

# **A Theology of Evangelism**

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## PREFACE

The following consists of my reflections on the church's task and opportunity for evangelism. Some of these materials have originated in the study of other issues, but are relevant to my primary concern here. I recognize that I need to continue to work them into a more cohesive whole, but if I wait until all would be as I would like these materials might never be shared. Perhaps you have reflections you would like to share with me which would help this work on to completion and maturity. May God bless these materials to God's honor and for the sharing of the Gospel with humankind.

There has been a great deal of concern about evangelism in the churches in recent years. This is partially because the churches are conscious of the evangelistic imperative which is part of their tradition and frustrated in finding a viable expression of it. It is also because of declining memberships in the "main line" churches, of which it is sometimes said that they are becoming the "by line" churches. The decline of membership is due to a number of reasons, one of the significant reasons being the development of a secular and pluralistic society in which church membership is becoming less normative and society offers options other than Christianity. Another may be the apocalyptic nature of the times which causes people to look for easy and black/white answers to the complex issues of life and causes them to seek security. The main line churches cannot in good conscience provide this because they see life and their religious traditions differently.

There are many programs available to help the churches deal with evangelism, but it is my impression that not much has been done on crucial theological issues related to evangelism. It is my conviction that the theological issues must be dealt with first before programs of outreach and assimilation of members are explored. Decisions on the theological issues inform the whole process of evangelism. Certainly what I am going to say is not purely theological, for it is informed by historical criticism, modern psychology, communications theory, and contemporary observations about the issues involved. However, it is theological in the sense that it is rooted in the Christian theological traditions, particularly the New Testament, and it is in dialectical relationship with the present -- which is the way I understand a theology for the present should be formulated.

One distinction that needs to be made is between "church growth" and evangelism. Though a concern for evangelism is often a part of church growth, not to make this distinction often allows evangelism to be distorted. Part of what the main line churches need today is church growth, understood as the development of older congregations and the planting of new congregations, for the sake of sustaining the institutional life of the churches. The church is an institution. An institution cannot continue and render its services without adequate support and membership. I do not feel that it is "unspiritual" to speak of institutional and financial needs of congregations and denominations, nor is it unchristian to give attention to sustaining the life of historical institutions, even though theologically the essence of the church is to be seen in its spiritual life rather than its institutional life. To neglect the church's institutional life is a type of Gnosticism.

On the other hand, evangelism is a process that belongs to God, not the institution, it is involved with the developmental process of persons and so can't be controlled. The very difficulty of communicating the Gospel necessitates patience and waiting and can't be forced, unless one wishes to violate the process of both God and the person. Results cannot be produced on schedule to meet the growth quotas of denominations. The process of Christ's outreach to the world as described in Phil. 5ff is "kenotic", i.e. it involves a self-emptying in obedience to God. If this is true there is something very anti-institutional about evangelism. It is not its primary purpose to make adherents of some institution. Yet without institutions Christian life cannot be supported and it becomes more difficult to proclaim the Gospel.

This may place the church in an impossible bind, but it has to be recognized and lived with so that one is clear about what is necessary for institutional survival and what is necessary to participate in God's process of bringing persons to God's self.

## Eleven Principles

It may be helpful to summarize and set forth at the beginning the approach to evangelism advocated in this study: <sup>1</sup>

### 1. *Life's Spiritual Dimension.*

There is a spiritual dimension to life of which many are conscious even if they are not aware of the real nature of human existence and God's relationship with humanity as a foundational source of life. It is the responsibility of the church in its mission to function like Peter to Cornelius (Acts 10), to help persons interpret and identify their spiritual nature and experience. In doing this we may appreciate, rejoice in, and respect the religious experience of other persons and traditions, valuing truthful insights and concepts wherever we find them.

### 2. *Public availability of the Gospel in word and living expression.*

The Gospel is to be made public so that others may be aware of the message. Congregations which are expressions of the Christian faith and life need to be planted so that there is a reality to which to point when the Gospel is spoken of. One cannot preach the Gospel without being able to point to where it can be experienced, or without providing a place where Christian faith and life can be supported. The founding of congregations is then crucial to evangelism, but its primary purpose is not the statistical growth of congregations. This latter is an institutional concern.

