

Evangelism, Church and Theology

One of the encouraging features of mainstream church life in the West in recent years has been the rehabilitation of evangelism as an explicitly acknowledged part of the church's mission. Since 1986 the Church of Scotland has deployed a nation-wide team of Organizers for Evangelism (one is grateful that 'for' is not 'of'), and the churches of the Anglican Communion have embarked on a Decade of Evangelism in the 1990s. Welcome though this Anglican venture is, its implications are not altogether comforting. Will evangelism cease at the end of the Decade? Should a Decade of Evangelism be any less disturbing than, say, a Decade of Worship would be, or a Decade of Loving-One's-Neighbour? Does not the very designation of a special Decade for evangelism suggest that it is not as normal and constitutive for the Christian church as worship and loving one's neighbour? Our prayer must be that the Decade marks the restoration of evangelism to as central and routine a place in the church's activity as Sunday services and pastoral care.

Many readers of this *Bulletin* may now be patting themselves on the back, as it were – for surely evangelical churchmen have always, almost by definition, maintained a fundamental commitment to evangelism? Does not evangelism represent an evangelical distinctive which evangelicalism has guarded like a sacred trust and is now only too happy to be sharing with the wider church? *Awakening the Giant* is how a recent paperback describes the task. Its sub-title is *Evangelism and the Catholic Church* and its author is Pat Lynch, a priest who persuaded his English bishop to set him apart as a full-time evangelist (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1990; 146pp., £5.95). Lynch is unambiguous about his extensive indebtedness to evangelicals – both full-time evangelists and writers on evangelism – in the development of his own understanding and role.

Yet it should not be too readily assumed that, where evangelism is concerned, evangelicals have no need of a teacher. The subject has not traditionally had much place in our theology. Calvin's *Institutes* do not deal with it as such, and the nearest L. Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* (to cite a widely used handbook) comes to it is the sentence: 'The true preaching of the Word is the great means for maintaining the Church and for enabling her to be the mother of the faithful.' To which theological writer or book would *you* refer someone seeking instruction in the theology of evangelism? One could make a start with the article in the IVP's *New Dictionary of Theology*, or even in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, a post-Vatican II Catholic work

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reviewed in Vol. 7:2 of this *Bulletin*, whose article begins with the revealing statement: 'A few years ago a term such as "evangelization" would have been unusual in a conversation about the Catholic Church's sense of mission and purpose.' (Catholicism has tended to prefer 'evangelization' to 'evangelism', but the former is commonly defined in a more comprehensive sense than the latter.)

If our Reformation heritage throws little direct light on evangelism, one of the dangers we face is that we identify it with something that Reformation ecclesiology took with utmost seriousness – the preaching of the Word (*cf.* the quotation above from Berkhof). If there is one weakness we are prey to, it is to believe that evangelism is synonymous with pulpit proclamation. The gospel is of course proclaimed in preaching, but neither is the Word wholly gospel nor is preaching the only means of communicating the gospel. Indeed it has to be insisted that methods of evangelism are not specified in the nature of evangelism itself. And here's the rub, for unworthy means can be resorted to (*cf.* the warnings of 2 Cor. 2:17, 4:2, 5) and not infrequently are, with the result that they discredit evangelism itself – which is one reason why the term, and even the practice, have been out of favour in some circles in recent decades.

But there can surely be few more urgent tasks in the 1990s than to formulate a clear-headed biblical theology of evangelism. We therefore welcome William J. Abraham's *The Logic of Evangelism* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1989; 245pp., £7.95), which laments 'the rift between evangelism and theology' and claims to be venturing into woefully neglected territory. He ends up conceiving of evangelism as 'that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time'. There is much to stimulate in this book, not least in its sensitive critiques of what it calls the proclamation and the church growth approaches. But it does not finally satisfy, not least because it makes so little use of Scripture, even – remarkably enough – making do without an analysis of the New Testament's use of the relevant Greek vocabulary. Hence Abraham reaches an understanding of evangelism lacking in sharpness of focus – one that encompasses discussion of conversion, baptism, morality, the creed, the gifts of the Spirit and the disciplines of the spiritual life, despite his recognition that when everything is evangelism, nothing is evangelism.

So the task remains. Its importance is neatly expressed by Abraham: 'Surely it is obvious that there would not have been a Christian community if there had not been any evangelism; nor might there be

one in the future.' If the church will not evangelize, no-one else will (which cannot be said of many of the church's activities). Meantime we could do much worse than keep the Lausanne Congress's fine definition before us:

'To evangelize is to spread the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and that as the reigning Lord he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gift of the Spirit to all who repent and believe. Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is every kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand. But evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God. In issuing the Gospel invitation we have no liberty to conceal the cost of discipleship. Jesus calls all who would follow him to deny themselves, take up their cross, and identify themselves with this new community. The results of evangelism include obedience to Christ, incorporation into his church and responsible service in the world.'

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It is fitting, as the editorial chair of *SBET* changes occupants, to pay tribute to Dr Nigel Cameron's service over the past ten years. *SBET* will continue to be published jointly by Rutherford House and the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society, and will seek to play a constructive (not a conformist) role in stimulating evangelical theological reflection, in Scotland and beyond (not in Scotland in isolation), for the 1990s and beyond (not for any past era, however glorious).