

EVANGELISM – THE SPIRITUAL KEY

Part I - Introduction

Can any *new light* be shed on Evangelism? I think not. I write this in the conviction that some of the essential '*old light*', if I may call it that, has by and large got lost!

I make no apology whatever for making public my thoughts. Evangelism is so much part of the Church's calling, that if any earlier insights, especially Biblical ones, have dropped out along the way, they must be regained as quickly as possible.

What is Evangelism? There are doubtless finely honed definitions by scholars, but my rough-and-ready definition would be that *Evangelism is God's activity whereby his Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ is proclaimed and accepted*.

My definition adds 'acceptance' to 'proclamation'; our land would not be 'evangelised' merely by sufficient loud-speakers enabling every member to hear its proclamation. 'Evangelism' is Good News when it has been received.

Miracles

If you are a bit allergic to the word 'miracle', bear with me, because it needs to be retained in connection with Evangelism.

Evangelism is not the same process as door-to-door selling of double-glazing: which is a *human* proclamation and a *human* response.

Neither is Evangelism like a Hollywood Bible epic: a *human* activity about *divine* things.

Evangelism is essentially a *divine* activity. It should result in the change and transformation of human lives.

We cannot convert; we cannot bless; we cannot heal; we cannot save; we cannot redeem; we cannot renew – it is GOD who does all these things. Evangelism is primarily God's work, only in a secondary sense is it ours, since whatever we seem to 'accomplish' is the result of God's action working through us.

Conversion

There are many patterns of turning to Christ and spiritual growth. In a Christian home it is possible to grow up never having consciously not been 'turned to Christ'; for others it can be a sudden U-turn of startling repercussions.

Whether 'turning Christward' is gradual or sudden, it is a miracle of God's grace, not ours.

There are some strands of evangelical spirituality that tend to regard miracles as suspect or unnecessary. Surely the supreme miracle is *conversion*!

There are some opposite strands within pentecostal-style spirituality which can also miss the supreme miracle of conversion because of thinking that their first encounter with the miraculous was in 'signs and wonders'.

Part II - Where evangelism can go wrong

God and Us in Evangelism.

As so often in the Christian life there are two opposite errors:

The first error is to see Evangelism so exclusively in terms of God's action that we have little or no responsibility.

The second error concerning Evangelism is to be so pre-occupied with our efforts that God is eclipsed.

The first error can result in sitting back and leaving it all to God, and perhaps over-applying the truth that '*God requires not success but faithfulness'*

The second error results in working hard to accomplish for him what only he can do.

'Statistical analysis shows that given factors A, B, C and D, we should expect a positive response of between 11% and 14% percent, depending on the...etc.

Neither Christians being lazy nor Christians being over-busy will in themselves result in successful Evangelism!

Keeping the Balance

If we are thinking of our part in Evangelism it is important therefore to keep in mind that it is God's work. If we are thinking about God's grace active in peoples' lives it is important to remember that he has chosen us and invites our co-operation.

Because what follows is largely about Evangelism and *us* it will be important to keep in mind that Evangelism is *essentially* God's work, lest we become imbalanced in our thinking.

Success?

If Evangelism were just a human activity, like selling Coke or washing powder, there is not much evidence that we are successful. The percentage of active Christians within the community remains – even after 2,000 years, pitifully small. That is pretty bad news.

The news which is the most shattering of all to accept is that if Evangelism is essentially God's activity – then here in the West God appears to be failing in his great task of redemption.

If we cannot believe this (and I cannot!) what is the answer?

Whose fault ?

The lack of success in Evangelism is usually regarded as due to just one or two causes: us or God.

God's fault?

It is not usually expressed as baldly as that, but the blame is sometimes put on God by implication –

- ‘God moves in a mysterious way...’
- ‘He requires faithfulness, not success...’
- ‘The Spirit moves where he wills ...’
- ‘We must not trust in results ...’
- ‘Who knows what God was doing invisibly in people’s lives?’
- ‘At least the seed has been sown...’
- ‘Small is beautiful!’

All of these are good and valid points and I do not wish to ridicule them, but they can be used as a subtle way of off-loading our blame on to God or as ways of ‘getting us off the hook.’

Our fault?

Again a list of perfectly valid comments may be used to indicate that failure in Evangelism has been due entirely to **us** -

- ‘Transatlantic Evangelism must be toned-down if it is to woo the British’
- ‘Perhaps we are learning that the days of mass Evangelism are over....’
- ‘They complained that the Vicar hadn’t visited when Granny died...’
- ‘They asked what were we doing about Northern Ireland...’
- ‘Perhaps we shouldn’t take a collection next time?’
- ‘Some really hard theological work needs to be done on the whole issue ...’
- ‘They wanted the Church to speak on unemployment not pi in the sky when we die ...’