### 3. *Patiently respect the process of God and the individual.*

One is not to proceed with the conversion of individuals nor to rush them in their process with God unless one first discerns what God is doing in that individual's life. The process is God's, not ours, and we can only be supportive and interpretive of it. We should not have the "itch of making many converts". God is Creator of all souls, has plans for each, and assumes ultimate responsibility. If God's work with a person is not finished in this life, God may finish it in the next. *The evangelistic urgency is to participate in God's process, not to create our own.*

### 4. *Relationship with God is central; life grows out of relationship.*

What persons are called to is primarily *relationship* with God/Christ and *new life* which flows out of that relationship. This relationship is "gracious" and "faithful", providing the context in which to grow, make mistakes, and be both fully human and spiritual. The relationship with God is productive of relationship with others, i.e. love.

### 5. *Variety is of the nature of the Gospel's expression and needs to be respected.*

Both on the individual level and on the ecclesial level there will be varied expressions of Christianity. The church must provide for this within the unity of a fellowship which exists around the crucified Saviour, symbol of God's appeal through love and not power (God does not force conformity). One must be careful to provide for cultural and indigenous expressions of Christianity rather than merely repeating the extant patterns of the church (while also exploring the values of the traditions). Thus one must be aware of the penultimate nature of one's own expression of Christianity.

### 6. *Willingness to find new forms, to change, is of Christianity's essence.*

The Spirit, the contemporary experience of God, is the formative influence in individual and corporate Christian life, leading Christians to legitimate expressions of Christianity in their context.

### 7. *Simplicity.*

While faith and life can become complex (and the church, to be responsible, must deal with their complexity), we must be concerned with maintaining simplicity in the practice of evangelism. Religion is *relationship* with God and *life* is response to God. We should not be overly impressed with presenting to

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<sup>1</sup> These principles are based upon those of Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf who was the sponsor and primary theologian of the Moravian Church in the 18th century. See Appendix C Moravian Faith/Identity and Evangelism.

others a complexity for which they do not ask and which may become a barrier rather than a communication.

8. *God is available to all, because Christianity is not primarily conceptual.*

The relational and experiential nature of Christianity (relationship with God and others) means that it is available to all: infants, retarded, senile. It is not dependent on our comprehension, though comprehension is a responsibility of those who can. Experience may be provided for those who cannot comprehend: e.g. experience of God, others, and Christian life may be provided for children in the congregation and family so that they will know the realities about which they will later be given concepts. Those who may never understand intellectually, the retarded and senile, still have an "experienced" relationship with God which is initiated by God.

9. *Evangelism and the world.*

Evangelism should be understood more broadly than sharing the Gospel and interpreting to others the spiritual dimensions of life. It also has to do with the ministry of God's people in the world whereby the quality of life in the world is influenced and the world itself is preserved as God's creation and gift.

10. *Experimentation.*

Experimentation is important. This is the way that one tries out insights and plans. One cannot always tell what God wishes until it is tried. God provides the opportunity to try what may turn out to be "wrong". "Discernment" is important, as a way of testing for truth in the light of central Christian realities.

11. *Strategy.*

The early church strategized its mission. The discussion between Paul and Christian leaders in Jerusalem in Gal. 2:1-10, Paul's presentation of his strategy for evangelization in Rom. 9-11, and the presentation of the development of the church in Acts indicates not only a dependency on God's leading but a development of strategy. Paul at the end of Romans 11 recognizes that his strategy could be wrong and wonders whether humanity can adequately understand God's wisdom and intent. However, Paul is a practical person who must have a strategy and venture upon it, allowing its truth to be discovered in the process of risk and venture. In I Cor. 4:1-5 he discusses how he will leave ultimate evaluation of what he has done up to the Lord in the final judgment.

Though this paper approaches evangelism primarily in relational terms, anyone who is familiar with the psychological theory expressed in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator will know that all persons do not think relationally. There are those who prefer to deal with words, rules and concepts rather than persons. One finds this even in some biblical traditions. For the Introvert dealing with persons consumes a great deal of energy, while for the Extrovert it may be easier. Moreover, the less than ideal circumstances of the childhood environment of many often make inter-personal relationship so painful that in-depth relationship is avoided. When all of this is considered, it is still my belief that at the heart of human existence is the need for relationship and at the heart of the Gospel is God's offer of relationship. Thus the difficulties of relationship do not argue conclusively against a relational approach.

