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Personal Evangelism.¹

WE have been called by our leaders to consider and realise the personal duty of all Christians to make disciples. We have been directed to seek our example and inspiration to this end in the records of the earliest Christianity. Certainly, we could not draw a faithful picture of Christian life in the New Testament times which was not also a portrayal of personal evangelism. The foreground of that picture would be occupied by men who were first of all missionaries. In the Gospels, Christ is the centre of missionary activity; we see Him sending His disciples to the cities and the villages of Israel. The very name "apostle" is eloquent of this vocation of the first disciples; they were men "sent out" to preach the Gospel. The Acts of the Apostles, the first of all Church histories, is really the record of the missionary labours of Peter and Paul, in widening circles of appeal. The epistles of Paul are the letters of a missionary to his converts, largely concerned with the practical problems of missionary work; but for this they would never have been written. The seer of the Apocalypse lifts his eyes from the Churches of Asia, creations and centres of missionary activity, to the unnumbered multitude out of every nation before the throne of God, and hears already that future song of praise to the Lamb repeated from the ends of the earth. But there is something to be seen which is even more impressive than the evangelistic energy of these protagonists of the faith. In the background of the picture we get frequent glimpses of unknown men and women, engaged in the ordinary occupations of life, yet not less earnest in their evangelism than their greater brethren. Their names for the most part are not enrolled in any book written on earth, yet to them, rather than to any apostle, the proud Church of Rome must ascribe its origin. A group of such names is found in the closing chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, most of them otherwise unknown to us. Yet it is clear that these unknown men and women were each of them living centres of personal evangelism, men and women who "laboured much in the Lord," men and women whose houses were often the homes of churches. It is of such as these, the rank and file of Christian

¹Two of the editors heard this paper when it was read to the Western Group of the London Baptist Association in 1922. At their request it is now published in view of the Discipleship Campaign of the Baptist Union. Some paragraphs were printed in Dr. Robinson's book, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists* (Methuen, 1927).

faith, that we especially think, when we speak of the "personal evangelism" of the New Testament. What was it, and what can it teach us for our present aims?

I.—PERSONAL EVANGELISM IS AT THE CENTRE OF THE GOSPEL.

First of all, we may say that personal evangelism is the life-breath and the pulse of the Christian Gospel, the evidence of its vitality, the expression of its energy. There is no need to appeal to the call of the first disciples, "Come ye after Me, and I will make you to become fishers of men," which we have been apt to apply to the call to a professional ministry; or to the Great Commission, "Go ye, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations," which we have been wont to assign to foreign missions. The obligation which the New Testament lays upon us does not depend on any uttered command; it is inseparable from the intrinsic idea of the Gospel. The unloving man does not know what love is, and cannot therefore know God who is love; herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. That sacrificial love of God is both the source and the standard of all love; but no man can claim really to know it, who is not stirred to experience something of the compassion of Jesus on the multitude, helpless for want of guidance. The ethics of the Gospel is inseparable from its theology, for the prophets of Israel laid its foundation when they made the nature and purpose of God the ultimate rule of human conduct. The measure of our loyalty to the King is our passion for the Kingdom. The greatest of modern philosophers found the test of the good will in the possible universality of its maxims; my will is good only when I will that which I would will all other men to do. Not less does the Gospel repudiate all particularity of ownership in itself; it is true for all men, if it is true for me. God so loved that He gave—but the gift is not yet mine, if I do not share God's purpose. Emerson was thinking of other things when he said, "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, that is genius." It is at any rate the genius of the Christian faith. And if a man does not realise that evangelism (without any distinction of home or foreign) is at the centre of the Christian Gospel, it can be only because he is not himself there. That is a hard saying, and I am conscious of its reproach even as I say it; yet I am bound to say it as an interpreter of the New Testament. Perhaps the most significant and important feature of the earliest evangelism is its implicit challenge to our own knowledge and experience of the Gospel. We are made conscious that there is something here deeper and more vital than the quasi-professionalism of the

ministry and the decent pieties and respectabilities of the laity. We are made uneasy about our own standing in the Gospel, like those who cried, "Is it I, Lord?" If our movement is not to repeat the relative failure of the Anglican National Mission, it can be only by our conviction that we who are so pledged by the Gospel itself to evangelise others, need first to be more deeply evangelised ourselves, till we share the Lord's passion and the Father's purpose to save.

II.—THE HUMAN CONTACTS OF THE EARLIEST EVANGELISM.

