

The Meaning of Evangelism*

D. WEBSTER

All of us are concerned that the Church should grow and Christianity spread. In many parts of the world, however, the Church's growth seems to have halted and its expansion either slowed down or ceased altogether. It is not uncommon for a church, instead of being concerned with extension, to be interested only in survival from one generation to the next. This is a dynastic outlook with the emphasis on succession and continuity rather than on mission and growth. Its tendency is to be inward-looking and self-absorbed. We have to admit that it characterizes much of our church life today.

In addition to this malaise three other factors form the context of our Christian witness, which taken together indicate that the Church is faced with a greater crisis than any it has met since the rise of Islam. First, there are new dynamic movements claiming and winning the total allegiance of men, often to a level of commitment seldom found among Christians in the Church itself. These movements are not neutral: they are definitely opposed to Christianity. The most obvious are communism, the resurgent religions of the East, and the neopaganism sometimes to be found in Africa as exemplified by Mau Mau. Secondly, there is the possibility that the Church in many countries may be entering a period of hostility on the part of the State, if not open persecution. In some, though not all, Muslim countries this is already the case, as also in the communist countries of Eastern Europe and most of all in China. We cannot rely on for ever being able to hold on to great Christian institutions, such as church schools and colleges. The days of dependence on such institutions are almost certainly numbered. The Church may soon find itself with evangelism as its only activity. Thirdly, the general climate of the modern age is materialistic and irreligious. Science and technology have shaped and are still shaping men's thinking in all progressive countries, not only in the West but also in Japan, for example, and in varying degrees elsewhere. All these things make the subject of evangelism a particularly urgent one. But what is evangelism? How are we to understand its meaning today?

* The contents of this article were delivered as lectures at Bishop's College, Calcutta, during the author's recent visit to India.

The New Testament cannot provide us with technique but it is here alone that we can find an adequate theological basis for evangelism. There is a mass of material relevant to the mission of the Church. I must be content with selecting only four very clear leads from the New Testament. The first is factual rather than theological in the strict sense.

1. In Acts and in the letters of St. Paul we find the Church always looking outward. Like the United States of America for many years, it had a moving frontier. The frontiers of mission ought always to be moving. Acts presents us with the exciting story of a growing Church. It grew because it put evangelism first. For the growth of the Church does not ultimately depend on either organization or education, the two spheres which have occupied the historic Church so much and so long, but on a sense of mission, a readiness to go out, a commitment to obedience in the world. St. Paul found himself responding to a strategy of the Holy Ghost (Acts 16:6-10) designed to take the Gospel westward without detour. In his letter to the Romans he is still thinking of the movement further west, envisaging a visit to Spain (Rom. 15:24, 28). As an apostle he made it his business to go to the regions beyond and so move the frontier. He never did missionary work in a place where there was already a church. To each new church he committed missionary responsibility. Each church was responsible for evangelism in its own neighbourhood. Paul congratulates the Thessalonian Christians for doing this so effectively, 'for not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere' (1 Thess. 1:8). There is no thought of anyone from outside doing missionary work *instead* of the local Church.

2. If we try to discover how the apostolic church thought of itself, we find that it had only two real concerns: God and the non-Christian. These twin concerns are expressed in its twin activities: worship and mission. Both these are implied in the New Testament doctrine of the priesthood of the Church, which is none other than the priesthood of Christ flowing over into his Body and exercised through its members. The two aspects of priesthood are directed towards God and men. The Church performs its priestly duties towards God in prayer and worship, and towards men in service and evangelism. St. Paul actually describes evangelistic work in priestly language. He calls himself, 'a minister (leitourgon) of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service (hierourgounta) of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 15:16). The *locus classicus* for the definition of the Church's priesthood is to be found in 1 Peter 2:5, 9, 'yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ . . . that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light'. The offering of spiritual sacrifices consists of prayer and worship; it also consists of missionary obedience in the Pauline sense and, lest there should be

any doubt about this, explicit reference is made in a repeat passage (v. 9) about the priesthood of the people of God, that part of its meaning is to declare his 'wonderful deeds', namely to engage in evangelism.