Part III - Putting things right

If the failure of Evangelism is due to God it is something we have to live with. If it is due to us, then there is a real incentive to investigate the insights of psychology and sociology and to utilize them; there is also pressure to revise liturgy and pastoral practice to be less off-putting and more productive. Again, these are no bad things, but they do not – in themselves – have the power to **unlock** Evangelism.

Incomplete

If I have fairly represented much thinking on Evangelism, then it is clear that a major factor is usually missing.

Parable

Here's a parable! –

A certain religious theatrical group toured the country to perform a production geared to spread their message.

They accepted one invitation to perform at a hospital.

They put on their production in one of the wards and it seemed a total failure.

Puzzled, they went away for hard thinking and reappraisal.

They sharpened the dialogue, made the setting more modern, checked the acoustics, improved the diction, increased the volume, doubled the lighting, and revised some of the material in the light of the local conditions. They enquired and took note of the mental attitudes and cultural backgrounds of their audience. They re-arranged the seating.

Still there seemed to be no response.

‘It’s uncanny.’ Complained one of them after the performance, ‘it’s as if they can’t either see or hear us!’

At that moment, a fellow in a white coat was just passing. He overheard their concern and laughed. ‘That’s not surprising; the ward you have been in consists of those who are all both *blind and deaf*’

Can you hear me!

Many readers will have been to conferences and heard the speaker ask first of all whether he can be heard, and whether he can be seen. This is the first question, since the value of whatever follows depends on its answer.

Once a minister failed to ask this at the beginning of a Good Friday three-hours devotion ... you've guessed it! Afterwards a lady shook him by the hand. ‘Thank you for coming. Unfortunately we couldn't hear a single word as the microphones weren't on!’

A wrong assumption

The assumption behind so much Evangelism and individual witnessing is that the non-Christian has eyes and ears open to the Gospel if we (or God) will only proclaim it correctly!

- If they appear not to hear we ask questions about our volume *not about their hearing*.
- If they appear not to see we ask questions about our activities *not about their sight!*

We assume that the non-Christian finds himself on spiritually **neutral** ground, under no pressures at all, free, when opportunity comes, to turn to Christ.

This assumption is widely held but is contrary to Scripture, to experience and to reason.

Starting from somewhere else!

This heading will remind some readers of the proverbial Irishman who was asked the way to Dublin. His reply was: ‘If I were goin’ to Dublin I wouldn’t be startin’ from here!’

The mistake of so much thinking about Evangelism and evangelistic activity is that it lacks the wisdom of the Irishman! It begins at the wrong place. That’s not as silly as it sounds. There are many activities that require a right starting-place, swimming, cooking, gardening, cycling, etc.

Starting in the right place

As my parable tried to convey it is easy to tackle the problem of response and communication by starting at the wrong place. Their first questions should have been—

Can they hear us?
Can they see us?

In the parable they missed the cause, and misdirected their energies to minor matters in the hope of finding a solution.

Part IV – Renewal and Evangelism

It is sometimes asked (e.g. Canon Finney in *Anglicans for Renewal* 26) – What has the charismatic movement contributed to Evangelism?

Among the contributions are the following –

- In the 1980's John Wimber rightly alerted us to the poverty of a word-only Gospel and the importance of the non-Christians being able to both hear, see and experience the words and works of Jesus today.
- The great understanding of healing ministries has led to recognizing a greater relevance and depth of the Gospel message for the whole person.
- An increased awareness of spiritual realities has led to the acceptance of the relevance of exorcism/deliverance ministries.

By and large, this last point has not been taken far enough. The increased awareness of the reality of spiritual warfare has not resulted in unlocking Evangelism as it should have done.
FOR THIS IS THE MISSING ELEMENT.

The questions ‘Can they see?’ ‘Can they hear?’ can only be *partially* answered by psychological, social, cultural or environmental factors. The problem is essentially a spiritual one which requires a spiritual solution. It ought to be at this level that the insights of the ‘charismatic’ stream of spirituality contribute to Evangelism.

Understanding these spiritual factors

The first thing to do is to look at ourselves and our Christian experience. Virtually all Christians would acknowledge the fact that their spiritual life is something of a battle. We are pushed and pulled and ‘under pressure’. We fail, in spite of our intentions.

It does not matter much whether we view such forces as personal or impersonal, external or internal, or that we agree on the language we use to describe them. What matters is that we acknowledge their reality.

Once we have done that we will find the Biblical accounts wholly up-to-date.

Biblical insights

Scripture depicts us against forces that will **tempt** us. Christ himself experienced this (Mk.1:13), while David, Judas and Ananias succumbed to it (1.Chr.21:1), Lk.22:3, Ac.5:3). St. Paul was hindered from travelling (1.Th.2:18), and St. Peter’s thinking was distorted by these forces (Mk.8:31-33).

