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FOREWORD

Evangelism is at the heart of church life. The church is called into existence and sustained by the continual preaching of the cross; the church is the concrete realization of that word in human lives. Clearly the greatest threat to the church is the loss of its vital center.

At present the church is at risk. The centrality of the message is being buried under an avalanche of distracting activities. Bureaucratic models of the church encumber ministries and reduce much activity to the maintenance of organizational momentum. Narcissism of the surrounding world, masked as therapy, legitimates endless self-preoccupying pursuits within churches. Evangelism has been broadened and diluted to the more acceptable and less specific "outreach." In all of this, the church is at risk.

This issue of Christian Studies calls attention to the importance of the church recovering a biblical understanding and practice of evangelism.

Michael R. Weed, *Editor*



What Happened to Evangelism?

James W. Thompson

Jürgen Moltmann once commented that discipleship was a neglected topic for Protestants, particularly for those who were members of the European state churches. Discipleship was regarded as a topic suitable only for fanatics until the word was discovered and made respectable by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in The Cost of Discipleship.¹ According to Moltmann, the passages on discipleship have been read with considerable embarrassment, and sometimes with a guilty conscience, in most Protestant traditions because church life in a Christian land bears little resemblance to the New Testament's portrait of an existence under the claim of Jesus. The demands of Jesus have been either domesticated or forgotten in many traditions.

One can also say that evangelism is a neglected topic throughout Europe and North America, particularly among Roman Catholics and those denominations which are usually described as "mainline" Protestant. Although a pervasive interest in evangelism is to be seen in the print, radio, and television media, the widespread conviction exists that evangelism is a matter only for fanatics and the uninformed. Although books on the methods of evangelism continue to be popular, serious consideration of the topic by a major writer is almost nonexistent. William Abraham correctly says that "it is virtually impossible to find a critical, in-depth study of the topic by a major theologian."² In the major schools of theology, little attention is given to evangelism. The inattention to the topic suggests its insignificance in most seminaries and church traditions.

I am convinced that evangelism is an unpopular topic among the major opinion-makers for two reasons. In the first place, the evangelist does not fit in with the pluralistic, tolerant culture. The media portray the evangelists as both narrow-minded and simple-minded. The certainty about one's convictions which lies at the root

of evangelism is offensive in the modern era. The desire to convert others is considered obnoxious. Evangelism, therefore, is equated with superciliousness and arrogance in a culture which celebrates the idea that all convictions are equal.

Some Protestant traditions have responded to this mood of tolerance with embarrassment at the Christian claims which have motivated Christians to convert others or to "win the world for Christ." Evangelism has been replaced by dialogue, and the idea of sending missionaries to convert others in distant lands is regarded as a form of cultural imperialism.

A second reason for the absence of the topic in many seminary curricula and in many church traditions probably results from the widespread assumption that we live in a Christian culture where evangelism is unnecessary. The national churches of Europe have for centuries existed in a situation where church membership is practically tantamount to citizenship. The American churches have also understood themselves as part of a Christian society where evangelism is unnecessary. In such a homogeneous society, where everyone is assumed to be Christian, the mission of the church is understood to be the improvement of living conditions and, in the words of H. Richard Niebuhr, "the increase of the love of God and neighbor."³ Thus the major "mainline" traditions have never placed great significance on evangelism.

A new feature today is that, even among the movements which have traditionally been evangelistic, evangelism has lost its attraction. Bill Leonard describes an "evangelical malaise" throughout American Christianity, and illustrates his point by describing significant changes which have taken place within the Southern Baptist tradition. Denominational statisticians, he says, anticipate a significant decline in the number of baptisms in the 1980s. In a denomination which has been divided between conservatives and moderates, each side blames the other for the decline in evangelistic activity. The conservatives blame the moderates for the "universalism" which has undermined evangelism. Moderates reject older forms of evangelistic

outreach, but do not have a replacement for the older forms.⁵ The result is the diminishing significance of evangelism.

