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The Divine and Human Elements in Conversion

BY MAURICE WOOD

WITHIN the narrow limits of our space, I want to outline a preliminary study of the Biblical view of the special gifts of the evangelist, what is his relation to the total ministry of the whole church, what are his practical and spiritual limitations, and those duties which God has specially committed to him, by virtue of the evangelistic gifts entrusted to him. I shall illustrate this by a brief glance at the work of Philip, one of the early evangelists in the apostolic age, to help us find our own duty in this task of evangelism which in some measure is laid upon every Christian, by virtue of his membership within the Church which is the Body of Christ.

In the New Testament, an evangelist is a distinct and recognizable part of the total ministry of the Church, either clerical or lay, and it is in this context of the whole ministry that St. Paul speaks of evangelists in Ephesians.

His gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for (or towards) the work of the ministry. Eph. iv. 11, 12 (R.S.V.).

We notice three things in the context of this passage, which throw light on the evangelist:

(1) Eph. iv. 3-6 lays reiterated emphasis upon the unity of the God-head, and so the related unities within the Deity, set out here in almost a credal manner.

It is unlike our classical Creeds [says R. R. Williams, Bishop of Leicester, in *Studies in Ephesians: the Lectures of the Third Theology and Ministry Convention, Christ Church, Oxford*] because it mentions the great affirmations of the faith in almost exactly the reverse order in which they occur in, e.g., the Nicene Creed. That Creed uses what I have called the order of logic or metaphysics, i.e., it begins with God the Father, the Creator, proceeds to God the Son, and ends with the Holy Spirit and the Church. The Ephesians passage begins with the experimental fact of the Church ("there is one body"), goes on to the mention of the One Spirit, proceeds to the person of the One Lord (to which is attached suitably enough "one faith, one baptism") and ends with the fact of One God ("One God and Father of all").

This is the evangelistic order.

Here is the experience into which the evangelist will, by the same Spirit, lead his hearers, but here also is the deep unity of God's plan, purpose, and Person, in which the evangelist finds his small but vital and inter-locking part.

(2) Eph. iv. 7-11 tells us that grace is given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift, for "He gave gifts to men" (Study the suggestive exegesis of Psalm lxxviii, "the greatest, most splendid and artistic of the temple songs of Restored Jerusalem" (Ewald), in that old book of G. G. Findlay in the Expositors' Bible Series (p. 229, New Edition).

Here is unity in diversity. God is "ONE God and Father of us all", "above all and through all and in all", and yet stoops to impart differing gifts by grace to different human instruments. The gifts of the evangelist are as important, no less and no more, than the other charismatic gifts of the pastor and teacher.

(3) Eph. iv. 12 reminds us that all these gifts are not to be husbanded for their own sakes, but are God's gifts through men "for the equipment of the saints to do the work of ministry". The whole church needs the evangelist, as well as the pastor and the teacher.

* * * *

There is an historical as well as an experimental sequence in this list of differing ministries.

The apostles in the first century were "from the beginning eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word" (Luke i. 2, R.S.V.) They proclaimed the historic facts of Bethlehem, Galilee, the Mount of Transfiguration, the Hill of the Skull, the Garden Tomb, and the Mount called Olivet, and the human figure of Jesus, who left His indelible and Divine work on each historic site.

Then came *the prophets*; the prophets of the Old Covenant came into their own, when the disciples, illuminated by the same Spirit that had inspired the Old Testament writers, saw, with Dominical authority, "Christ in all the Scriptures" (Luke xxiv. 27) and so became the prophets of the New Covenant.

The historic Jesus, seen to be the suffering servant of Jehovah and the Messiah of the prophets, is now preached by *the evangelists* as the message which demands a verdict, and, pricked to the heart by the emotional, moral, and intellectual challenge of Peter, men cried out, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts ii. 37). One fears that Sargant would hardly have approved! (*The Battle of the Mind*, by William Sargant).

Three thousand people were gloriously and suddenly converted, and *the pastors* and *the teachers* were pitchforked into action, but the evangelistic nets held firm, because the pastoral crooks were ready, so that "they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship" (Acts ii. 42).