Other disciples might be **tempted** (1. Cor. 7:5, 1.Th.3:5), or **corrupted** (2.Cor.11:3), **attacked** (Eph. 6:16, 1.Pet.5:8), **deceived** (2.Th.2:9-10), **accused** (Rev.12:10), **condemned** (1.Tim. 3:6), **ensnared** (2.Tim.2:26), **made to sin** (1.Jn.3:8), **made ill** (Lk.13:16) and/or **imprisoned** (Rev.2:10), by the direct or indirect influence of these forces.

Biblical writers picture them operating under an ‘Adversary’ (satan) or ‘Accuser’ (devil).

If us – why not them!

If there are such negative pressures on Christians – in spite of Christ’s Victory over evil [For victory see Gen. 3:15, Mt. 4:11, 25:41, Mk.3:26, Lk.10:18-19, Jn.12:31, 16:11, Rom.16:20, Col.2:15, Jm.4:7, 2.Pet.2:4, 1.Jn.2:13, 3:8, Jud.6, Rev.12:9-12, 20:1ff, etc.], **it is contrary to reason and experience to assume that non-Christians live in freedom from them.**

If Christians find themselves pulled and pushed by forces contrary to the Kingdom of Christ, it is ridiculous to assume that when confronted by the Gospel of Christ non-Christians are not subject to the same forces blinding them to the Light of the Gospel.

Making deaf and blind

If such evil powers exist, both our experience and our reason would indicate that they would seek to cut the non-Christian off from receiving and accepting the Gospel.

This is precisely the teaching of Scripture.

The Example of St. Paul

The Conversion of St. Paul gives us a good example:

According to the account of Acts 26:12ff. Christ’s Commission of St. Paul was in these words –

‘I am sending you
to open their eyes
and turn them from darkness to light
and from the power of Satan to God [cf.Col.1:13.]
so that they may receive forgiveness of sins
and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

Paul was later to teach that-

‘The god of this age has **blinded** the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. We preach not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord. [2.Cor.4:4.]

Paul’s blinding

Was the intolerable experience of sudden blindness given to Paul at his conversion in order that he would forever remember that it was to those who had been *blinded* that he was being sent?

Before – and after

Paul’s commission describes the state of the non-Christian as being under the power of Satan, and hence blinded and in darkness. Evangelism often puts last things first and misses this.

Deaf as well!

When Jesus encountered among the Jews the inability really to hear him, he explained it thus –

‘If God were your Father, you would love me...

Why is my language not clear to you?

Because you are unable to hear what I say.

You belong to your father, the devil,

and you want to carry out your father’s desire [i.e. kill Christ]

He was a murderer from the beginning [John 8:42]

The god of this world/age

The proclamation that **Jesus** is LORD is not merely an affirmation of personal allegiance, but an announcement that he is the true Lord as against the false rulers, authorities and powers of this present age. The whole world lies in the grip of the evil one (1. Jn.5:19). Ephesians calls him the ‘prince/ruler of the power of the air’ (2:2, cf.6:12), and John repeatedly talks of the ‘Prince of this world’ (12:31, 14:30, 16:11). The Temptations of Christ also imply a certain rule of the Devil over nations (Mt. 4:8ff)

Evangelism’s first task

The first task of Evangelism is to free the non-Christian from the forces which blind him and make him deaf. According to Paul’s commission, this must *precede* the experience of forgiveness.

Unfortunately this task cannot be accomplished by any one single action that we might simply add to our evangelistic activities.

It involves a deep understanding of spiritual warfare.

Part V - Conclusion

Some Implications

What are the implications of these insights for our thinking?

- The church cannot exercise authority over that by which it is itself dominated.
- The first step of Evangelism is not, therefore, for the church to align itself with ‘the world’ in an attempt to ‘get alongside’, but rather fully to renounce ‘the world, flesh and the devil’ (as the NT views them). Failure to do this renders the church virtually helpless as an agent of salvation.
- If the characteristic of evil is to distort, then distortions within the church, whether of belief or behaviour, place it under the very powers from which it would seek to release others.
- If the grace of reconciliation is not at work within the church how can such grace work through it? A dis-united church is the work of the One-who-throws-apart – Diabolos. There cannot be really effective Christian Evangelism without Christian unity.
- In the past Christians have combatted the ‘powers’ of possessions, sexuality, self-will, greed and money by poverty, chastity, obedience, fasting and tithing. Only by a disciplined stand against the powers in these (and other) ways, can the church free itself from the domination of the ‘world, flesh and devil’.
- A break-through in Evangelism will come when the Christian church takes the ‘powers’ seriously. When it learns to expose them, strip them of their power over us and submit them to Christ’s Victory.
- Authority over evil is not something that can be aimed for. It is a by-product of Christian holiness and faithfulness.
- Christ has disarmed the powers, and triumphed over them in his Cross (Col. 2:15). We re-arm them every time we fail to renounce the Devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, and the carnal desires of the flesh, and when we allow ourselves to follow or be led by them. (Wording from Book of Common Prayer)
- Evangelism requires holiness from whence alone comes authority over evil, to open eyes and turn folk from the power of Satan to God that they may receive forgiveness ...