Evangelism among Churches of Christ appears also to have undergone a malaise for many of the same reasons. Churches of Christ in America, having grown out of the Second Great Awakening, have always been very evangelistic. Many of us were taught that the mission of the church was evangelism, benevolence, and edification. Primacy was always given to evangelism. The primary task of our ministers was more evangelistic than pastoral in nature, and thus the local minister was often called the evangelist. For several generations the high point of the church year was the annual or the semi-annual "gospel meeting," which focused on evangelism. Our attention was constantly focused on the need to evangelize the lost. When the media offered new possibilities for evangelism, Churches of Christ were eager to meet the challenge of using media for the purpose of evangelistic outreach. "Cottage meetings" involved the membership of local congregations, and the use of audio-visual aids made evangelism easier for the general membership. We found the Scriptural basis for this emphasis in the great commission (Matt. 28:16-20), in our reading of Acts, and in our view of Paul as the model evangelist. Although our movement accepted the role of the full-time "evangelist," we were reminded regularly that the entire community was to be evangelistic.

Although statistics have been notoriously unreliable in a movement of autonomous churches, we may assume that the churches experienced considerable growth during this intense evangelistic activity. This growth was undoubtedly enhanced by the certainty and the confidence with which the evangelists conducted their work. They were certain of their claims to have the truth and confident in their appeal for others to leave behind their own traditions and to become members of the Church of Christ. Evangelism was enhanced by the infectious sense of well-being among the many members who wanted to share their convictions with others. The evangelistic message was rarely directed to the unchurched, but to "our religious neighbors." The gospel meetings and the cottage meetings focused regularly on the themes which had played an important role in the

Restoration Movement and the characteristics which distinguished Churches of Christ from other traditions. The message was characterized also by a remarkable uniformity in the preaching. This confidence gave members a kind of "triumphalism" as they continued to expect the continued growth of the church.

Evangelism Today

Evangelism has diminished significantly in the Churches of Christ. Although some congregations continue to have active programs in evangelism, one can observe a change of emphasis in many others. The gospel meeting, as the focal point of church activity, has largely been replaced by various seminars to meet special needs. The church calendar is more likely to have seminars on marriage, parenting, and stress management than to have a gospel meeting. If one can judge from reading a variety of Christian newspapers and bulletins, the high involvement of the members in evangelism has diminished considerably.

A successor to the evangelistic emphasis in the churches has been the church growth movement. This movement has much in common with the earlier evangelistic focus, inasmuch as evangelism may be expected to result in church growth. However, despite the similarities between evangelism and church growth, the emphasis on the latter reflects a fundamental change of direction. Evangelism is based on proclamation, even when that proclamation is offensive to the hearer. The church growth movement is based on the analysis of the factors which cause churches to grow, not on proclamation. Thus church growth has been fundamentally different from evangelism. Where evangelism risks being offensive, church growth is largely based on ensuring the attractiveness of the church and its message.

The church growth movement has provided valuable insights for congregations, and it has reminded us of the importance of growth as an essential factor in the life of the church. However, while the church growth movement shares some emphases with the earlier focus on evangelism, this movement reflects a different focus from the earlier one.

Evangelism has declined for a number of reasons. One reason has been the impact of the secularization of our culture. We do not anticipate that the old methods of evangelism would be effective. Gospel meetings will have little impact in a community where the populace is unlikely to attend. Furthermore, a message directed to "our religious neighbors" will have little impact on a largely secular culture where our neighbors are not very religious.

I suspect that a much deeper reason exists for the decline of evangelism in the Churches of Christ. Evangelism grows out of a deep sense of certainty about one's convictions. The evangelistic power of the earlier evangelism was rooted in the certainty that the message which distinguished the Churches of Christ was true, and that all other views were false. Today this view is no longer uniformly held. What is the message? To whom do we present the message? Do we continue to assume that one can be a Christian only within the Churches of Christ? I suspect that a decline in evangelism has been the result of a growing uncertainty about those basic questions. The evangelism of the past was addressed to a specific religious climate, and now we have face the new situation with some uncertainty about our message and our audience. Consequently, evangelism has largely been replaced by other activities.

