

EVANGELISM AND THE MISSIONARY FUTURE
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Presbyterians have the reputation of being against evangelism. Or if not against it, at least suspicious of it. The judgment is not quite fair. Our Assemblies vote in favor of evangelism every year. That perhaps is the trouble. We act as if we thought that was enough. But in the light of plummeting Presbyterian church membership and declining missionary enthusiasms, if there is to be any future at all for us what we need is not another resolution in favor of evangelism, but first, some measure of agreement on what we mean by evangelism; second, an appreciation of the centrality of evangelism in the church's mission; and third, a clearer demonstration that we have the strategy and the will to practice it. Generalities do not generate enthusiasm.

The first problem is definition. Our church has been redefining evangelism on the average of every six or seven years, and each succeeding definition gets broader, more complicated and more obscure. We have amended and footnoted evangelism to death as we all fight to make sure that our own particular assignment, whether it be lobbying in Washington or community development in Bangladesh, can be included under the magically orthodox designation of evangelism. But by insisting that what we are already doing is evangelism we have almost crowded what the Bible calls evangelism outside the official mission agencies of our church.

I suggest, therefore, that in future statements and strategy we narrow the definition back into a clear and recognizably Biblical focus. This is no place to attempt a complete definition. I would rather point to what might be the minimum dimensions of such a definition, beginning with the Biblical pattern since it is from Scripture that Christian evangelism derives its authority and tests its authenticity.

The New Testament uses the word evangelize in what seems to be a shockingly narrow sense. A whole cluster of verbs, actually, is used to describe evangelism: "preaching the word" (Acts 8:4), "heralding the kingdom" (Lk 9:2), "proclaiming the good news" (Lk 4:18, 8:1). But in essence, what all these words describe is simply the telling of the good news (the gospel) that Jesus the Messiah is the saving King. Evangelism was the announcement of Christ Kingdom. It was more than an announcement. It was also an invitation to enter that Kingdom, by faith and with repentance.

Evangelism, therefore, is not the whole of the Christian mission. It is only a part of the mission. Jesus and the disciples did many other things besides announce the Kingdom and invite response. Evangelism is not worship or sacraments. "Christ did not send me to baptize but to evangelize," said Paul (2 Cor. 1:17). And it is not church growth or church planting. The planting and growth of the church are surely goals of evangelism and its hoped-for results. But evangelism does not always produce a church or more members for it. Neither is evangelism confined to apologetics. Paul says "We try to persuade" (2 Cor. 5:11), but insists that he was sent to tell the good news "without using the language of human wisdom... (for) this world's wisdom

is foolishness" (2 Cor. 1:17,20). Finally, evangelism in the New Testament was not confused with Christian service, or Christian action and protest against the world's injustices. A revealing and disturbing incident in the Book of Acts tells how Greek-speaking Jews among the early Christians rose as a minority group to complain of discrimination in the distribution of funds. The reply of the apostles seems almost callously narrow: "We cannot neglect the preaching of God's word to handle finances" (Acts 6:1, 2 TEV). Of course, they did immediately proceed to do something about the injustice. But they did not call it evangelism.

Does this make evangelism so narrow that in our day it will only further polarize the church? If so, the point I am making is completely misunderstood. What polarizes is not clear definition of the different parts of the Christian mission, but exclusion from that mission of one or the other of its essential parts through sloppy definitions. As when it is said, for example, that mission is evangelism, or mission is social action, or social action is evangelism. The clearer the role of each function is made, the less danger there is of excluding it by neglect, and the more the interdependence of each becomes apparent. If everything is evangelism, nothing is. But evangelism without obedience to the gospel's clear call to justice and mercy is as dead as preaching without practice.

There is something to be said for clear, narrow definitions of function in the Christian mission, and for letting evangelists evangelize. New Testament evangelism was not the whole mission, but it was the heart of the mission. And it worked. The church began to grow. It is quite true that evangelism does not always bring numerical growth. Jesus clearly warned his disciples of that in his parable of the sower and the seed. But what hope for growth is there if the sower does not "go forth to sow"? And the point of the parable was not to teach complacency in the face of lean harvests but rather to give hope that with the right combination of sowing and soil, that is, of evangelism and understanding, the harvest might well be sometimes a hundred, sometimes sixty and sometimes thirty-fold.

That straightforward, unembarrassed New Testament evangelism brought results. So also in Korea where the church's evangelism may seem to some rather narrow too. But the Korean church is not losing 60,000 members a year. If it is true that by the year 1986 the number of United Presbyterians will sink below the two million mark from its high six years ago of three million (if present trends continue, which God forbid!), even then in global terms we will still not be falling behind, thanks to those narrow, evangelistic Koreans. For by 1986 (again if trends continue) the Korean Presbyterian churches will have compensated for our decline by shooting upwards from two million members today to three million then. They are growing and multiplying even in America. They tell me that the fastest-growing church in the New York area is a Korean Presbyterian church in Queens. Why does it grow? "Immigration and prayer," says the pastor. But above all, evangelism. A high number of the new members come by adult baptism.