Naturally there is a relation between the priesthood of the Church and the priesthood of Christ himself because the Church is His Body. Our Lord's priesthood was expressed through his own human body during his own human life. This was a double offering also. In the body he was continually offering his life to God in perfect worship and complete obedience. And in the body he was offering his life for men in continual acts of service and love and finally in one perfect act of redemptive sacrifice on the Cross. It was offering on both these levels which led to the Cross and which gave it unique meaning and effect. On the Cross he was offering his life to God and for men; the two obediences, the two offerings had become one. As the Church partakes of the same obedience and fulfils its particular form of priesthood by engaging in both its prescribed activities, worship and mission, so these are taken up into the one perfect action of Christ and have effect through becoming his. There has never been any doubt about the Church's vocation to worship and the priestliness of this. Not nearly sufficient attention has been paid to the correlative priestliness of the Church's vocation to mission. A one-sided priesthood is not Biblical nor is it effective. It can never therefore be sufficient for the Church to remain merely a worshipping community holding services for its own kind. It must also be a witnessing community going out into the world to bring others to Christ, if it is to be truly a priesthood. The mission of the Church, evangelism, means the Church living as the Body of Christ in this world. It will also mean the Cross in some form or other.

3. Turning to the gospels we are presented with the Lord's own definition of his mission at the very outset of his ministry: 'Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel"' (Mark 1:14, 15). His message falls into three parts, which the rest of his preaching, as also the apostolic preaching, expands. First, he insisted that this was a significant moment of time; it was a day of fulfilment, the breaking into history of a new era. Something new and something different was operating. His own arrival on the human scene was a fact of final and eternal significance. Things could never be the same again. The apostles in their preaching reflected the same excitement, this sense of newness and of fulfilment. St. Paul takes up this thought as pivotal. 'Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation' (2 Cor. 6:2), he writes in connexion with a prophetic promise (Isa. 49:8), just as Jesus himself at the beginning of his Nazareth sermon, on another passage from Isaiah (61:1, 2), 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4:21). Genuine evangelism is always inspired with a sense of the significance of this present time, the

Christian era, which has not been for ever and will not last for ever but which continues during the dispensation of grace. We are still able to preach in the year of our Lord, anno domini.

Secondly, Jesus made an announcement. His message was the announcement, and it was about the Kingdom, the new life, that God was offering to men. His preaching was entirely about God. At no time has the Church had any other message committed to it, nor are we engaging in evangelistic preaching when we are talking about anything else than God. The contemporary evangelist has precisely the same offer to make to modern men—the Kingdom.

Thirdly, Jesus demanded some kind of verdict or response. When presented with this kind of news, this kind of gift, men could only say yes or no. The proper response was to 'repent and believe in the gospel'. A man had to do two things: to change his whole outlook and to commit himself utterly.

In these three phrases we are given the whole meaning and reason for evangelism, 'preaching the gospel of God'. There must be awareness of the situation, the offering of the message, the challenge to a response. Because of what he did, his Cross and Resurrection, Jesus became the message that he preached. Evangelism today is presenting men with the full Christian message of Jesus and his love.

4. This message in its totality is the Gospel of Salvation. For in the New Testament the activity of evangelism is meant to lead into the experience of salvation. Salvation is a theological concept fundamental to the whole Bible. It is in considering this key word, which occurs in one of its forms 150 times in the New Testament, that we begin to grasp the theological basis of all evangelistic activity and to know why we can and why we must evangelize. One way of approaching this is to notice the three great convictions which governed the thought and the ministry of St. Paul. We had three certainties. The first was about the will of God. Whether or not the pastoral epistles are Pauline—I think they are—they certainly belong to Paul's tradition. 'This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God Our Saviour, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim. 2:3, 4). There is nothing equivocal about this. It is unfortunate that theological speculation has too often concerned itself with the wrong kind of universalism. It is not for us to know with certainty whether all men will in the end be saved. But it is for us to know that it is God's will that all men should be saved and by our obedience to bring God's will to pass. God's will is not always done. Yet we pray, 'Thy will be done', and every time we use the Lord's prayer we are in effect committing ourselves to evangelism, as is the whole Church, because it is God's will that all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Millions still wait to hear.

Paul's second great conviction was about the condition of man. We speak about estrangement, despair, need. Paul sums

it up in one word: sin. 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23). This is the second area of universalism. None are excluded from God's good will, and none are excluded from our present predicament of sin. Precisely the same teaching about the human need for rescue and salvation is to be found in our Lord's three parables about being lost in Luke 15. Those who are lost need to be found and brought home. Every man is in need of the evangel, the gospel of salvation.