The one group which has maintained this high evangelistic intensity and certainty is the Boston movement, which now exists largely as a separate movement from Churches of Christ. Indeed, the attractiveness of the Boston movement for many may lie in their perception that evangelism has disappeared from the "mainline" congregations.

Evangelism in the Early Church

What is the appropriate place of evangelism and church growth in the life of the church? For one who has been nurtured in an evangelistic tradition, an examination of evangelism and church growth in the New Testament yields some surprising results. While early Christianity was undoubtedly a "spreading flame," as F.F. Bruce described it,⁶ amazingly little is said about the subject of

evangelism and church growth. The book of Acts, the book which has been appealed to most in the evangelistic tradition, portrays the expansion of Christianity “in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) under the leadership of Peter and Paul, and it describes how this evangelistic activity occurred when the Hellenists were driven from Jerusalem (Acts 11:19-21). However, it says little about the activities of the converts or the expectations which were placed on them. Except for the activity of the Hellenists who spoke the word of God to Jews (11:19) and Greeks (11:20), evangelistic activity is attributed only to Peter, Paul, and others who have distinctive evangelistic roles.

The epistles of Paul have no references to a mandate for community involvement in evangelism. Paul is the evangelist par excellence who has been commissioned to “evangelize” (euangelizō) in fulfillment of Isaiah 52:7. He plants churches, while others water and nurture them (1 Cor. 3:6). He refuses to build on the foundation of others (Rom. 15:20), and his primary task is to “save some” (1 Cor. 9:19-23). However his letters never suggest that his role is transferable to others. In his letters, Paul never challenges his congregations to be “soul winners” or to involve themselves in evangelism. He instructs his congregations on a variety of subjects, but he refers neither to church growth nor to evangelism as tasks for the whole church. Carl Holladay correctly observed:

There is little evidence that he actively sought to transfer his mission to his churches, so that mission would become a lay movement. There is a stunning silence throughout the Pauline letters on this particular point, and the historian has little evidence that Paul’s churches, once he had established them, became small hives of missionary activity per se.⁷

The evidence from the New Testament may suggest that the decline of evangelism in the churches is in keeping with the emphases of the New Testament. However, despite the absence of emphasis on evangelism or church growth, the remarkable fact is that evangelism and church growth were indeed important in the early church. The

triumph of Christianity in the early church reflects the explosive power of these communities. Even if church growth was not as remarkable as is sometimes supposed, the power of Christianity was nevertheless extraordinary. Indeed, the persecutions directed against Christians at the end of the first century largely reflect the threat which this growing movement posed for established institutions. Without an organized program of evangelism or a transference of Paul's ministry to others, evangelism was a vital part of the life of the church.

The New Testament offers glimpses of the evangelistic activity of Christians. The close interaction of Christians with their neighbors offered many opportunities for evangelism. Unbelievers apparently attended Christian assemblies (1 Cor.14:23), and Christians were concerned about the impression which their assemblies made on them. Families were divided, but Christians in divided families were eager to "save" or "win" their spouses (cf. 1 Cor. 7:12-16; 1 Pet. 3:1-7). One may assume that the same commitment that led Christian wives to attempt to win their husbands also led Christians to win other acquaintances, including family members, friends and neighbors, to the faith. Christianity spread, not because of techniques or organized programs of evangelism, but because of the way individual Christians spread the message.

Preaching undoubtedly played a major role in the evangelistic activity of the early church. Indeed, the two major terms for preaching that are used in the New Testament, keryssō and euangelizō, were used primarily for evangelistic proclamation. The kerygma (preaching) and the euangelion (gospel) included the proclamation of God's saving acts. The evangelistic power of this proclamation is suggested in Acts, where the proclamation was followed by a response from the hearers.

The place of evangelistic preaching in the early church can be seen in the role of the four gospels which were all written, as in the case of John, "that you may believe" (John 20:31). The brief episodes which were recorded in the gospels are, in fact, "the gospel in miniature" describing the power of Jesus Christ to transform lives.

