

# The Great Evangelist

by SAMUEL HUGH MOFFETT

God has the message. He does the inviting. We are only doorkeepers

**Y**ou can't be an evangelist, you say? "All right," says God. "I'll settle for that. Just be a doorkeeper. I'll be the evangelist."

Will you settle for that?

Christians who heed the Word of God and obey it discover this secret: we are not really the evangelists after

New Testament word *evangel* did to the Anglo-Saxons. Today's word is not *evangel*, nor even *gospel*; for modern man the word is *good news*.

Any definition of the Gospel must encompass three key proclamations, all of which are found in Scripture: the apostolic, the Messianic, and the angelic.

The *apostolic evangel* was the message that the early church carried to the world. The Apostle Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel."<sup>1</sup>

But why wasn't he?

Was not the Gospel a ridiculous thing for a Roman to be preaching — full of nonsense about love, meekness, humility, and turning the other cheek, and about a god who died like a criminal? It was rubbish suitable for slaves or women, not for world-conquering Romans. Such was Rome's attitude — self-sufficient and powerful. Rome's standard was the eagle; its symbols were the axe and the short sword, not the cross. Rome wanted victory, not sacrifice; power, not meekness.

So Paul stood up and said to Rome, "The good news I have for you is power."<sup>2</sup> And this is the first characteristic of the apostolic evangel: power. There is a dynamic and a movement in the Good News that will not suffer compression or containment. It is precisely because the evangel is first of all power that evangelism can never be equated with the cold, clear transmission of orthodoxy to the unbeliever. The power of the Spirit received, the power of a personal encounter with God, this is the good news of the evangel. It is heady stuff.

But the same apostle who was so excited about the power of the Gospel as he begins his Letter to the Romans, goes on to write 12 of the most closely reasoned theological chapters in all of Scripture. Paul was the greatest evangelist in history because he not only had power, he had learn-

ing. If the evangelist's message is not true to the facts it is not good news at all, it is only wishful thinking or false propaganda.

A few months after the Communists overran Peking in 1949 they posted a slogan in huge characters across the walls of a bookstore in Tientsin. It said: "Any fact which is not in accord with revolutionary theory is not a true fact." But for the Christian any preaching which is not in accord with the facts is not the true evangel. "What the apostles preached," said James S. Stewart, "was neither a philosophy of life nor a theory of redemption. They preached events. They anchored their Gospel to history."<sup>3</sup>

The facts Paul chose as his summary of the Good News are the most fundamental facts of all existence: death and life. In Christian symbolism they are portrayed by the cross and the crown. Now, where is the Good News in death? As that durable Puritan, John Owens, put it 300 years ago, the Good News "is the death of death in the death of Christ."<sup>4</sup> The hard facts of sin and death are never isolated in the Biblical evangel apart from the love of God, and the deepest proof of that love is that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."<sup>5</sup> The Bible does not dodge the fact that sin causes death, but its spotlight is not on man's death by sin, but on Christ's death for sin. That is the Good News.

The evangelist must present the facts without apology, but also in love, without condemnation. The late Paul Little tells the story<sup>6</sup> of an intoxicated man who, traveling on a train, lurched into the seat beside Charles Trumbull, the founder of *The Sunday School Times*. Spewing profanity and filth, the man offered Trumbull a swallow from his flask. Trumbull inwardly recoiled, and a lesser man might have blasted the stranger for his condition, but instead Trumbull politely declined the drink, saying, "No, thank you, but I can see you are a generous man." The other's eyes lit up and it was the beginning of a conversation that brought him to the Savior.

That is evangelism. It communicates the Good News which is not condemnation but salvation. The dynamic of the Gospel is its movement from death to life. It took a miracle to wrench the course of history and bring it around from death to life. That was the miracle of the Resur-

rection. Such is the apostolic evangel: power, and death, and life — the fire, the cross, the crown.

Even earlier than the evangelism of the apostles was the *Messianic evangel*, or Jesus' evangelistic ministry. There is a significant difference here. Jesus' own evangel as he preached it in the villages of Galilee focused on an aspect of the Gospel which not all evangelists have recognized: the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. This evangel is the affirmation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Theologians tell us that the earliest creed of the church was "Jesus is Lord." Paul said, "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Spirit."<sup>7</sup> The Bible does not give us one creed for evangelicals, "Jesus is Savior," and another for social activists, "Jesus is Lord." The creed of the church and the teaching of Scripture is that "Jesus is Lord and Savior." In other words, no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," who has not first said, "Jesus is Savior." The Messianic evangel calls for commitment both to Christ's Person and to his program.

There is, finally, an *angelic evangel*. Earliest of all proclamations in the New Testament was the evangel of the angels. Luke tells us that the angel declared to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid; I have good news for you: there is great joy coming to the whole people. Today in the city of David a deliverer has been born to you — the Messiah, the Lord."<sup>8</sup>

The lost note in most of our evangelism is hilarity — a Biblical word. The evangel is a theme for singing, and if we cannot sing it, it is not the Gospel. It can be power and fact and ethics and invitation and all the rest; but take the joy out of it, and it does not really grip the heart.

It is as simple as that — the Gospel. If you cannot preach it, at least sing it. Proclaim it as truly and simply and as earnestly as you can. This world of ours is dying for the kind of happiness which the Good News of the love of God in Christ has the power to give.



Samuel and Eileen Moffett in the garden of their home in Seoul, Korea

all. God is. The Great Evangelist is with us, and in us, and for us. Our task is to open the door a little so that men can go in and find him.

Evangelism means preaching the Gospel, and the word "gospel" has a nice, pious ring to it, but we forget that it probably means as little to the average person today as the Greek

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(1) Romans 1:16. (2) Cf. Romans 1:4, 16. (3) From "Thine Is the Kingdom," by James S. Stewart, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York. (4) From "The Death of Death," by John Owen. (5) Romans 5:8. (6) In "How to Give Away Your Faith," by Paul E. Little, © 1966 by Inter-Varsity Press, Chicago. (7) Cf. 1 Corinthians 12:3. (8) Luke 2:10-11, NEB