The third certainty is about the power of the Gospel. 'I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith' (Rom. 1:16). In the Christian message itself, in the very act of proclaiming it, as Paul had proved again and again, a power is released and made available to those who hear. This is what gives such paramount importance to the Word, the thing preached. For the divine Word is clothed in human words. The words matter greatly, for 'faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ' (Rom. 10:17). Paul has no doubt whatever of the immense power of the word of the Gospel. 'The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God' (1 Cor. 1:18). It is by the proclaiming of this Gospel to men in their need that the will of God for their salvation may be accomplished. By its evangelism the Church is both meeting man's deepest and direst need and also doing God's will.

Not everyone says yes when presented with the Gospel of Christ nor does the New Testament expect this. In the gospels and in Acts we find people saying no. Some have to hear many times before they respond. But we should not be complacent about the noes, for two things need to be remembered. First, we need always to ask whether it is in fact the *whole* Gospel that has been preached or something partial and one-sided. 'I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God' (Acts 20:27), said St. Paul to the Ephesian elders on the beach at Miletus. We cannot be expected to preach the whole Gospel in one sermon very often, let alone in every sermon; but the calendar of the Christian Year provides the opportunity for a disciplined balance and ensures the presentation of every aspect of the Gospel in turn. We need also to remember that there is an incalculable gap between the Gospel that is proclaimed and the Gospel that is heard, which has not always been taken into account in discussions about evangelism' (J. V. Taylor: *The Growth of the Church in Buganda*, p. 252, S.C.M. Press, 1958). People's hearing is determined by the 'auditorium', by all sorts of influences which shape their lives and thoughts. It is this which gives to the evangelist so great a responsibility for understanding the minds and the *milieu* of those to whom he preaches. It is this which constitutes and complicates our modern problem of 'communication'. To this problem we must now turn. At least let us be sure that it is the Gospel of Salvation which we

are called to communicate. And in the light of the New Testament evidence we may conclude that evangelism has a firm theological basis.

In any society relationships are only possible as individuals communicate with one another. All day long all of us are occupied in giving and receiving countless communications. The evangelist has something which he feels compelled to communicate to others. His problem is to communicate in such a way that they are able to understand what he says and to make responsible decisions about it.

In the human body there are two main physical organs for receiving communications from others, the eye and the ear, through which the senses of sight and sound are mediated. Seeing and hearing, eyes and ears, are prominent themes in the New Testament. Part of our Lord's ministry was devoted to enabling people to communicate better, for he made the blind to see and the deaf to hear. These activities of his were Messianic signs, indications that the age long expected had arrived, that the time was fulfilled. Isaiah had foretold the day: 'Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped' (Isa. 35:5; cf. 29:18). When St. Paul was describing his conversion experience on the Damascus road, he said, 'I saw a light . . . I heard a voice' (Acts 26:13, 14). St. John, giving his apostolic testimony to the origin of the Christian faith, wrote, 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes . . . that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you' (1 John 1:1, 3). Great emphasis is put upon both seeing and hearing, communication at both levels. To Saul of Tarsus Jesus became real to both senses. There was a seeing and a hearing. Eyes that had not seen before, ears that had not heard before, were opened. The obvious implication of this is that the Church in its evangelism must present the non-Christian world with a Gospel that can be truly seen and clearly heard—and present Christ in such a way. There has never been any doubt that the Gospel has to be heard. But has sufficient attention been paid to the necessity for the Gospel to be seen in the sense of being demonstrated, made visible in its effects? 'Mine eyes have *seen* thy salvation', said Simeon as he held the infant Christ in his arms. Salvation is not merely something to be talked about or hoped for. In Christ it has become visible. St. Paul speaks of the proclamation of the Gospel as involving more than words; it is 'in demonstration of the Spirit and of power' (1 Cor. 2:4; 1 Thess. 1:5). There were signs which could be seen as well as words that could be heard.

The theological language which the New Testament writers use to describe the Incarnation reinforces this idea of seeing and hearing. In the Old Testament Israel repeatedly *heard* God through the word of the prophets and *saw* the hand of God in the events that befell them, in judgment and deliverance. In Christ, however, men saw God and heard him directly. 'He

who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). 'In these last days (God) has spoken to us by a Son' (Heb. 1:2). Jesus Christ is both the Image of God and the Word of God. He is the Word made visible (John 1:1-14). He is the Image made audible (Heb. 1:1-3). In him God can be seen and heard, both. In the presentation of Christ, with which the Church is entrusted, there must be a real attempt to help men to see and to hear. The preacher presents the picture of Jesus and he tells the story of Jesus. Picture, story; image, word; seeing, hearing: such is the pattern.