However, to return to the Bible, evangelism is evangelism even when it does not produce church growth, and Biblical evangelism is not quite as narrow as I may have made it sound. Narrow in definition, perhaps. But that is only to keep it clear and in focus. Narrow in its outlook and implications? Never. Biblical evangelism was the proclamation of good news, and the good news it preached was as broad and inclusive as the Kingdom of God into which it invited all who would to enter.

Evangelism in mission must take seriously the fact that the central motif of New Testament evangelism, especially in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), was the Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. When Jesus came through the villages evangelizing, he preached the Kingdom (Lk 8:1). This is how he described it, borrowing a passage from the Old Testament for his dramatic announcement:

"good news to the poor... liberty to the captives... sight to the blind... free(dom) for the oppressed... and the Lord's salvation for his people" (Lk 4:18,19 TEV, adap.)

In the context of the Kingdom the evangelistic proclamation was never so narrow that it became isolated from the immediate pressing needs of the poor, the imprisoned, the blind and the oppressed. Again I am reminded of Korean evangelism. I asked a pastor in the Philadelphia area why his church was growing so fast. "When Koreans come in," he replied, "first I get them jobs; I teach them some English; I help them when they get in trouble with their supervisors. I invite them to church. And then I preach to them the gospel." This is putting evangelism into context.

But if there is anything worse than taking the text out of context, it is taking the context without the text. Just as Christ's salvation is never to be isolated from the immediate, real needs of the people, neither is it to be identified with those present needs. When Jesus quoted the Old Testament about "good news to the poor" and "freedom for the oppressed," he did so on his own terms. His salvation is not Old Testament shalom, and his Kingdom is not Israel. Healing, liberation and social harmony are all important signs of the Kingdom, but not the greatest. The great sign was the resurrection; and His Kingdom is eternal. It is precisely at this point that the synoptic gospels must not be torn apart from the Gospel of John. Matthew, Mark and Luke emphasize the King and his Kingdom. This is evangelism's immediate, liberating context. But John, in particular, adds an important perspective and extends the parameter. The good news is not only for the poor and the oppressed but even for Nicodemus. The King is also Saviour, and his salvation is not wealth or even freedom, but ^{new birth and} everlasting life.

Perhaps one of the contributing causes of polarization in the church in our day is that by broadening our definitions of evangelism and social action to include both in one, we have only managed to narrow our understanding of mission. There is nothing quite so crippling to both evangelism and social action as to confuse them in definition or to separate them in practice. Our evangelists, sometimes, seem to be calling us to accept the King without his Kingdom; while our prophets, just as narrow in their own way, seem to be trying to build the Kingdom without the saving King. (1)

1. As in the statement: "The church's service to the world is that of being the pioneer of every social reform without making any claims for Christianity or trying to Christianize the revolution." Quoted in Christians in the Technical and Social Revolutions of our Time, ed. by J.B. Mosley, page 34.

A second problem which faces us in relating evangelism to the missionary future is the question of priorities. Once we have satisfactorily defined it, where does evangelism belong in the total mission?

There was a time when most Christians believed that evangelism was the only priority. They were wrong. Then the church swung too far the other way. The only Christian priority that came through clearly out of the Uppsala Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1968 was social justice through reconstruction. That, too, is an important priority, but it is not the only one, and when Uppsala made it the only clear mission of the church, the result was a disaster. In trying to speak to the world, the WCC almost lost the church. Four years later the Nairobi Assembly valiantly tried to restore the balance and did much to repair the damage. "Christ mediates God's new covenant through both salvation and service... Christians are called to engage in both evangelism and social action," it declared (Official Report of the Fifth Assembly, p. 43). But that was not enough. For one thing, since it was a council of churches, not a church, Nairobi was paralyzed by its inability to define either evangelism or salvation in terms that could reach a consensus. More important, what the church needs for the future in mission is more than balance. It needs momentum. Not an uneasy truce between faith and works, but a partnership.

Now in most practical, working partnerships there must be a leading partner, a "first among equals," or nothing gets done. Which should be the leading partner in mission? Evangelism or social action? I submit that what makes the Christian mission different from other commendable and sincere attempts to improve the human condition is that in the Christian mission our vertical relationship to God comes first, while the second, our horizontal relationship to our neighbors is "like unto it," and just as indispensable, but still second. The leading partner is evangelism. This is not to exalt the proclamation at the expense of Christian action. They belong together. But it does insist that while without the accompanying deeds the good news is scarcely credible, without the word the news is not even comprehensible. Have you ever tried to watch the news on TV with the sound turned off? Besides, the really good news is not what we in our benevolence do for others, but what God has done for us all in Christ. Evangelism, as someone has said, is one beggar telling another where to find help.

