Evangelism: Some Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives

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In revisiting the Biblical material, Paul Weston reminds us of the patterns discernable in NT preaching of the gospel message. While sensitive to contextual presentations of the message, he encourages us not to lose touch with the apostolic proclamation, nor to permit the siren voices of cultural and religious relativism to lull us into compromise.

My purpose in this article is to map out the basis upon which a biblical perception of evangelism might be understood, with particular reference to the message itself and some aspects of its communication today.

Evangelism: its defining characteristics

Right at the start we note from our English word 'evangelism' an integral connection between the gospel itself (the evangel) and the process by which it is passed on. However, 'evangelism', is not strictly a biblical word at all.

It is derived from three related biblical words: *euangelisasthai* — a verb occurring 52 times in the NT meaning 'to announce good news', *euangelion* the noun (occurring 72 times) referring to the good news which is announced, and the noun *euangelistes* (occurring 3 times[1]) — meaning the one who brings the good news, i.e., the evangelist in person.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary takes this background at face value when it defines evangelism as 'the preaching of the Gospel'. The root of the word (evangel) is understood as the content of what is preached (from the Gk. noun), whilst the suffix 'ism' is understood as 'the act of preaching, explaining, or spreading it.'

Evangelism and words

There are of course numerous definitions of evangelism, and I do not particularly want to add to them. Suffice it to say that the NT gives grounds for establishing that what sets evangelism apart from wider concepts of 'mission' is that it involves the use of language. Biblical evangelism takes place where the gospel is explained or declared.

To be sure the *context* of such an explanation will happen in a variety of different ways for different people, and for the great majority the means by which such words become possible will be *via* relationships expressing love

1 Acts 21:18; Eph. 4:11; 2 Tim. 4:5.

and care within the local community.[2] In this sense evangelism and what has become known rather clumsily as 'social action' belong together and are in fact inseparably connected.[3] Nonetheless, within this wider context, it is proper to defend an understanding of evangelism which is necessarily connected with the use of language. For actions by themselves are ambiguous. They may unlock doors but without words to explain or interpret them they will not permit the hearer to open and pass through.[4]

The NT explains this theologically in two ways. First, faith — as Paul argues in Rom. 10:17-18 — 'comes from *hearing* the message, and the message is *heard* through the word of Christ'.

Secondly, when the word 'gospel' is used as a noun in the New Testament it is always combined with words of hearing and speaking when the process which we would understand as evangelism is being described. When it is being handed on to someone else it is described as being 'preached' or 'proclaimed', 'heralded' or 'spoken', 'made known' or 'taught'. When it is described as being accepted it is usually 'heard', or simply 'received'.[5]

Evangelism and a message

If therefore the process of evangelism involves the communication of the 'evangel', what is the 'evangel' that is being communicated? Lack of clarity and vision at this point has dogged Anglican consultations in the past.[6] More seriously, if — as we shall argue — the gospel is its own imperative, then the content of the gospel must be its message.

God the evangelist

It is impossible to establish an understanding or 'theology' of evangelism from the Bible without realising that it is woven into its very fabric. For evangelism begins with the character of God. Indeed, there can only really

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2 See John Finney's important study of 500 conversion stories (*Finding Faith Today: How does it happen?*, Bible Society, Swindon 1992) for the importance of relationships in the process of conversion.

3 For an in-depth study of the relationship between evangelism and social action, see R. J. Sider, *Evangelism and Social Action*, Hodder, London 1993.

4 The relationship between word and deed in the presentation of the good news is illuminated in the NT by the frequency with which *spoken* opportunities are brought about by the impact of Christian *lives* — e.g., Col. 4:5-6 (with the emphasis in v 6 on the word 'answer'); 1 Pet. 3:15.

5 For example, the noun *euangelion* occurs 8 times in the gospels — always with the verb *kerusso* to preach, or proclaim.

6 See, e.g., the Report of the Church of England's Partners in Mission Consultation of 1981 (*To a Rebellious House?*, Church House, London 1981) where the external partners disagreed so strongly with the internal partners over the nature of evangelism that, though the remainder of the report was printed as a unanimous document, the section on evangelism has two differing sections, one from each group. 'The final plenary session of the Consultation agreed that the difficulty experienced in reaching mutual understanding and agreement about evangelism, as witnessed by the form of this section, is one of the most serious questions facing the Church of England' (par. 127). Happily things have improved since then.

be any discussion about a 'theology of evangelism', for the fundamental reason that God is evangelistic in his very nature.

