is impossible to read many pages of the New Testament without being aware that those who “received the gospel” were never content to keep the news of the

gospel to themselves. They were inwardly motivated to communicate with others that which they had experienced. What they received was good! The one from whom they received it was good! That the offer was not exclusive, but open to all was wonderful! So, they talked about the gospel with each other and with friends and relatives. They taught it in synagogues and in their homes. They proclaimed it fearlessly before rulers and judges. The joy with which the believers announced the gospel, and the love and peace with which the followers of Christ lived their lives in community, in families and even in prison, “presented ideas to the Roman world that demanded a choice” (Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, as quoted by Green, 22).

In contrast to the New Testament record, the perception of persons on the streets of 21st century cities in Western Europe and the USA is that the message and life of evangelical Christians is one of bondage rather than freedom, of judgment rather than forgiveness, of argument and division rather than unity and acceptance, of manipulation and control rather than openness and trust. It seems that the non-Christian of our day colors our “gospel” in shades of gray and black instead of sparkling gold. The faded canvas of our ineffective evangelism might be restored to its amazing brilliance by a fresh look at the New Testament.

Developing a fresh look at evangelism could also be aided by listening to the voices of history. It is both refreshing and sobering to observe the similarities between many of the paradigms which held sway in the Greco-Roman world and those that are developing in our post-modern culture. “Spirituality” is as in vogue now as in the first three centuries. The possibility, and even the probability, of the super-natural are current even in educated circles. Subjectivity has all but replaced objectivity. Openness to any and all ideas is the hallmark of the west. As Michael Green affirms, “Relativism in morals and pluralism in belief are all part of the new world view” (Green, 12). In the introduction to the revised edition of his classic, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Dr. Green identifies five principles drawn from his study of the church as it lived its life during the first three centuries. He writes, “These principles are highly relevant to any who seek to further the cause of evangelism in our generation” (Green, 14). Just as the Christians of the early church lived out and proclaimed the gospel, they continue to provide insight for our fresh view of evangelism. Identifying these principles is both convicting and motivating.

The believers of the early church had an unshakeable confidence in the truth of the gospel. Christ is the Jesus of history. He is the Messiah of promise and God’s solution to man’s dilemma, the dilemma of all mankind. His life, teaching, death and resurrection, and now exaltation are historical facts and provide the only means of salvation.

They were passionately convinced of the truth and efficacy of the gospel. Peo-

ple were lost without it. God had poured out his love in Christ on a needy world. In love, they had to make that reality known. They were convinced that they had the privilege to participate in the mission of Jesus.

All strata of the believing community were involved in apologetics. Individuals from the uneducated to the intellectuals were eager to give a “reason for the hope within them.” Green makes the following passionate plea for the church of the 21st century:

One of the great needs of the modern church is for those who evangelize to improve their theological understanding, and for those who are theologically competent to come out of the ivory tower and evangelize. The first Christians point us in that direction. And in today’s world, as in the first two centuries, people are unimpressed by mere talk. They need to see lives that are different! (Green, 19)

The Christian of the early church “fleshed out” transformation. Individuals made such an amazing change that only the term “transformation” was appropriate. The community of faith was like nothing else seen in the world. Barriers between rich and poor, slave and free, male and female, Jew and Gentile dissipated. A clearly observed love existed between people and that love extended even to those who brought persecution. These Christians had a supernatural capacity to face criticism, even persecution, with peace and even joy.

The record shows that the Christians of this period were uncompromising in their commitment to total conversion. “Jesus is Lord” was more than the confession; it was the surrender of life. No other Lord could be confessed or followed. This confession resulted in testimony of life, which made a startling impact on the world in which the Christians lived and died.

Finally, a fresh look at evangelism could be enhanced by honestly looking at the world around us. People are broken. They look like Humpty Dumpty in a scrambled mess after his fall. Addictions control lives. Greed exploits all of society. Anger and hostility has the world on the brink of destruction. Humanity is fragmented, alienated and frightened. The life and message of the gospel promises the only way to restore Humpty to wholeness. The truth of Jesus brings freedom to the addicted, peace in place of hostility, and love rather than exploitation.

If believers dare to take a fresh look at evangelism through the lenses of the New Testament and the early church and with an understanding of the world in which we live, perhaps the daunting task of evangelism will be seen as a privileged opportunity to join Christ in his ministry of love.