Has not our communication been defective too often because it has been based on hearing only, without seeing? In evangelism the Church has to take account of both wave-lengths. The Church is called to proclaim the Word of Christ audibly and to be the Body of Christ visibly. Both together. It is not sufficient to use audio-visual aids. *The Church itself is meant to be THE audio-visual aid to the Gospel it preaches*, to be a true community in which the life of Christ is manifested and where his power and love can be seen and his word heard. Where the Church is not a real fellowship in the New Testament sense, its capacity to communicate the Gospel effectively will be seriously weakened. In ecumenical circles it is being realized that unity and mission are knit together. On the local level this is equally true but not always realized.

One further thing needs to be said about communication. In the Christian sphere the great Communicator is the Holy Ghost. True communication can only be through him. In all our evangelism we are only agents and instruments, servants in the work of God which is greater than anything we can understand and remains a mystery. The story of Babel and the confusion of language in Genesis 11 was both a result and a sign of man's sin. Sin has complicated the problem of communication or, as some would say, created it. The significance of Pentecost is that on this multi-lingual occasion real communication was achieved and, according to St. Luke, 'devout men from every nation under heaven . . . heard them speaking in his own language'. We cannot easily envisage what happened but it is clear that the giving of the Holy Ghost opened the way to a new kind of communication. As Jesus said, it is the Spirit who convinces (John 16:7-11); we can neither convince nor in our own ability communicate effectively, for communication is more even than the mastery of language. We do not always communicate successfully with those who speak our own language. Evangelism is not a matter of technique but of obedience to the Spirit, the Communicator. St. Peter was an ignorant man with great sins, but he communicated with the crowd on the Day of Pentecost because he was filled with the Spirit.

Effective evangelism, real communication, comes about by presenting the whole Gospel of Christ, by demonstrating the fellowship of the Church of Christ, and by proclaiming him in

the fullness of the Spirit. Technical powers are no substitute for the Word, the Church and the Holy Ghost.

In evangelism two modes of approach may be distinguished, the direct and the oblique. Each of these is a legitimate way of communicating the Gospel. Direct evangelism is normally associated with an evangelistic sermon or mission or campaign of some kind. The aim is to proclaim the Gospel clearly with personal conversion in view. The message is expected to be challenging, culminating in an appeal for response. Such preaching is straight from the shoulder. It is meant to touch and stir the conscience and to move the will to decision. The most obvious and the best known example of this today is Dr. Billy Graham. But there are others also. And many pastors all over the world use this approach with devoted constancy.

The oblique approach is more subtle and indirect. Here the emphasis is rather on the power of suggestion, the fertility of a true idea germinating in the human mind, the significance of right influences. We find this in Christian art, music, painting, poetry, but particularly drama. The Gospel being a story makes it specially suitable for dramatic presentation. But even plays or novels which are not in a Biblical setting but entirely contemporary can be evangelistic in tone and meaning, if the logic of the whole is in a definitely Christian direction. As an example of this the plays of Mr. T. S. Eliot immediately spring to mind. The Gospel is implicit rather than explicit but none the less powerful for a certain type of audience. A play or a book can point to Christ as the only way, the proper fulfilment, the one answer to a problem, the only end to a search. Radio and television have great opportunities for this type of evangelism; so does the novelist. Sometimes people who would be quite unmoved by an evangelistic sermon, even if they could be persuaded to go to a place where one was being preached, may be drawn to the feet of Christ as a result of this mode of oblique approach. The Church must do all in its power and its imagination to encourage and promote experiments along these lines.

It is unfortunate that those who favour the one method often dismiss the other as worthless. We should rather recognize the desirability of both. It is important also to take account of the dangers and limitations in both. In the case of the direct method there is the risk of staleness and repetition. It is one thing for a travelling evangelist to use the same sermon many times in a variety of places; the local pastor cannot do this. But all too easily he can find himself preaching virtually the same sermon on a number of different texts. Moreover, if the local pastor is an ardent evangelist and often preaches in this way, he runs the risk of producing a congregation that is Gospel-hardened through hearing too many appeals. It is like calling 'Fire, fire'. Eventually people take no notice for they have become immunized to the challenge of the Gospel by hearing it delivered *in the same form and manner too often*. Either they have wearied of it or they have grown glib and are able to use all the

right words whilst remaining unconverted. Churches exist where precisely this has happened.

