

Some Thoughts on World Evangelism . . .

The reasons for evangelism

1) Jesus commands it and *expects* it as a result of his death and resurrection. ***Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:47, Acts 1:8.***

2) People need rescue (= salvation). This is a fact that needs to be taken on board very clearly. We need to face head-on any reservations which we may have about this. I believe that all true mission activity is based upon a twofold conviction:–

a) that every human being is in wrong standing with God and that this needs to be and CAN be put right. See ***Romans 1:18-25, Romans 3:23.***

b) that there is no other source of salvation apart from faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. See ***Acts 3:23*** (Jews), ***Acts 4:12*** (everyone), ***Acts 13:39*** (Jews and anyone following a system of religious rules).

Any doubt that we may have about the true ‘lostness’ of those who do not trust in Jesus should be dispelled by reading the biography of any Christian engaged in evangelistic work, from Hudson Taylor in China to David Wilkerson in New York, those in contact with all sorts of people, ‘sophisticated’ Westerners, ‘primitive’ jungle peoples in remote parts of South America, the Triad gangs of Hong Kong’s Walled City. Each one points out the fact that none of those they meet is at peace, none has any sense of a right relationship with God. The myth of the ‘innocent savage’ is just that – a myth!

If we have had any contact with people of other faiths, we may have found the same result. They may think that their actions merit God’s favour and that he is pleased with religious observance, but few if any would claim that they have been brought into right relationship with the living God.

Usually only Christian believers make that claim, and it is a massive one! Perhaps that should remind us to be aware that we have received this as a **gift** by God’s grace, and not boast that ‘we are the only ones who are right’ – !

The aims of evangelism

1) Proclaiming the good news of forgiveness and reconciliation with God through the Lord Jesus Christ, with a view that as many as possible

will take hold of the message and actually receive that forgiveness. See **Acts 10:42-43, Acts 13:38-39, Acts 17:30-31, Acts 26:15-18,**

2) Making disciples (**Matthew 28:19**). A disciple is one who hears, learns, follows and is transformed to be like their teacher (**Luke 6:40, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 3:18**)

3) Seeing the Church built. See **Romans 1:7-8, 1 Corinthians 1:4-9, Ephesians 1:15-17, Philippians 1:3-6, Colossians 1:3-12, 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10, 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4**. All these demonstrate how Paul rejoices in the various ways in which the believers have been built together, have joined in with the work of evangelism ('actively' or 'passively'). He sees this as the fulfilment of one of the vital goals of the gospel, and the body of his letters is dedicated to just that – the building up of the Church.

What evangelism is NOT (and so, what is not evangelism)

1) Propagation of the traditions and practices of a particular group of Christians. What used to be termed 'the mission field' is littered with the vast array of different groupings from all corners of the 'sending' countries. So, in one Indian town, where the number of Christians is small, there may be different named groups with their roots in different traditions and from different countries of origin – and all of these in apparent competition with each other. The 'sending' countries did not just send the Gospel, they (we) sent copies of the disunity they already had 'back home'.

It has been said that the Christian Church is the single greatest hindrance to the spread of the Gospel in the world. If that is true in the level of division in our own countries, how much more where that division is multiplied in the 'mission field'.

2) Performing good works, such as medical or agricultural aid. These are often seen as the primary role of the missionary and they are certainly beneficial, but must always be seen as sidelines to the actual work of evangelism. Valuable sidelines, as they are ways in which to demonstrate the love of God in practical form, but still not the prime reason to be there. There have been too many missionary medical staff who have been so overwhelmed with the medical work that they have been practically unable to say or do anything about the message which brought them there in the first place!

3) The spread of a different social culture. This is dangerous on at least two levels. The wave of overseas evangelism that coincided with British imperial expansion was horribly caught up in it, with the contradictory results highlighted in paragraph 2 of page 44 of the *Faith Journeys* course book. Some missionaries were aligned too closely with colonial powers, others took a dramatic stand against some of the colonial injustices. Inevitably, others made compromises, consciously or not. Any of these courses of action may have adversely affected the spread of the Gospel.

As an example of this, James Alter writes about the British colonial practice in Northern India at that time:– “Addicted to the illusion of permanence, increasingly illiterate in any but the language of colonialism, the British chose to believe in a static, predictable world even as their policies and practices contributed to volatile change.”¹ And this was written about the Christian missionaries of the area!

In more familiar surroundings, we too often make the mistake of encouraging people to change their lifestyle and habits to an apparently ‘Christian’ norm, without emphasising the need for the spiritual change of repentance and faith. Thus people are assimilated into what they think is the Church, whilst actually remaining outside God’s family. This is as dangerous and deceptive in a Western situation as it is in ‘foreign missions’, and once more adds to the inertia of an unfit Church.

A.W. Tozer said that the primary task of the Church is not to preach the Gospel, but to be fit to preach the Gospel. To the extent that we tend to reproduce what we know and what we are, the weaknesses of the Church in the ‘sending’ West have been reproduced in the countries to which western missionaries have gone. The grace of God is bigger than all that, but there remains a legacy of separation and distrust between many groups, in direct denial of Paul’s wish in **1 Timothy 2:8** “*Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension.*” Reading the verses which lead into this, you will see that the context is the effect of Christian living on the effectiveness of the message. Once again, the condition of the Church is the greatest hindrance.

4) Linked to the last point is the aim of some to see the ‘Christianising’ of society. For generations, Britain has been seen to be a ‘Christian’ country. Certainly many of the strong influences in British

¹ *In the Doab and Rohilkhand, James Alter, 1986*

culture have been Christian ones, but there can never be a 'Christian' country in the same way that there can be a Muslim one. There is no Christian code of practice to parallel the Muslim system of 'Sharia' law, for example. Ironic, perhaps, to see the ambition of some Muslim groups to see the introduction of Sharia law in Britain, with some even advocating that Britain will become a Muslim country!

Many Christians will find cause to protest at such ambitions, in the same way that they may protest about the 'erosion of Christian values' and growing secularisation in British society. We need to understand that we have no right to see Christian principles enshrined in our country's laws, any more than our fellow-Christians overseas have a right to see them in their cultures, whether Hindu, Muslim, Shintoist or Communist.

In fact, the message of the Gospel is often more clearly heard in the context of a different culture. However much we may regret the fall of moral standards, we can certainly welcome the growing secularisation of Britain because it gives a clearer contrast to the Gospel message.

Despite all the setbacks of Christian missions mistakes, it is still much 'easier' to proclaim the Gospel in the context of a different culture or religion. I have certainly found that to be the case in India, as have others in different situations. And one of the greatest periods of expansion of the Church was in the declining years of the Roman Empire, which was known for its decadence and opposition.

Summary

Evangelism (and world evangelism in particular) is a direct result of the lives we lead as Christians. What we are in our home church situations is what we take with us to 'foreign' ones. We may have fine words which seem to compensate for our straying from Biblical core facts, but in the end what we **are** is what will be reproduced. Paul knew this well, and was even confident enough of the working of God's grace in him to invite others to imitate him and his fellow-workers. He certainly knew how things work! (See **1Corinthians 4:16**, **1 Corinthians 11:1**, **1 Thessalonians 1:6**).

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