### **Implicit and Explicit Evangelism**

In advocating a concern for the theological aspects of evangelism it is important to recognize that one is touching on a "specialization". Although each person within the congregation is in some way a theologian as they reflect on Christian life and experience, to be a theologian is also a highly specialized task involving knowledge of the Bible and Christian tradition and also knowledge of the issues involved. Though I affirm the importance of theology for the evangelistic task of the congregation, not all have the time and the inclination to deal with the theological issues.

In the history of Christianity there is a helpful distinction using the terms "explicit" faith and "implicit" faith. Implicit faith is that which senses one's human need and relates to God in a way that may not be much understood but is nevertheless very real. One might call it a "faith of the heart". Explicit faith is explained faith, and is usually divided into two categories: faith which one needs to explain for the sake of

one's own understanding and faith which needs to be explained for the sake of others' understanding. This is a "faith that involves the head".

The faith of many members of the congregation may be more implicit than explicit, but is nevertheless quite real. Unless you understand Christianity as historical information or a system of knowledge which demands an "expert", there is no necessary correlation between extent of understanding and faith, understood as the relationship of the heart with God. Of course one must recognize that making faith explicit, i.e. understandable, is very important for all Christians, though it is not of the essence of faith.

There must be some within the congregation, and within our denominations, who assume primary responsibility for making faith explicit and for urging faith and actions in harmony with this. Here is where the pastor as theologian comes in, as the one trained in Bible, tradition, spirituality, contemporary world context and who can lead the church to workable and meaningful understandings. This is not to deny that well-educated laity or very insightful and less-educated laity cannot fulfill the same role. Nor is it to deny the significant role of laity educated or skilled in areas other than theology who can help to understand human beings, human systems, economic considerations, etc.. But the role of theologian is important, and must be assigned to someone lest it be done by no one.

In the task of evangelism many members of the congregation will function in ways which assume and express implicit faith. They may reach out to their friends, welcome them into the relationships of the congregation, and be involved in the process of their inclusion and assimilation without having to understand the theological details of what they are doing. The importance for me in this distinction of implicit and explicit is that members of the congregation who so engage in the actions of evangelism must know that what they do bears the same *dignity* and *value* as the person who articulates evangelism theologically. To present those who can explain and discuss as those who are really doing evangelism and those who cannot as somehow second class is to be confused about the nature of the Christian faith. It is also to denigrate the committed participation of the whole congregation in the evangelistic task.

If we understand that the Christian Gospel is primarily about relationship and life (God's relationship with us, our relationship with each other, and the life which ensues from this), then those who live life out in relationship with God and who welcome others into relationship are doing evangelism in its highest sense.

This idea of implicit and explicit can be carried further into a model of evangelism.

In our communities there are among the unchurched:

- those who are familiar with the Christian tradition and may have previously belonged to a church;
- those who have little knowledge of the Christian tradition, may belong to another religion, or may have no religion.

Their experience of life and the Transcendent (the spiritual, God) will be to various degrees implicit or explicit. Where it is explicit it may not be so in terms of the Christian faith. Where it is implicit it may not always be within the awareness of the person. Because of our presuppositions about God as creator of the world and all humanity, graciously initiating outreach to all, we may assume that God is seeking to be in relationship with a person's life even if there is no awareness -- though there are those persons in whom spiritual receptivity seems dead. Thus as members of the congregation relationally reach out and welcome persons to the Christian community and Christ, there can be a variety of tasks involving making faith explicit -- depending on the issues people have and the questions they ask. Some persons will affiliate with the congregation merely on a relational basis, faith remaining implicit until a membership class or some crisis which calls for explanation. Where the issues of faith need to be explicitly dealt with, then someone must be ready to deal with this -- either the pastor or others so trained. Those who established first contacts with such persons then may have to refer them to others who can deal with the issues, much as a general practitioner refers to a specialist.