The danger in the use of the oblique approach, particularly if it is exclusively favoured by the preacher (as distinct from the novelist or dramatist), is that a strong desire for Christ may be created without the way to Christ ever being explained. The oblique manner at its best can lead people to 'feeling after Christ, if haply they might find him', but it seldom brings them to a point of decision or tells them the way of salvation. How does a person become a Christian? Oblique evangelism may bring someone to the stage where for the first time they ask that question and really want an answer, but it does not give the answer. A direct and declaratory word is required, and the Church through its ministers—or through its laity—must utter it. For whilst it is dangerous for men to be brought to the point of decision too often, it is disastrous for them never to be brought to the point of decision at all.

It is often assumed that evangelism is meant for those outside the Church. This is true. But we must remember that the Church itself needs constant evangelism. 'Tell me the story often, for I forget so soon . . .' No one, no Christian, reaches a stage where he does not need to hear and re-hear the Gospel. As we feed on Christ in the Sacrament so we feed on him in the Word. The Christian congregation must be continually confronted with the Gospel which brought it into being and which sustains its existence. A simple analysis of the constituents of many an average congregation underlines the relevance of evangelism in the congregation itself.

In any congregation there may be five different groups of people. 1. Nominal Christians, whose faith is inherited and second-hand. They are keeping up a family tradition by church attendance; their practice of religion is a form and a habit which has largely if not totally lost its reality. They have no living contact with Jesus Christ. He is not real to them. These difficulties belong to second, third and *n*th generation Christians, born into Christian homes. Like those at Laodicea they are 'neither cold nor hot' (Rev. 3:15). These need conversion. 2. There are lapsing Christians, those who were once committed but for some reason or other are gradually losing hold and losing interest, moving away from Christ and from faith in him. Already in the New Testament period apostasy was well known. St. Paul wrote to the Galatians about this, for some of them had lapsed (Gal. 1:6-8), and St. John wrote to those in Ephesus who had abandoned the love they had at first (Rev. 2:4). These need to be recalled to Christ by the Gospel. 3. There are partial Christians, sincere innocents who are only half-way there and may have got stuck. This is a special characteristic of younger Churches in which there are converts either from paganism or some other religion. The old beliefs may still have considerable power over them alongside a quite real Christian faith. In Africa there are many genuine Christians who feel the pull of the old superstitions just

under the surface and in times of crisis or calamity may yield to these through fear. In Japan there are Christians who in times of death and bereavement behave much more like Buddhists because Buddhist beliefs still persist on the deeper levels of their being. The situation of such partial Christians may be compared to that of Israel at the time when Elijah challenged them on Mount Carmel. They had reached a stage of religious co-existence, partially acknowledging the Lord God and partially the local baals. Elijah's message was: 'If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him' (1 Kings 18:21). He was calling Israel to advance beyond this co-existence of faiths to a total allegiance in God, with no harking back or clinging on to the old deities. In many churches today in Africa and Asia there are partial Christians like this who need to be led on to a fuller response to Christ at the deeper levels of their being. They need the Gospel. 4. It is to be hoped that in several congregations there are enquirers. They have come to church wanting to know what Christianity is all about. They watch and listen. If over a course of time in attending church services they do not hear the Gospel proclaimed they are naturally disappointed and the Church has failed them. 5. In most congregations there is a nucleus of faithful Christians who have responded to Christ and are committed to him. These should be the spearhead of the Church's mission in the neighbourhood. They ought themselves to be training as lay evangelists who know the full content of the Gospel and how to speak to others about Jesus Christ. For them evangelism will be a reminder, an example and a spur.

There can of course be evangelism through systematic Christian teaching and through the very action of worship. The liturgy in structure and intention is profoundly evangelistic. Nevertheless there must be occasions, spaced at proper intervals, when in every church and congregation there is the activity of evangelism, direct and explicit. Without it the Church is like a pot-bound plant.

Book reviewers are requested to write the reviews as brief as possible. As a rule, books containing up to 200 pp., unless otherwise specified, should not exceed 250 words.

In this issue some of the reviews had to be reduced in length, in view of the lack of space.