In the first days of the early church, the historic order was apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. That this historic sequence is also the pattern for church life and development in every age is brought out well in Ruth Paxon's book *The wealth, walk, and warfare of the Christian*.

The foundation of the Church must be securely laid in the Lord Jesus Christ and made known in an authoritative body of teaching. This divinely attested truth must be thoroughly

taught to the Church. So Christ gave to the Church in its infancy some to be apostles and prophets. Upon this foundation, laid once for all, a building was to be constructed for a habitation of God made up of living stones, to be added one by one. A mystical Body was to be created for Christ, the Head, out of sinners saved by grace and quickened by His Spirit. This required evangelists who would go far and wide to proclaim the gospel and extend the boundaries of the Church through winning souls one by one and "adding to the Church such as should be saved". But the sheep must be shepherded, so there was the need of pastors; the members of the Body must be built up in their knowledge of Christ through the Word, so there was need of teachers. As the evangelist labours to extend the Church, so the pastor and the teacher work to edify it.

"For the perfecting of the saints." The special gifts are bestowed with a definite, divine design. No gift is bestowed for the sake of the man himself. It is given to one for the sake of the whole. Neither does it place the monopoly of service in the hands of a gifted few. The evangelist, pastor, and teacher are not commissioned by the Lord to do all the work of the Church, but rather to so feed, teach, and train the saints individually that each of them be brought to spiritual maturity and thoroughly equipped to fill his place and do his work in building up the Whole Body. Every Christian has been made a king and a priest unto God (Rev. i. 6). As the whole Body is bound together in faith and in life, so is it also united in service.

But what discord we see in the Church today caused by these very gifts! What unholy ambition! What sinful pride! What corroding jealousy! What spiteful envy!

In Ephesians, God has shown us what is our responsibility in this matter of keeping this God-ordained and God-designed unity of the Spirit in the Body of Christ. We should have a fixed determination that we shall not allow anything for which we are to blame to separate us even a hair's-breadth from any other member of the Body. We should study diligently how to keep this unity; and make it our personal business to advocate it whenever possible. We should determine to stand together on the basis of truth and in the bond of love as an act of allegiance and devotion to Him who is our one Lord, and thus glorify Him by walking in unity (pp. 102, 103).

True and humiliating words! We do well to ponder this passage I have quoted at length, because we are not always united in Christ, for whichever gift God has given to us is to be used for the whole Church, and that means that we must in our turn depend upon others who are gifted with complementary spiritual gifts. The evangelist needs the pastor, if his converts are to be brought into fellowship, and so prepared to listen to the teacher. The pastor needs the teacher if his lambs are to grow strong and knowledgeable and "able to teach others also" (2 Tim. ii. 2). The teacher needs the evangelist, or he will be out of a job, with nobody to teach!

This is 20th Century commonsense, and 1st Century scriptural teaching, but to our shame it is not always a mark of our Church life today. The evangelist can be impatient of the parochial caution and the unrelated pedantry of the teacher. The parish pastor can be suspicious of the "methods" of the itinerant evangelist, and jealous of the cloistered calm of the scholarly teacher. The teacher can be supercilious of the simplicity and denigratory of the appeal of the evangelist, and be ignorant of the sorrows (and joys) of the pastor.

We must elevate the importance of this threefold function of ministry; and seek to draw all three together, and each be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace". (Eph. iv. 3).

The evangelist's work must be seen as a spirit-given ability, integrated into God's pattern for the ministry of Christ's Church, and necessary for the life of the Church as a whole, if all the saints are to be perfected, and brought into the fruitful, reproductive, witnessing, and evangelistic ministry, suggested by the idea of the priesthood of all believers.

Unfortunately, the biblical view of the specialized, Spirit-equipped work of an evangelist within the normal pattern of church life, is often obscured today, to the detriment of the Gospel and the loss of precious souls for whom Christ died.