G.R. Beasley-Murray, in Preaching the Gospel from the Gospels, shows how the miracles, parables and even events in the life of Jesus could have served the mission and evangelistic preaching of the church. One can imagine how the evangelist, for example, would tell the story of the woman with the hemorrhage. "Look at her," he would say, "this flow of blood was only a little thing, but a serious one. It cut her off from family, synagogue, others and from God. . . . Is that the situation you are in?"⁸ The gospels served the needs of the early church as they encountered unbelievers. Undoubtedly evangelists in the first and second centuries used the stories in their preaching in order to proclaim that Jesus is the Christ and the only source of salvation. Acts 4:02

The gospels demonstrate that evangelism was rooted in the conviction that God had revealed himself finally and definitively in Jesus Christ. The power of Christianity, as Glenn Hinson observed,⁹ was in the exclusive nature of the claims which were made about this faith. Christianity did not take its place as one philosophy among others. The outreach to others was grounded in the conviction that the kingdom of God was present only through Jesus Christ. Christians were convinced that God's new world was already present in their midst, and that it was at work transforming lives. William Abraham¹⁰ correctly observed:

Early Christians were convinced that God was working in their midst, guiding them and speaking to them. . . . These events were also enough to provide the early community with its primary motivation for evangelism.

Abraham notes the way Christianity originally spread.¹¹

It did not spread because of a carefully designed program of evangelism; nor did it start because the early Christians meditated on the Great Commission and felt that they had better obey it to assuage their feelings of guilt. . . . The Christian movement was not initiated by a band of professional evangelists eager to sign up a public relations firm and get the show on the road. Rather, the church grew because the sovereign hand of God was in the midst of the community that found itself

surrounded by people who were puzzled and intrigued by what they saw happening. . . . In other words, evangelism was rooted in a corporate experience of the rule of God that provided not only the psychological strength and support that was clearly needed in a hostile environment but that also signified the active presence of God in their midst.

A Call for Evangelism Today

Our study has indicated the vital importance of evangelism in the early church. Indeed, an examination of the information from the early church reveals that church growth and evangelism were vital components in the life of the church. Those who have focused on evangelism and church growth have correctly shown the importance of a neglected subject. Nevertheless, the church's means of expansion bore little resemblance to the evangelistic and outreach movements of the twentieth century. The expansion of Christianity was the result neither of the demands which were placed on the church members nor of a specific technique of persuasion. Evangelism happened because of the deep conviction among Christians that the power of God had entered their lives. The conviction that God had revealed himself only in Jesus Christ, and that Christianity was not simply one choice among others, was the power which stimulated the expansion of this movement.

The answer to the contemporary church's loss of evangelistic outreach is to be found neither in coercive methods nor in techniques of persuasion. The answer is to be found in the recovery of the early church's conviction that God has spoken decisively in Jesus Christ, and that Christians are being transformed by God's power. When this conviction is expressed in Christian proclamation and shared by Christian communities, evangelism occurs. Where this conviction is lost, authentic Christian outreach will be impossible.

NOTES

¹ J. Moltmann, in Miteinander in Lebensraum Christi (Stuttgart: Steinkopf, 1979) 67.

² See William J. Abraham, The Logic of Evangelism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 1-2.

³ H. Richard Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry (New York: Harper, 1956) 27.

⁴ Bill J. Leonard, "Evangelism in America: A Contemporary Malaise," The Reformed Journal 39 (1989) 12.

⁵ Leonard, 12.

⁶ F.F. Bruce, The Spreading Flame (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953).

⁷ Carl Holladay, "Church Growth in the New Testament," Restoration Quarterly 26 (1983) 99.

⁸ Cited in Michael Green, Evangelism in the Early Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 64.

⁹ Glenn Hinson, The Evangelization of the Roman Empire (Macon, Ga.: Mercer, 1981) 72.

¹⁰ Abraham, 37.

¹¹ Abraham, 37.

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