The Christian community, consisting of persons living in relationship with God, Christ, and each other, will also consist of persons at various places along the implicit - explicit continuum. Life issues, educational opportunities and practical wisdom may bring implicit faith into greater consciousness and call forth greater understanding of faith and life. The pastor, and others who are willing to give themselves to this, are the resident experts who have struggled both to understand and live out Christian faith and life. These persons not only deal with the need for understanding as it arises within and without the congregation, but engage in a process of education which assists the congregation in growing into awareness and understanding of what God is like, how God is experienced, how the Christian life is lived, how faith is communicated and developed, how the Christian tradition can be understood, what the church is, etc., -- i.e. all those matters which make evangelism understandable and affect how it is conducted. The congregation in which Christian faith and life have become articulate provides the best context for evangelism.

Implicit faith and evangelism require some very practical steps by the members and boards of the congregation. It does not merely happen by itself.

1. They need to decide that they are committed to the Gospel of Christ, to be experiencing something transformational through it, and to know personally its relational aspects. Thus they are convinced they have something to share that is of value. However, sometimes persons may discover this in the process of evangelism when the transformational and relational aspects of Christianity are brought to consciousness.
2. They need to decide that they are willing to engage in evangelism, at least in its elemental form: i.e. to create a hospitable congregation, willing to make people feel at home and to share with them the life of the congregation. This may involve some prioritizing by which people decide how they are going to use the time they give to the church. It particularly involves the decision to be hospitable. This must be seen as a commitment because of possible interruptions and dislocations when new persons are brought into the "home".
3. Then they need to develop some simple strategies, including such as:
  - A. The Pastor needs to provide enthusiastic and supportive leadership. However, he/she cannot take the place of lay leadership and involvement.
  - B. Some board or committee that will accept responsibility for over-all planning. This could be an existing board of elders or consistory, or might be an Evangelism Committee if enough leadership is available.
  - C. There should be a way to invite visitors. This may be done through a group that will be responsible for initially contacting prospects, in a brief and hospitable call, referred to it by the congregation or pastor. It can also be done through members contacting friends. It might be good to focus efforts around important times in the church year when persons might think of visiting churches (Christmas, Easter).
  - D. A group should be developed for immediate follow-up calling (within three days) upon persons who do visit - this only needs to be a very brief 15 min. call to acknowledge the visit.
  - E. A group should be formed and trained to assume responsibility for spotting and welcoming visitors to the service, making sure that their names and addresses are secured.
  - F. Make sure that the worship services are positive and uplifting and that as many of the essential congregational services are available as possible (e.g. Sunday School, youth program, choir, organizations which will provide places for involvement).
  - G. Provide ways for incorporation and assimilation into the congregation.
  - H. Make use of all available means for public relations to create community awareness of your congregation.
4. Training often needs to be provided, but keep it simple and uncomplicated. Respect the limitations of people's available time. Do what is possible, not what is ideal. All groups should meet as necessary for inspiration, assignment of responsibilities, and feedback.

5. Assistance with methods and materials can be provided through denominational offices, or through such an organization as the National Evangelistic Association of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Write the Net Resource Center, 5001 Ave. N, Lubbock, TX 79412, or call 1-800-638-3463. You can ask for their two Guides from which to order materials and services: Resource Guide, and The Consultation and Training Services Guide. The Resource Guide contains video and printed resources on most everything you would like to try. They also publish a newsletter called "Net Results".

As for explicit evangelism, the Pastor's time, as resident theologian, is limited. If the questions and issues of the unchurched and non-Christian are to be dealt with, there will need to be lay persons to help. Even those who have formerly been church members may have questions about faith which arise out of life crises, previous religious affiliations, or curiosity about the congregation being visited. Thus it is important for the pastor to train some persons within the congregation who are willing to commit themselves to a longer period of training and service than the groups mentioned above. These people can be called in wherever others encounter issues that they feel unequipped to treat. Whereas the above groups make relatively brief calls, these calls will take more time and the members so involved will have to be protected from overload and from impossible situations with no end to needs and no resolution in sight.

If the congregation cannot provide a group of persons committed to this growth of understanding and willing to spend some time with people, then evangelism becomes only the winning of those who raise few questions, are attracted by the implicit Christianity of those who contact them, and appreciate what the congregation has to offer. Such evangelism, while very worthy, does not adequately deal with the many persons for whom faith and life need explanation.

It is hoped that the following will be helpful in moving towards a contemporary theology of evangelism. This material is for the Pastors and other theologians of the congregations and church who wish to be ready to deal with faith and evangelism explicitly. And it is especially dedicated to those who feel the call to help the church think through crucial aspects of its life and mission.