* * * *

In the brief scope of this paper, however, we must confine ourselves to one biblical evangelist, namely Philip the deacon (not to be confused with Philip the Apostle) who, after his leader Stephen's martyrdom, came to the fore as "*Philip the evangelist, which was one of the seven*" (Acts xxi. 8).

The evangelist has a limited message. "Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and *preached Christ* unto them" (Acts viii. 5).

The evangelist is to preach Christ to the unconverted. Dr. Billy Graham, and most other evangelists are criticized on two grounds, in this respect. The narrow sacramentalist, or the man with limited views on conversion and a general satisfaction with the outward forms of church-going, criticizes the evangelist for not reaching beyond the fringe of the occasional church-goer, and is sometimes distressed because he receives, by way of commendation from an evangelistic mission, the name of some young person who has recently been confirmed, or baptized in believer's baptism, or otherwise received into their denominational full membership.

Here is encouragement as well as rebuke. The youngster has already received "apostolic" testimony and "prophetic" truth in his local church, so that he has begun to see his need, to understand the provision of Christ, and to recognize the challenge of response. Then, in the order of Ephesians iv. 11, noted above, he hears the evangelist "*preaching Christ*", and the Holy Spirit convicts him of his sin of *not* believing on Christ (see the important references of John xvi. 7-9, and John iii. 18.) The Holy Spirit then shows him that repentance and faith are the steps Jesus Himself demanded (Mark i. 15), which St. Peter (Acts ii. 38) and St. Paul (Acts xx. 21) everywhere reiterated,

both to Jews and Gentiles, and with which the evangelist today now confronts him for a verdict.

Church membership is not enough. Christ must be personally trusted for salvation. This, at least, is the clear teaching of the Church of England, which paradoxically but biblically states that we are not saved only by belonging to the Church of England.

“ They also are to be had accursed that presume to say, that every man shall be saved by the Law or Sect which he professeth, so that he be diligent to frame his life according to that Law, and the light of Nature. For holy Scripture doth set unto us only the Name of Jesus, whereby men must be saved.” (Article XVIII. Of obtaining eternal Salvation only by the Name of Christ.)

The Lord God is Sovereign, and in His wisdom sometimes *does* lead “ dying thieves ” to Jesus, with no previous knowledge of the faith, just as soon as Christ is preached, but it is the experience of most evangelists that those who profess conversion usually have some previous Christian knowledge, or at least have been under conviction of sin. Even the sudden and dramatic conversion of St. Paul was prefaced by the “ ox-goads ” (Acts ix. 5). My good friend, Mr. Tom Rees, once told me that he found that nearly all converts told him, if questioned some months after their conversion, that they had now discovered that someone had been praying for them, before they came to the point of decision.

Although the evangelist will teach, in the course of his preaching, so that his message is addressed to the whole personality, made up of intellect, conscience, emotions, and will, his main message will be limited in general to those themes of the Gospel that centre in the person and work of Christ, crucified, risen, and alive for evermore, for he *must* rely upon the faithful work of preparation by other Christians through prayer, witness, and systematic Bible teaching, and on the Holy Spirit's work of enlightenment and conviction.

Not only will his message be limited in its scope, but limited in its application, also, and this produces a second criticism. Dr. Billy Graham was criticized in this country, and also in Scotland by such leaders as Dr. George Macleod, because his message was said to be only personal, and was not addressed to the social problems of the day. But “ unto everyone of us is given grace, according to the measure of the gift of Christ ” (Eph. iv. 7).

The task of preaching the Gospel is exceedingly difficult, if we are to do it with “ truth, clarity, and passion ” (Dr. Campbell Morgan) ; by putting into clear and arresting and balanced words the eternal verities ; by making a warm, personal contact with a constantly changing audience ; and by shepherding individual sinners in difficulties of soul to the foot of Christ's Cross.

It is *so* difficult, that it would seem that God has not given to many men the ability both to evangelize, and *also* to relate the faith to the problems of race relations, nuclear disarmament, under-developed countries, inter-church relations, missionary strategy, liturgical experiments, church reunion schemes, contraception, education,

road-safety, industrial peace, refugees, and mental health, to name but a few of the fields in which Christian scholars are seeking to relate the unchanging Gospel to the changing needs of our exciting day and age.

