

CHAPTER 2

Reflections on Contemporary Evangelism

REFLECTIONS ON THE THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF CONTEMPORARY EVANGELISM

Often it's much easier to be critical than to offer practical and more effective solutions to the problems we are seeking to solve. Whilst hoping to avoid this unfortunate tendency, my aim in this paper is to raise some of the problems that we face (and in some cases create) in our evangelism, whether it be at a one to one level or in public preaching. Although a number of solutions are proposed in the material that follows, this paper is primarily designed as a basis for discussion and further reflection on these matters.

1. Inadequate Definitions

The first problem that comes to my attention is that of inadequate definitions. That is, the tendency of a number of evangelistic presentations to inadequately define terms or propositions and thus set the gospel on a wrong footing from the outset. One example of this can be found in the Evangelism Explosion booklet 'Just Grace'. Here 'eternal life' is defined as 'life lived to the full now, and heaven when you die'. Although this is no doubt true, it is very non-relational and comes somewhat short of Jesus' own definition: 'to know You the only true God and Jesus Christ whom You have sent' (John 17:3). However, my real problem with the E. E. definition is that it seems to have been designed to appeal to peoples' self-interest. After all who in their right mind would knock back 'life lived to the full now and heaven when you die', particularly when you're told in the next breath that you can have it for free! Nevertheless, it should not surprise us that those who show initial interest in such an offer are quickly turned off by talk of repentance and submission to the Lordship of Christ etc., which seems to imply that there are strings attached.

However, the fact remains that 'eternal life' is a free gift and is also extremely desirable. As the Psalmist puts it: 'In Your presence is fullness of joy and pleasures for evermore' (Psalm 16:11). So what is the real problem?

2. Wrong Starting Points

Perhaps the problem is that we have started in the wrong place theologically. To put this another way, we may be operating with a gospel which is overly 'human-centred' or 'need-centred' rather than one that is 'God-centred'. My own experience is that it is all too tempting to appeal to human egotism in order to get a response and thus to mould and even distort the gospel to meet peoples' perceived needs. A rather humorous illustration of this can be seen in the following re-write of Isaiah 6:1-8, in Max Warren's book *Interpreting the Cross* (p. 45).

In the year that King Uzziah died, I resolved that with the help of God I would think only positive thoughts and so come to believe in myself. And suddenly I saw myself sitting on a throne, high and lifted up: and I knew my own strength and power, and I said 'I will stamp upon my mind a mental picture of myself as succeeding, and when I said, 'Who will help me?', the Lord said, 'Here am I, use me.'

Although we are rarely guilty of preaching this sort of perversion of the gospel, our concentration on peoples' needs can easily lead us to preach a kind of gospel that in the end requires no radical repentance. This would seem to be confirmed by the way many people apparently become Christians without any substantial recognition of God's glory and greatness, or any real conviction of sin. Nevertheless, once again we must not deny that the gospel can and does meet genuine human need. In fact, it is perfectly tailored to meet the deepest of all human needs; forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. As John Newton so beautifully put it:

*It makes the wounded spirit whole
And calms the troubled breast
'Tis manna to the hungry soul
And to the weary rest.*

Therefore, it is simply not true to say that the gospel is not concerned with human needs. It is! However, the real question is: 'Which needs are we talking about?' For instance, I once heard a rather over-zealous Christian tell a non-Christian woman that if she came to Christ, He (Jesus) would give her a husband. This is simply not true! That is why we need to think carefully about what we are promising God will do for people when we call upon them to give their lives to Christ. However, assuming we have done this (a dangerous assumption!), the next question is: 'How are we to reconcile both the God-ward and the Man-ward aspects of the gospel in our preaching and evangelism?'

3. Law and Grace

One traditional way that certain of the Reformers (and later many of the Puritans) sought to overcome this problem was by always doing what they called their 'law-work' first. In other words the unremitting demands of God's holy law and the perilous plight of the sinner in the face of the coming wrath were clearly enunciated before any word of grace was spoken to the hearers. So effectively was this done by Jonathan Edwards in his famous sermon 'Sinners in the hands of an angry God', that people are said to have clung to the pillars of the church for fear of slipping down into hell!

