

Editorials

SOME THOUGHTS ON EVANGELISM

BILLY GRAHAM is a very disarming person. During his visit to Toronto in the fall some of us had the privilege of hearing him address a gathering of theological students. We went armed with a whole host of prejudices built up on the basis of a "radio acquaintance" with him and of a more intimate acquaintance with evangelists of the "old fashioned" variety. We found that he had anticipated many of our questions and answered them in a way which, in general, left little to be desired.

Graham makes no pretence at being anything other than he is, a "mass" evangelist. Yet, unlike many who have been caught up in a reawakened interest in evangelism, he does not hold that mass evangelism is the only, or even the best, way to evangelize. Evangelism, he says, is a wheel with many spokes; his only claim is that his method is one of these spokes and thus is valid within its own limits. He knows the difference between his "meetings" and the worship of the Church and he does not confuse "conversion", as the initial commitment to God in Christ, with "salvation" as the remaking of the whole man into the image of Him in whom he believes. For these reasons Graham seeks the closest relations possible with the churches. He does not adopt, at least theoretically, the anti-intellectual attitude of some who believe in and practise his methods; he claims to hold no brief for emotions divorced from thought, or for inspiration divorced from scholarship. He paid John Wesley a compliment in stating his conviction that Wesley was the greatest evangelist of modern times; he asked whether part of Wesley's power did not reside in the fact that he was a theologically educated man. In his statements concerning the authority of Scripture he was not as reassuring as we should have wished him to be; but he did answer one question about the symbolic and mythological character of the biblical witness to revelation in such a way as would have caused alarm among many of his fundamentalist supporters, had they heard it.

We say we were disarmed as Graham answered these and other questions in a most personable way. Yet we are still not at all certain that our assessment of his message and his method can be as uncritically positive as many others find theirs to be. For we cannot help but raise the question whether what Graham says so well in answer to his critics adequately informs what he says and does in the presence of his thousands; whether his sermons do not reflect more of a legalism of letter and spirit than of the Gospel which witnesses to the mysterious and inscrutable love of God in Christ for man the sinner; whether there is not in his attitude and practice a marked tendency to fall prey to a pragmatic spirit which measures success in terms of statistics and subordinates the question of "truth" to the question of

“effectiveness”; whether he does not too unquestioningly employ the knowledge and techniques of “social engineering” which, when employed with no matter what humble spirit and God-centred aim, are as questionable in relation to the evangelistic mission of the Church as they are in relation to the social control of human beings in “secular” society. Paul Tillich in the opening pages of his *Systematic Theology* warns against all such pragmatic verification of message and method when he says: “The fact that fundamentalist ideas are eagerly grasped in a period of personal or communal disintegration does not prove their theological validity, just as the success of a liberal theology in periods of personal and communal integration is no certification of truth.”

These questions concerning the most effective evangelist of our time, and perhaps of any time, are not raised in any spirit of carping criticism but with all the seriousness that is due so crucial a question as evangelism. One fails miserably to understand the nature and function of the Church of Jesus Christ if one does not realize that evangelism is central to the Church’s being and mission. Every act of Christian worship should contain a proclamation of the Gospel which it is man’s perennial need to hear. There must also be periodic attempts at evangelism in the more special sense of building up the Church, both intensively and extensively, through concerted efforts aimed at a revival of lapsed or nominal Christians and a conversion of those who are without God in the world. But the practical question of how this is to be done is a theological question, and therefore a question of “truth” and not simply the pragmatic question of effectiveness. That is, the question of the method of evangelizing can be answered only within the context of one’s understanding of the nature and function of the Church. There is, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer has pointed out in his small book, *Life Together*, such a being as “a humanly converted person” whose “conversion was effected, not by the Holy Spirit, but by a man, and therefore has no stability.”