In each of these fields, however, experts become so absorbed in their own work, that if the evangelist does not relate his evangelistic addresses to their particular interest, they feel his message is lacking.

As an example, I was interested to hear Bishop Ted Wickham give this as one of his reasons for not supporting Dr. Billy Graham. It is an easy criticism, but a glance at even the short list of subjects in the previous paragraph soon shows that it is not a valid one, once we accept the evangelist's ministry as only part of the total ministry of the church, and recognize that the Army's principle of "the maintenance of the objective" is vital to his success.

In practice, the mobility of the evangelist leads him to become well-informed enough on many social problems, so that he is able to put the essential challenge of conversion and committal to Christ in a way that will often be closely related to the needs of men under certain social pressures. It is worth noting that after his recent evangelistic tour of Africa, Dr. Billy Graham was invited to the White House to discuss Race Relations with the President of the United States and his advisers, but his first duty, clearly given him by God, still remains paramount. Very few of us are large enough to bear the weight in our souls of more than one major burden from God. The evangelist must always say, "Woe is unto me, if I preach not the Gospel" (1 Cor. ix. 16).

At the same time, every good evangelist will challenge his converts with the resultant duty of witness for Christ, and so by the grace of God new men will be injected into many of their old situations where they will now bring Christian insight to bear on the social structure of their milieu, and, having been found by Christ, will seek to make Him known amongst their contemporaries at work and at home.

The evangelist cannot be accused of preaching the Gospel in isolation, and without what Bishop Ted Wickham calls "involvement", because as long as he proclaims the personal Gospel *fully*, the Holy Spirit will show the converts the need of applying their new found faith in their individual environment, given the one condition of good "follow-up" through the local minister, who must then exercise a truly pastoral and teaching ministry.

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The evangelist has a limited stay. More briefly, we learn from the agricultural world, in a simile which has Dominical authority, that though ploughing and sowing and weeding and watering take a *long* time, the harvest is a *short* time. Philip the evangelist went through "many villages" (Acts viii. 25) of that part of Samaria where the Master Himself had first said, "Herein is that saying true 'One soweth, and another reapeth'. I sent you to reap that whereon ye bestowed no labour: other men laboured, and ye are entered into their labours" (John iv. 37, 38).

The evangelist, be he a visiting "Guest Service" preacher, a ten day missionary in a parish church, or the leader of a large student or united church mission, has a right to expect that by apostolic preaching and testimony, by prophetic exposition of the Word, by believing prayer that brings Holy Ghost conviction, together with sacrificial actions by Christians which bring in the uncommitted, he stands for his limited stay on *prepared* ground. If not, the local Christians, and not his methods, must bear the major criticism.

Against the background of all we have already written, however, he comes to *preach for a verdict*.

Of that grand old Puritan Richard Baxter, it was said, he

"Preached as never sure to preach again
And as a dying man to dying men."

See this and other important quotations on these themes in Chapter VII, *Hallmarks of Preaching*, in *The Ministry of the Word* by the present Bishop of Bradford, Dr. F. D. Coggan.

"Preaching for a verdict" has always been one of the assumptions which Evangelicals have shared in unity, for it has been a hallmark of evangelical evangelism.

The evangelist has a limited duty. Despite the fact that he must wholly rely upon God the Holy Spirit to do the work of regeneration, to the evangelist is surely and biblically committed the limited duty of presenting Christ as Saviour and Lord, demonstrating the biblical steps of repentance and faith, and offering personal help to the puzzled seeker, and pointing the way to first steps in Christian living, so that having accepted Christ as Saviour, the convert may grow up in the fellowship of the Church.

Let us return to our biblical evangelist in Acts viii. Philip obeyed the Holy Spirit and "joined himself", at some personal embarrassment, to the lonely Ethiopian (verse 20). Finding him reading the great "Servant" passages of Isaiah, he asked him if he understood the Bible, and he received the charter of all personal workers, counselors, and "Instruction Talk" speakers! "'How can I, except some man should guide me?' And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him" (verses 30, 31).