This, of course, raises the question as to the place of judgment, hell, and the coming wrath in our evangelism. Although it is not my purpose to tackle this in detail here, suffice it to say that the gospel makes no sense at all except in the light of the judgment that is coming upon the world. That is why Paul has no hesitation in speaking of Jesus as 'Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come' (1 Thess. 1:10). Indeed, this is basic to the gospel message.

Clearly then, the reality of future judgment and hell must have a place in our evangelism, particularly in warning people of the consequences of disobedience to the gracious command of God to 'repent and believe the gospel'. However, to return to the practice of the Puritans mentioned above, the question I do wish to pursue in a little more detail is whether or not the preaching of Law first, and then Grace, is helpful or in fact 'biblical'.

My own understanding is that theologically 'grace' always precedes 'law' without exception, in both Old and New Testaments. Nevertheless, this does not mean that in certain contexts the preaching of 'law' prior to 'grace' is necessarily inappropriate. It may be that those who are blinded by arrogance and pride need to be brought to 'to the end of their tether' before the balm of God's grace can be effectively applied. Charles Spurgeon records an incident where a gospel preacher on one occasion preached from, 'Now also the axe is laid to the root of the trees' (Luke 3:9), and delivered such a sermon that one of his hearers said to him, 'One would have thought you had been preaching to criminals. Your sermon ought to have been delivered in the county jail.' 'Oh, no,' said the good man, 'If I were preaching in the county jail, I should not preach from that text, there I should preach 'This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners' (1 Tim 1:15). He adds, 'The law is for the self-righteous, to humble their pride; the gospel is for the lost to remove their despair.' (*All of Grace*, pp. 15-16.)

However, what must be understood and underscored is that the 'law' alone cannot bring about true 'evangelical repentance'. This can only come as the fruit of 'the word of his grace' (Acts 20:32). As one hymn writer has put it:

*Law and terrors do but harden,
All the while they work alone;
But a sense of blood-bought pardon,
Soon dissolves a heart of stone.*

4. Preaching Of The Cross

It is precisely at this point that the preaching of the cross is critical, for this and this alone is God's power to save those who are perishing. Tragically, here we are often extremely weak and lacking in depth, and thus

fail to communicate the immensity of the Father's love which (to speak in a human way) overleaped His love for His own Son in order to reach us and save us (cf. John 10:11-18).

Moreover, we also have a tendency to speak of the Atonement as a kind of celestial and impersonal transaction whereby God has somehow 'fiddled the books' to get us off the hook, rather than the fiery and passionate demonstration of his holy-love in which he has taken our evil so seriously that he has damned it and drained it of its power to condemn us, by judging it to the utmost in the flesh of his own beloved Son. How can we be matter of fact as we speak of Christ's intense personal identification with each and every member of our race as he bore our sins in his own body on the tree, the righteous for the unrighteous (cf. Gal. 2:20, 1 Pet 2:24 and 3:18)? Is it not the revelation of this love which constrains the apostle to action (2 Cor 5:14)? For surely one who is apprehended by such 'great grace' cannot but fall down in grateful adoration and willing service at the feet of the Saviour?! To quote Isaac Watts:

*But drops of grief can ne'er repay,
The debt of love I owe;
Here, Lord, I give myself away,
'Tis all that I can do.*

Thus it is that in the preaching of the Cross the 'God-ward' and the 'Man-ward' aspects of the gospel are seen in their true perspective and held in their correct balance. That is why P.T. Forsyth can speak of the cross as 'a sacrifice offered *by* God more than *to* God, but more to God than to men. It is offered to the holiness of God before it is offered to the service of men. To both, indeed, but in that order.' (*The Cruciality of the Cross*, pp. 169-170.) It is also in this light that the true nature of obedience can be understood; not as the cost of eternal life but as a *response* to the Grace of God, which although very costly to him is utterly free to us.