It seems that most often the kind of evangelism represented by Billy Graham tends to foster an “individualism” in belief and life which contradicts the corporate nature of the Church. There can be no denying the fact that God in Christ does confront men as individual persons, making His personal claim upon their penitent hearts. But the normal sphere of that confrontation is the worshipping community of faith and love, and its means the proclamation of the Gospel through Word and Sacraments. From this one is led to ask whether the special occasions for evangelism in the narrower sense should not also take place within the context of the regular faith and order, life and work of the Church rather than in ways which make their connection with the Church not immediately apparent and integral.

It is on the basis of such considerations as those set forth above that we would urge a careful rethinking of the question of “mass” evangelism. The question is still, for this writer at least, a very open one.

THE NEED FOR CRITICISM

IT seems fashionable to find fault with the declared policies of one's own denomination. They are either too cautious, too extreme, or a combination of both. Everyone will admit that the Church's opportunity in Canada is unlimited. For some, this means a policy of "more of the same", or a mere expansion of existing programmes. New churches in new areas, bigger budgets, an increased number of clergy, Sunday School teachers, and so on, are sufficient to meet the needs. Others believe that the character of Canadian life has changed so fundamentally that a bold new programme is required. New techniques, new types of building, a new approach to community problems are necessary.

Undoubtedly, Church officials, especially at the regional or national level, tend to conservatism. To them are entrusted large sums of money and the management of the intricate, if not unwieldy, machinery of government. Their constituents are as varied as humanity and each individual is a potential critic. The public press, respectable or otherwise, is ready to pounce on all aberrations from the normal. Any apparent controversy in the Church may easily be distorted into an ugly situation.

Among the rank and file of the Church there is a large body of opinion which instinctively approves of conservative leadership. Ecclesiastes' dictum, "There is nothing new under the sun", is understood as, "There must be nothing new under the sun." Confident of this support, officialdom has a tendency to discourage "mavericks", however brilliant. New ideas are treated with suspicion, "referred to committee", or otherwise buried. Attempts to break the shackles are time-consuming, if not fore-doomed to failure. After repeated efforts to initiate action the experimenter may retreat into bitterness or reluctant conformity.

The cautious types have opposite numbers—the radicals who seem willing to try anything, so long as it is new and gets good coverage in the newspapers. Even after allowance is made for the distortions of news media, some of their ideas seem ill-considered and misapplied. Of this group less need be said, since their work inevitably makes them well known, if not notorious.

We believe that the above is a fair description of some aspects of Church life in Canada. In this issue we are glad to publish a critique of North American attitudes as seen by a distinguished clergyman of the United States. We believe that Canadians too are capable of such constructive self-criticism. There are many experiments going on, not just for increasing attendance or stealing publicity. Church people are thinking seriously about social and political trends and some have reached conclusions of importance to the Church as a whole.

Unfortunately, we have received few manuscripts on so-called practical subjects. In this issue Dr. Pidgeon deals with the problem of religious education in the public schools. Hilda Neatby wrote earlier on the challenge of

education to the Christian Church. In July, some problems of modern missions were discussed by Edward Johnson. We feel that the value of this Journal will be vitiated if we do not continue discussion of such issues, and many others. Subjects can be found without any difficulty and only random examples need be given. Christian work among the Indians and Eskimos is being outclassed by that of the government and secular agencies. The expansion of the North seems to have caught the Church almost hopelessly unprepared. There are congregations, north and south, conducting their affairs with little or no relationship to the drastic social and economic changes going on in their districts. Psychiatric practices are still treated with suspicion born of ignorance. Chaplaincy work of various sorts is entrusted to untrained men and women.

We realize that the people most capable of writing on practical affairs are extremely busy. They complain, with full justice, that they have little time for reflection, let alone for writing. Canadians have not yet reached that stage of maturity which allows them to pay men to take small assignments of administration and large ones of writing. It is not utopian to think that a time must come when they will do so. In the meantime, we are anxious to provide a forum for the discussion of practical affairs. We look forward to receiving, and publishing, analyses of Canadian life which will enable the Church to make the Gospel more meaningful to all.