It is indeed for God, not man, to fix the time of conversion, but it is for man to be humbly and obediently in the hand of God to help the seeker *to the uttermost*. It is surely illogical to believe that God can take our poor lips to preach publicly the unsearchable riches of Christ, but does not also desire, as with Philip, to answer the personal questions of the seeker by privately "preaching unto him Jesus", from the opened Bible (verse 35), as any modern counsellor does; to point out the steps to simple committal to Christ (verse 37a) and to have the joy of calling out the witness of the lips to the reality of the heart's trust in the Saviour (verse 37b).

The evangelist is failing in his duty to let down the nets and catch men, to use our Lord's simile (Luke v. 10), unless he both preaches the Gospel fully, and, according to the circumstances of the particular evangelistic venture, also proclaims the basic steps of repentance and faith, which our Lord (Mark i. 15-17), St. Peter (Acts ii. 38), St. Paul

(Acts xx. 21), and St. John (Rev. iii. 19, 20) all demanded. If the Holy Spirit has honoured his preaching, and made his instruction clear to his hearers, tired though he may be, he must *offer* personal help to those who may still be muddled, "unless some man should help them." No wonder the evangelist needs to be "purged and sanctified and meet for the Master's use" (2 Tim. ii. 21), and all who seek to engage in this work must feel, with the writer, their tragic ill-equipment for this task, unless God the Holy Spirit empowers them, but we must "evangelize or perish".

When I have finished an evangelistic sermon, I kneel, and remind myself that the Lord Jesus said, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John vi. 44) and that the work of regeneration is God's work by His Spirit. I then remember that we are allowed in some small way to be "workers together with Him" (2 Cor. vi. 1), and then I claim the promise of the Lord Jesus that "All that the Father giveth me shall come to Me, and him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out" (John vi. 37). I then pray that some may have seen themselves as sinners before a holy God, and have also seen the Lord Jesus as the only Saviour, and, despite all the imperfections of the human instrument, have come face to face with Christ at Calvary. At the Cross their mind has been illuminated, their conscience disturbed, their emotions warmed, and their wills moved, until the Holy Spirit who convicts and illuminates, gently draws them as a total personality to a personal response of repentance and faith in Christ. In response to saving faith, He truly regenerates those who are "bound to perform" these promises made for them by their godparents at their baptism.

As evangelicals let us never withdraw from the costliness of total committal to complete evangelism in all its related phases of apostolic and prophetic scriptural proclamation, Gospel preaching and instruction, personal counselling and shepherding, and continuous teaching of the Word, that those for whom God may make us responsible, "having known the holy Scriptures" and so "become wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus", may become mature "men of God, perfect and thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. iii. 15-17). The end product of evangelism is not only new converts but new evangelists.

In our present world situation it may be later than we think. Does not the Lord of the Harvest call upon us all to engage in a new task of sacrificial evangelism before it is too late? "Say not ye 'there are yet four months, and then cometh harvest?' behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest. And he that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal; that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together" (John iv. 35, 36).

There is a story which is only a story, although it is a very lovely one, about the Lord Jesus when He was received up again to heaven on Ascension Day. The angels welcomed Him home, and then as they gazed down from the ramparts of heaven to the earth which Christ had so recently left, they said to Him, "Master, what plan have you made to carry on the great work which it cost you your life blood to

begin ? ” Jesus said to them “ I have left eleven men ”. The angels turned to Him and said, “ But, Master, if the eleven men fail, what other plan have you ? ” Jesus turned, and with a smile of trust and confidence said, “ I have no other plan.” It is a wonderful thing to realize that the Lord trusts the youngest Christian to carry on this great commission to make known to the world the saving facts of the Cross. Because Christ told us to be witnesses, (Acts i. 8) because the world needs Him, and because we want to serve Him, we as Christians *must* accept evangelistic responsibility. May the Lord of the Harvest bind us by the cords of His love to this costly work of the Harvest field.