A significant feature of the earliest evangelism is its naturalness and spontaneity. It moves along the lines of normal human contacts, with an unstudied and untutored simplicity. It is almost misleading to speak of "methods" in such a connection. The familiar stories of the evangelism of Jesus are remote from any "plan of campaign" save the will to do the will of His Father. He takes life as it comes, and uses the opportunities of each day; the crowded street and the way-side well are for Him as rich an opportunity as the synagogue. Sometimes the deep emotions of others move Him to speak, as to the woman in Simon's house; sometimes He takes the initiative, as with Zaccheus, preaching the Gospel by the simple offer of companionship; again, it may be by simply being what He is that the message gets home, as to the penitent thief upon the Cross. The Apostle Paul sings hymns to a prison-cell, or says grace before his breakfast on the reeling deck of a storm-tossed ship, and these are just as much a part of his evangelism as the speech at Athens, and apparently more successful. Aquila and Priscilla are like Paul, not only because they earn their living by tent-making, but also because they are eager propagandists, as we see from their evangelisation of Apollos. Their journeyings from Rome to Corinth and from Corinth to Ephesus illustrate the trade relationships and movements which had so great a part in the evangelisation of the Empire, just as the centurion's party of soldiers guarding Paul reminds us that a Christian soldier in the ranks would become a personal evangelist, as his century or legion moved from place to place. Any one who looks at a good map of the distribution of early Christianity, will see that if trade followed the flag, or rather the Roman eagle, Christianity followed trade, and soon established itself in the trading cities of Asia Minor, the coast-lands of the Mediterranean, the great ports of Alexandria and Carthage, the capital city of Rome, and up the river Rhone at Lyons. It is a mistake to think that Christianity began in the villages and country places. The strategic centres of evangelisation have always, from the beginning, been the cities, as the very name "pagan" meaning

“countryman,” or “heathen,” the dweller on the heath, may serve to suggest to us. Where men gathered most thickly, and where human lives most often touched each other, there was the opportunity for the Christian faith, so long as its disciples were personal evangelists. We note the hint thrown out by Paul as to the possible influence of a Christian husband or wife on a heathen partner, and the letter to Philemon shows us that the relation of master and slave could be itself evangelised. How fruitful such personal relationships of the household must have been we know from one of the most bitter opponents of Christianity in the second century—Celsus. He is speaking of slave craftsmen who are Christians employed in the households of wealthier Greeks and Romans:

“We see, indeed, in private houses, workers in wool and leather and fullers, and persons of the most uninstructed and rustic character, not venturing to utter a word in the presence of their elders and wiser masters; but when they get hold of the children privately, and certain women as ignorant as themselves, they pour forth wonderful statements, to the effect that they ought not to give heed to their father and to their teachers, but should obey *them*; that the former are foolish and stupid, and neither know nor can perform anything that is really good, being preoccupied with empty trifles; that *they* alone know how men ought to live, and that if the children obey them, they will both be happy themselves and will make their home happy also.”
—(Origen against Celsus, III., 55; ANCL. Trans.)

Best known of all as an illustration of the use of private intercourse for personal evangelism is the incident of the conversion of Justin Martyr. He tells us that as he was meditating in a lonely field, an old man who was searching for some of his household engaged in talk with him, and that their talk turned to Christ. The stranger passed away unknown, but not before the flame of Christian devotion had been kindled in Justin's soul. Then again, we have that delightful account of a walk along the shores of the Tiber taken by three cultured Romans, one of whom throws a conventional kiss to the image of Serapis in passing. His Christian friend, Octavius, remonstrates, and in subsequent conversation convinces his companion of the claims of Christ. The lesson of all this is that personal evangelism did not energeise in a vacuum. It employed the normal human relationships, and to this naturalness it undoubtedly owed much of its success. There is a flourishing Church in Lancashire which has grown out of the meetings of half a dozen friends to practise orchestral music—and that is a true type of the way faith spread in the early generations. Part of our difficulty to-day is that either our life or our faith is of such a quality

that they do not easily mix, and an attempt to "bring in religion," as we say, is then bound to be artificial.

III.—THE SIMPLICITY AND SINCERITY OF THE MESSAGE.

It is characteristic of this personal evangelism that its message was both simple and sincere. We who come to the New Testament as a whole, with a traditional interpretation of its meaning in some sort of theological system, are apt to miss this simplicity. We see the variety of ways in which the claims of Christ are presented in the New Testament by men of very different temperament and training, and we have often the impression that Christian faith must be something rather elaborate and complicated to be worthy of the name. But the earliest message brought by the disciples of Christ can be put into four words—"Jesus is the Messiah." This is, for example, the point of Paul's preaching in the synagogue at Thessalonica: "This Jesus, whom I proclaim unto you, is the Christ" (Acts xvii. 3). That is a Gospel for Jews, and only Jews, or those with some knowledge of Jewish religion, could possibly understand it. The Ethiopian eunuch, evangelised by Philip, was of this type; he was, you remember, reading the fifty-third of Isaiah, and Philip, beginning with this Scripture, preached unto him Jesus (Acts viii. 35). But in the Gentile world, to which "Messiah" was an unknown word, the message inevitably takes new forms. When Paul wishes to show that the Spirit of God is active in the humblest believer, he writes, "No man can say, 'Jesus is Lord' but in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. xii. 3). In that acknowledgment of personal loyalty to Jesus, we have the simplest confession of faith, that faith *in* Christ which brings a man to share the faith *of* Christ, so that by the same Spirit he cries Abba, Father. The glory of that simplicity is that it can bring with it an inexhaustible height and depth of experience. All the theology of the Epistle to the Romans centres in the cry "Jesus is Lord." All the vast sweep of the prologue to the Fourth Gospel lies behind that simple confession. All the consolation of the high-priesthood of the glorified Son of God unfolded in the Epistle to the Hebrews may spring from it. The believer who has climbed to such heights will be eager to lead others to a like experience. But we quite misunderstand the simplicity of the New Testament evangelism if we think that it made its disciples by preaching all these things at once. It began, with Jew or Gentile, by demanding personal loyalty to Jesus Christ, and that is where we must begin, if we would enter into that apostolic succession.