In mission parlance this all-embracing theological starting point has become identified with the term *Missio Dei* — 'the mission of God'.[7] Here is both the primary focus and the principal impetus behind the whole subject of evangelism.

As David Bosch puts it:

> Mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is the fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is mission because God loves people.[8]

A biblical overview

It is this fundamental outlook which under girds the flow of biblical truth, and thereby reveals the character of God. In fact it is hard to identify one biblical doctrine which does not reflect the desire of the creator that his creatures should live in a transformed relationship with him. Creation itself sets out God's original intention for humankind as one in which fellowship between creature and creator lies at the very heart of all that the creature is intended to be.

The fall is tragically pictured as the exclusion of Adam and Eve from the place in which the intended fellowship was created, and with this exclusion comes the accompanying judgement of death.[9] The biblical narrative then picks up the creator's determined plan that this exclusion will be reversed. The Genesis account narrows the focus to the calling of one man, Abram, and relates God's promise that through him God's original intention will be brought to fulfilment: i.e., that through him blessing will be brought to the nations.[10] The Old Testament story as a whole centres around Israel's subsequent calling and ultimate failure to fulfil her role as God's missionary people amongst the nations — that she might fulfil the calling given to Abraham to be a blessing to the nations.[11] This global perspective pervades the material from start to finish.

This evangelistic calling was ultimately fulfilled in the incarnate life of God's son, through whom the possibility of fellowship with the creator was not only restored but taken to greater depth.[12] In the gospels Jesus (using

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7 For a brief survey of the origin of the term, see D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Orbis, New York 1991, pp 389-93.

8 Ibid., p 392.

9 Gen. 3:23-24 in the context of v.19b.

10 Gen. 12:2-3. Cf. G. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word, Waco 1987, p 275 for the connection between the blessings promised through the patriarchs and God's original intentions for humankind.

11 E.g. Isa. 49:6 ('I will ... make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth') which picks up the patriarchal language of blessings for the world which were made in the promises to Abraham. For its apostolic counterpart, cf. Acts 13:47.

12 The language of restoration is integral to much of Jesus' teaching and preaching (e.g., Luke 15:1-7 and John 10:1-18 esp. 16 with their fulfilment of the restoration of the lost to fellowship with the 'Shepherd', which had been the intended role of the shepherds of Israel under the old covenant — Ezek. 34:4-6, 11-13).

enormous and profound. As David Bosch puts it:

> ... dare we today read Paul's letters devotionally, dare we preach from them, unless we allow ourselves to be infected with the missionary passion of Paul? And does not Paul himself extend his vision and image of mission to his fellow-workers and to the churches he has founded?[16]

Evangelism: its message

At this point we need to develop an idea addressed earlier. For if the Bible clearly establishes the missionary nature of God's character as the foundation for all that He reveals about Himself, it does so by describing historical events in which he evangelises his creation — either directly, or through His people. Not only therefore is the Bible about God the evangelist, it is also about the means and methods by which He does it. In a global perspective, the gospel must go to 'all nations', and therefore will inevitably be culturally adapted.

A message summarised

I propose to earth the discussion about this gospel message by examining the preaching of the apostles in Acts. There are two reasons for this. First, because Luke records for us a number of examples of the early evangelists at work declaring or explaining the gospel, but secondly, because they are seen as doing so in different *cultural* contexts. If you like, here are paradigms of the commission to all nations in action. The resulting elements of similarity and dissimilarity will help to give definition to our contemporary task.

No doubt these records are summaries of what was actually said, but this is actually an advantage in our present task — which is that of identifying the core elements of the message.

I am aware that since C.H. Dodd's work (*The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*[17]) in which he argued that the apostolic message could be reduced to a 7-point outline, there has been caution expressed about articulating any common outline in the early preaching. Perhaps Dodd's scheme was over precise. Nonetheless there is good evidence for demonstrating strong elements of repeated emphasis within the apostolic preaching — be it to Jews in Jerusalem, God-fearing Gentiles in Joppa or articulate pagans in Athens.[18]

Let us then ask the question, What did the early apostles understand the good news to be? In terms of similarity, there appear to be three basic elements or themes:

A message from God

First, the gospel exists to be spread because of God's initiative. This is a prominent theme throughout the recorded sermons (e.g., Acts 2:22-24,32,36;

16 Op. cit., p 171.

17 Hodder, London 1936.

18 For a summary of these common strands in the apostolic literature, and a fuller attempt to draw conclusions, see Eugene Lemcio's two articles, 'The Unifying Kerygma of the New Testament', part one in *JSNT* vol. 33 (1988), pp 3-17, and part 2 in *JSNT* vol. 38 (1990), pp 3-11.