The supreme task of the church then, now and for the future is evangelism. It was the supreme task for the church of the New Testament. It was also set forth as the supreme challenge facing the World Council of Churches at its founding in 1948. "If an ecumenical movement," wrote Bishop Stephen Neill in the preparatory papers, "is not primarily a strategy of worldwide evangelism, then it is nothing but an interesting academic exercise." (The Church's Witness to God's Design)

My last point has to do with strategies and models. The determining factor in developing evangelistic strategies, I believe, is that evangelism moves always in the direction of the unreached. "Those without the gospel" is what the Program Agency's excellent planning paper calls them. "More than one-half of the world's people are still without the simplest knowledge of the good news of God's saving love revealed in Jesus Christ," it points out. There is no greater challenge to evangelism in mission than that.

Who are they--these unreached peoples without the gospel? The same paper defines them this way:

"People who for any reason do not know, acknowledge or experience God's redeeming and sustaining love through Jesus Christ as divine Lord and Savior have not responded positively to the Gospel. They are the people...who are 'without the gospel'."
(Strategies for Reaching People Who Are Without the Gospel)

If I were to add anything to this admirable description it might be to suggest that a distinction can be drawn between 'the unreached' and 'those without the gospel.' The latter is a broader category. It includes many who have already been reached by the evangelistic announcement and invitation and have thus been given at least some kind of a chance to respond to the gospel, but either have not acted on it or have rejected it. They are indeed "without the gospel," but in a sense the responsibility is now theirs. "The unreached," on the other hand, is a narrower definition. It is limited to those who have not even been given a real, meaningful chance to respond to the claims of Christ. In their case does not the greater and more urgent responsibility still rest with us who call ourselves Christ's disciples, who have heard his command, but have not yet gone to give them the chance they deserve?

It is just as important to ask Where are the unreached? as to to ask Who are they? At this point, I am afraid our holistic, Presbyterian "six-continent" approach to mission begins to lose touch with evangelistic realities. Not that the "six-continent" view is invalid. It has a validity of its own, but it belongs more with church relations than with mission. It begins with a different question, "Where are the churches?" and comes up with the comforting answer, "on all six continents," which is true. But however much evangelistic mission and church relations may be intertwined and interdependent, mission begins with a prior question, and a more disturbing answer. "Where are the unreached?" The answer, by and large, is "Not here, but over there." Of course they are found everywhere, but the solid blocks, the great masses of the unreached, are not on six continents, but on two or perhaps three: Asia, Africa, and some would add Latin America.

In this connection it may be useful to note that for general strategic evangelistic planning, some missiologists suggest as a rule of thumb that "a group of people are classified as unreached if less than 20% claim or are considered to be Christian." (Unreached Peoples, MAEC, p. 26) Christians are rightly concerned about the grievous unbalances of wealth, and food and freedom in the world. What about the most devastating unbalance of all: the unequal distribution of the light of the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ?

I am not overly addicted to statistics (except when I remind myself that strategy without statistics almost always turns out to be dictated more by the emotions than the mind, and emotions are notoriously selfish). But what does it say about a six-continent approach to evangelism, for example, to find that most of our church mission funds still go to ourselves on the sixth continent, which is between 70% and 80% already at least nominally Christian, while Africa is perhaps 40% Christian by the same rough and imprecise standards, and Asia, which holds more than one-half of all the people in the world, is

only 3 or 4% even nominally Christian. In the next ten years the number of non-Christians which will be added to the population of Asia will be greater than the entire present population of the United States (650 million, compared to 220 million). A six-continent leveling of mission is a selfish distortion of the evangelistic realities in the world.

But statistics and body-counts do not make the future in evangelism. They only help us to plan for the future. It takes people, it takes working models of evangelism, actually to shape the future. There are many models to choose from, and I have been helped by them all: Risk Evangelism, Young Life, the great evangelistic crusades of a Billy Graham which were so effective in Korea, and the little neighborhood meetings in Christian homes anywhere in the world. None of them are perfect, and all need the added dimension of support and counsel from the organized churches, but at least these are examples of people actively evangelizing, and such are becoming increasingly hard to find, at least in our mainline denominations.

One last thought. There is an unexpected bonus to keeping the definition of evangelism simple. It means that anyone can get into the act. One of the happiest lessons I ever learned about evangelism came not from an evangelist (at least that is not what he called himself). He was a watermelon vendor. It was in a Korean village, and Eileen came up to ask him how much a watermelon cost. He was so surprised at finding a long-nosed foreigner who spoke Korean that at first he was struck dumb. He even forgot to tell her the price. There was something more important he wanted to say. He said, "Are you a Christian?" And when she said, "Yes," he smiled all over. "Oh, I'm so glad," he said, "because if you weren't, I was going to tell you how much you are missing."

If more of us were so happy about what we have found in the Lord Jesus Christ that we couldn't wait to tell those who have not found Him how much they are missing, we would need to worry no longer about a Presbyterian future in evangelism.

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