We are apt to forget that the New Testament has its own rich background of religious life. Much of it is directed either to Jews or to those who had come under the spell of the Jewish

religion. Many of the things said in the New Testament presuppose a considerable religious experience, which is not the same as that of any religious environment of to-day, and very different from the life of those who have had no religious training. Take, for example, the sense of sin. That was highly developed in the religion of Judaism, relatively weak or non-existent in Gentile communities such as that at Corinth. We complain that it is weak in the average consciousness of men to-day, but that is really nothing new. In a very true sense, the evangelical sense of sin comes only with the vision of God. It comes as it came to Isaiah in the temple or as it came to Peter in the boat—"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." The more we see of God, the less we shall think of ourselves. But that means, for to-day, that it is by steadily and faithfully proclaiming Christ, by trying to bring men into some sort of personal relation to Him, that the vision of God will be given through which the sense of sin is created. The stereotyped formula, even though it uses the New Testament language, is here of little use, sometimes of positive harm. This leads me to say that the cardinal fact in regard to the message was then, as it is now, its sincerity. There is a contagion in conviction that is the noblest logic. As the Anglican Report of the National Mission said, "The supreme evangelistic need of the Church is reality in its members" (p. 22, 23). There is more value for personal evangelism in fragmentary truth that is sincere and real, than in a complete compendium of New Testament theology which does not come from the heart. The New Testament evangelism is an appeal to the will, more than to the emotions or to the intellect, though it includes both. But just because it is an appeal to the will it must have the will of the evangelist behind it. He must mean all he says, though he by no means says all that there is to be said. It was because the appeal of the individual was thus reinforced by the tokens of sincerity that Christian evangelism had its marvellous success. As the Apology of Aristides in the second century says, "truly this people is a new people, and there is something divine mingled with it." Their philanthropy was not a graceful accompaniment of their doctrine, their morality was no decent setting for it. They may often have believed a good deal less than we give them credit for, less than we think *we* believe; but they did believe it with such sincerity, such surrender of the will to their convictions, that they were able to convince others, and set their feet on the personal path of faith.

IV.—THE CORPORATE CONSCIOUSNESS OF PERSONAL EVANGELISM.

Perhaps the chief difficulty and hindrance to personal evangelism in the minds of most of us is the consciousness of our

own unfitness to speak of Christ to others, whether because of our own failure to maintain a high standard of discipleship, or because of our consciousness of the lack of those gifts of speech or persuasiveness which mark the successful evangelist. There is also, of course, that reserve that is characteristic of the Englishman; he resents any intrusion into his own private feelings, and is usually reluctant to give any one else such cause for resentment. But so far as the sense of unfitness and unworthiness are concerned, the earliest evangelism has something to say to us. One of the great reinforcements of that evangelism was the corporate consciousness of the Church, the realisation of a membership in the Body of Christ, which threw the emphasis less on the individual self-consciousness and more on the one animating Spirit of Christ. The idea that underlies Paul's parable of the body is the underlying thought of baptism in the New Testament. We are baptised into the one body; the whole body is linked to us and we to it. This means that personal evangelism is not some private venture made in our own strength and for our own ends; it is an energy of the body we represent. Some things can be done only through our brother, some things perhaps only through ourselves; that is immaterial, for in any case the energy is that of the whole Body of Christ. It may not be given to me to speak the decisive word to another; that is quite secondary, so long as my own part in the preparation for that word be done, and there certainly will be some part that is my own. My brother's words will have a new power if my words have prepared for them; they belong to him as do his to me, and both to Christ. We should gain a new confidence in personal evangelism if we thought less of the poverty of our own equipment and more of the wealth of the communion of saints.

To maintain this corporate consciousness of the Church at its fullest pressure, which means its pressure towards a simple and sincere message of personal evangelism delivered in an atmosphere of natural human relations and genuine sympathy, is the work of us all; just what form it will take for each of us we must settle with God individually. The creation of such a consciousness means Pentecostal power, and Pentecost means man's prayer and God's discovered presence. There were some words in the closing paragraph of the Anglican Report on this subject that are of universal application. "Though we cannot organise spiritual revival it is possible to direct the thought of the Church to one end, and of thought there is born desire, of desire prayer, and by prayer the Kingdom of God will come."

H. WHEELER ROBINSON.