5. The Resurrection Context

Of course, none of what has just been said should be understood apart from the resurrection. For clearly the cross accomplished nothing if Christ's resurrection did not take place (cf. 1 Cor 15:17-19). Indeed, the resurrection is the seal of the victory of the cross, and so because of it Jesus is now proclaimed as 'Lord and Christ' (i.e. Lord over the principalities and powers which held men and women in bondage through the guilt of their sin and the fear of death (cf. Col 2:13-15 and Heb 2:14-15). Along these lines Deane Meatheringham (*Your God Reigns*, p. 8) makes the comment:

Evangelisation is the message delivered to the powers and to those captured by them, declaring, 'Jesus is Lord', and 'Our God reigns'. In this witness, by men and women freed in Christ, the reigning Christ confronts the powers and brings them to account for their deeds. Christ liberates the captives, transferring them from the prison of the system into the Kingdom of his love. These are the people who have another King, Jesus (see Acts 17:1-9).

This then, is the 'cosmic context' in which evangelism must be understood and carried out. The gospel is the gospel of the God who reigns sovereignly over the entire creation, whose Son is both 'Judge' and 'Saviour', and who calls to all the ends of the earth to turn to Him and be saved (Is 45:22). However, what must be avoided at all cost is the kind of thinking which sees a split between the cross and the resurrection, as if to preach the cross is to preach a 'Man-centred' gospel and to preach the resurrection is to preach a 'God-centred' one. (This was the astonishing claim made in an otherwise helpful article in issue 44 of *The Briefing*, 1990). Along the same lines, we must avoid separating Jesus' 'Saviourhood' from His 'Lordship'; as if He was 'Saviour' on the cross and 'Lord' by His resurrection. Clearly, one can not exist without the other. Indeed, he saves us out of his Lordship! Thus we can say that his resurrection was with a view to his becoming the effective 'Saviour of the world' (John 4:42), for by it the benefits of Christ's sacrificial death for us are able to be applied to us. So it is that Paul can say, 'He was delivered over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification (Rom 4:25).

6. Conclusions

As we seek to draw some conclusions what must be admitted is that there is only so much that can be said on any given occasion. Therefore, in a brief, one-off evangelistic encounter, for instance, certain elements are bound to be lacking. However, it is my opinion that whether we like it or not, we will convey certain emphases and impressions even by the very way that we speak. This point should not be overlooked, for what it means is that we may communicate more than we actually get the opportunity to say. It is in this sense that evangelism can be seen as an act. To quote P.T. Forsyth *The preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ*, (pp. 55):

As God's preaching of Himself in the Cross was an act, the act of giving Himself, so all true preaching of it is an act also, and more than speech only. It is a devoted act of the preacher's personality, conveying God in His Grace and self-donation. It is not merely exhibiting Him. It is sacramental.

However, we must say more than this. For although there is a vital connection between the medium and the message, it is ultimately the message that saves, not the messenger. Therefore, when we come to speaking the gospel these are the emphases that I believe we ought to be seeking to communicate:

- a. The 'cosmic context' of the gospel message (i.e. that it has to do with the entire creation). This preserves it from being viewed as a 'privatised' message for a select few.
- b. The 'personal dimensions' of the Love of God, the defiance of sin, the grace of the cross and the responsiveness of obedience.
- c. God-centredness. That is, giving primacy to the holiness of God as that which gives meaning both to the culpability of sin and the extra-ordinary nature of God's grace.
- d. Need-centredness. That is, applying the gospel both deliberately and personally so that the hearer not only understands the desperate nature of their need but sees how completely God has acted to meet that need in Christ and his Cross.
- e. The true 'love-nature' of God's will and commands (i.e. that they are not burdensome, 1 John 5:3), and the liberating joy of submission to the one who has not only bought us with His own blood but whose love compels us to that slavery which is perfect freedom indeed!

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