3:13,15; 10:34-38,39-42; 17:24ff), and should not come as a surprise in the light of our overview of the biblical material so far. In fact the divine derivation and God-centredness of the whole message form the axle around which the evangelistic enterprise was always understood to rotate. God therefore is continually shown to have initiated the gospel, brought it to fulfilment in his son Jesus, confirmed it, and finally underlined its meaning. This God-centredness is apparent even at Athens where Paul spends the majority of his recorded sermon defending God's personhood and Creative majesty before explaining that by raising Jesus from the dead he was telling us something vital about who Jesus is.

A message about Jesus

Secondly, the Gospel message is all about Jesus Christ. If the message has a divine imperative about it, its content concerns the man Jesus Christ (cf., Acts 2:22-35; 3:13-18; 10:36,38,39-41; 17:31). This might be considered as something of a truism (although perhaps we need to be reminded of it in the light of some contemporary evangelistic preaching!). Yet in the identification of the content of the evangel, I have found that these early sermons map out a very stimulating and challenging grid within which the gospel message was always, and should always, be explained. For they are not simply *about* Jesus. Rather, each sermon culminates in a divinely statement of *who Jesus is declared to be in the light of his death, resurrection and exaltation*. The test of apostolic evangelism is that the evangel will always find its authentic expression within the parameters of these christocentric gospel affirmations.

There are five such titles. The first two appear together at the conclusion of the Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:36[19]). They are that Jesus is both 'Lord'[20] and 'Christ'[21]. Here the particular Jewishness of the gospel and its fulfilment in Jesus as Messiah ('Christ') is combined with the title that more than any other sums up the NT message: Jesus is Lord.[22] The first came to invest the gospel with a particular Jewish flavour; the other with universal relevance. Theologically, as we shall see, the title 'Lord' is the one within which each of the others is subsumed. The third title is that Jesus is 'Leader'.[23] He is the one who has gone before, who is the originator of life and who heralds a new life as 'pioneer'. The fourth title is that Jesus is 'Saviour'[24] — perhaps the title with which modern evangelists are most conversant in their preaching. Jesus is the one who saves us from our sins. The final title is that Jesus is 'Judge'[25].

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19 'Let all the house of Israel know for sure that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.'

20 *Kurios* — cf. also Acts 10:36.

21 *Christos* — cf. also Acts 3:18,20; 10:36.

22 Cf. Rom. 1:4; 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3 for the centrality of this phrase in summing up the good news.

23 *Archegos* — Acts 3:15; 5:31 — also translated 'Prince' or 'Author' (cf. also Heb. 2:10; 12:2 where it is usually translated 'Pioneer').

24 *Soter* — Acts 5:31; 13:23.

25 *Krites* — cf., 10:42 where Peter explains to Cornelius the command given to the Apostles by the risen Jesus that they should preach that he will judge the living and the dead; also 17:31 where the verb is used with the same meaning as the climax to Paul's sermon at Athens.

A message about new life

The third major strand of continuity within the sermons is that the message guaranteed the forgiveness of sins and the promise of new life to those who turn in repentance and faith.

According to the message of the apostles the offer of salvation and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit as a sign and guarantee of the new age promised by God in the OT becomes a possibility only in the light of who Jesus has been declared to be. It is precisely because of his exaltation that the gift of the Holy Spirit may be given to those who obey God (Acts 5:32).

It is also precisely because he has been declared to be both Lord and Saviour that forgiveness of sins can be offered in his name (c.f., 5:31 'God exalted Jesus to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might *give* repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel'); and perhaps even more explicitly (this time by Paul to gentiles), 'the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. Therefore, my brothers I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you' (10:37-38).

This then is the nub of the gospel according to the apostles. It is a message from God in which he has *declared certain things to be true about his son Jesus* — things which have made forgiveness and the promise of new life a possibility through repentance and faith.

This general pattern in which the gospel is set out may be mirrored elsewhere in the NT. It is certainly plausible to argue a basic continuity of presentation. One other example will suffice to illustrate this: Paul's introduction to the letter to the Romans.

> Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for *the gospel of God* — the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures *regarding his Son,* who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was *declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.* (Rom. 1:1-4)

The same basic pattern emerges. The gospel is the gospel of God. It is about his son, Jesus. He is declared to be 'Son of God', 'Christ', and 'Lord' by His resurrection. Paul's calling — as he goes on to describe it — is to call Gentiles to the obedience which is due to Christ as Lord — an obedience which comes through faith (1:5-6).

Evangelism: some contemporary implications

There are a number of issues which arise from this material. The remainder of the article will focus on some of the similarities and dissimilarities between the apostolic sermons and attempt to draw some contemporary implications for further reflection.

Gospel and culture

The first concerns the relationship between gospel and culture. It is clear from the apostolic sermons that culture *did* affect the way in which the message was

preached. One example is the discernible shift in emphasis between what might be termed 'Jewish' and 'Gentile' styles of evangelistic proclamation in the Acts. For the latter, the Messiah and Saviour categories give way to the more cosmic category of Jesus as judge (e.g., Acts 10:42; 17:31).

This theme is introduced at Athens in the context of the Athenians' idolatrous worldview.[26] It is significant in both Paul's recorded sermons in pagan cultural contexts (Lystra and Athens), along with references in two of his epistles, that his first evangelistic contact with Gentiles seems to have been on the subject of idolatry. It would appear that it was subsequent to this initial contact that he concentrated on the cross. At Lystra for example (Acts 14:8-18), Paul 'brings the good news' that they should 'turn from these vain things to a living God'. The content of his evangelistic sermon is very similar in thought and style to the later address at Athens where Paul concentrates heavily upon idolatry. To take one example from the epistles, he writes concerning the Thessalonians of how they 'turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God' (1 Thess. 1:9).[27]

There is an instructive parallel to our contemporary style of evangelism here. Much of it still proceeds on 'Jewish' lines in the sense that it often makes assumptions about the degree to which people can understand and assent to the sort of Judaeo-Christian religious framework within which the language of salvation fits and makes sense. My own experience as an evangelist suggests that this is in fact very rarely the case amongst today's non-Christians, but that the notion of idolatry is just as relevant today as an initial point of contact. Most people have a much clearer idea of what it is in life that they are relying upon to give some sense of purpose and hope, than of any idea that they need 'saving' from anything. For the latter implies some recognition of a sense of 'sin' which deserves judgement—a notion which we must acknowledge to be far removed from most minds today, whereas the former (with its echoes of so much of the quasi-religious language of materialism) is much closer to the surface of contemporary culture. In line with Paul at Athens, the contemporary evangelist is more likely to make a meaningful initial contact with the non-Christian by exploring and challenging such contemporary forms of idolatry than by moving too quickly to notions of salvation.

In this sense we do not live in a society which has ceased to 'worship' or to exercise any kind of religious aspirations. As Lesslie Newbigin remarks:

> We have learned, I think, that what has come into being is not a secular society but a pagan society, not a society devoid of public images but a society which worships gods which are not God.[28]

We need to understand how these aspirations are focused and expressed if we are to find ways to communicate the gospel more effectively.

On the other hand, our study has sought to demonstrate that there were apostolic parameters within which such cultural explanations took place. A

26 Acts 17:16, 23 and the content of Paul's sermon in vv 24-29.

27 Note the similarity to Paul's language at Lystra; the other example in the epistles is 1 Cor. 12:2 in the context of 1 Cor. 2:2.

28 *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, SPCK, London 1989, p 220.

second observation is therefore that cultural relevance was never at the expense of apostolic faithfulness.

The challenge of subjectivism

This faithfulness moreover is full-bloodied. The early apostles might easily have been tempted to point to themselves as the recipients of God's end-time blessing. But perhaps the boldest characteristic of these sermons is their objective nature: not what God had done *in* them so much as *for* them.

In our contemporary context, the pressure of a prevailing culture of subjectivism (what is happening *in* me as the test of truth) presents us with peculiar challenges at just this point. My own observation (both in my ministry as an evangelist and in seeing others at work) is that it presents the temptation to limit the gospel's significance to the realm of feelings and its relevance to those outside the church who are aware of some *felt* need for it. The content of the evangelist's message is designed to evoke a recognition of those felt needs and the message communicates that Jesus can meet them.

Of course there is truth here. We will often build from perceived needs to talk about true spiritual need. But if our gospel is presented only as a panacea for such needs we have to ask whether this really is the biblical gospel. What continually strikes me about the apostolic presentation is the stress on the objective nature of the gospel. Action is demanded of the hearers not to meet a felt need but to square with God's truth and the nature of his world as it is now and will be on the last day. The aspect of the apostolic gospel (again stressed in pagan contexts) which puts this most forcefully is that Jesus is judge. Perhaps this brings with it connotations of the sort of hell-fire preaching from which we want to shrink; and perhaps rightly so. Maybe also, in our post-modern culture which appears to reject the sort of truth claims that are dependent upon historical happenings in the past as the guarantee of what is yet to be, such an apologetic appears doomed from the start.

Yet, two points need to be made. First, we have to admit that the spirit of subjectivism which wants everything to increase the personal 'feel good' factor has affected the church as well, not least in its evangelism. If we shrink from the bold apologetic of insisting that the world revolves not around ourselves but around the God who will call all people to account, we may be saying more about our own cosy world view than we care to admit. But secondly, where the message is faithful in content to the apostolic witness, the evangelist will have no need to give the message some sort of relevance that it does not already possess. If God is going to bring the world to account, then the message about him and his son Jesus is relevant whether we choose to believe it or not.

The challenge of pluralism

A third observation leads on from this. If a major modern Western cultural characteristic is that of subjectivism, its manifestation in the religious realm is that of pluralism. It is on this issue that the church faces its greatest challenge in the coming decades. Newbigin again rightly interprets this when he writes:

> As long as the Church is content to offer its beliefs modestly as simply one of the many brands available in the ideological supermarket, no offence is taken. But the affirmation that the truth revealed in the gospel ought to govern public life is offensive.[29]

But just such a claim is put forward by the apostles in the simple affirmation that 'Jesus is Lord'. As noted above this is the descriptive title under which the other apostolic titles find their meaning and coherence. The others are, in effect, aspects of this Lordship. Jesus is able to save, and will come as the cosmic judge at the end of time — precisely *because* he is Lord.[30]

The distinction sometimes made between the gospel of Jesus as a gospel of 'the kingdom' and the gospel of Paul as a message about 'personal salvation' needs to be re-evaluated at this point. Evangelicals have often so stressed the cross of Jesus (and thereby his status as Saviour) that the message about substitutionary atonement has become divorced from the NT emphasis upon his Lordship. In fact the two belong inextricably together. The Lordship of Jesus is the over-arching category in both epistles and gospels under which the different evangelistic emphases cohere. There is no essential difference in Paul's theology.[31] This separation between Jesus as Saviour and Jesus as Lord is a false one which leads much contemporary evangelism into either a presentation of the gospel which sells the call to discipleship short, or else fails to make the message connect with those for whom 'salvation' language has no relevance.

Conclusion

The church's faithfulness to the apostolic message about the Lordship of Christ will undoubtedly be severely tested in the decades to come. It is inextricably connected to historic events which are themselves the guarantee of what is yet to come. We may shrink from this kind of apologetic in a culture that has effectively relativised the importance of any kind of absolute truth claims. Yet the challenge facing us is to find ways to communicate relevantly with contemporary cultures the brilliance of this global gospel. Perhaps one of the key elements to the church's future effectiveness is whether Christians in their private and public lives live out confidently the view of the world which the gospel proclaims.

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29 Ibid., p 7.

30 This may perhaps explain why in the Acts sermons there is not such an emphasis upon the cross as one might expect. Because the idea of Lordship is to the fore, the cross and its benefits are implicit rather than explicit. The idea seems to be that to submit to Jesus as Lord entails with it the gift of forgiveness (through the cross); cf. 5:31.

31 E.g., Col. 2:13-15, with its remarkable similarity of thought to John 12:31-32; also Acts 28:31 where at the conclusion of the book, Paul is said to have continued to preach the 'Kingdom of God' which, in the context of Paul's recorded sermons refers to the sort of Lordship idea we have been referring to.