

LEADING IN EVANGELISM

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A THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE FOR EVANGELISM

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Introduction

Over the last three decades, churches of the Anglican Communion, including the Church of England, have adopted Five Marks of Mission as a summary description of the Church's missionary vocation and task.

THE FIVE MARKS OF MISSION

The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ.

1. To proclaim the good news of the kingdom.
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers.
3. To respond to human need by loving service.
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation.
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx

These marks of mission express a holistic and integral approach to mission which reflect the breadth of God's concern for his creation. However, the Anglican Consultative Council, the body responsible for formulating these statements, identify the first statement, 'To proclaim the good news of the kingdom', as that which provides the framework within which the other marks are to be construed. This first mark, which, according to the ACC, deals with personal evangelism, is, they insist, a summary of what all mission is about, because it is based on Jesus' summary of his own mission. This should thus be the key statement about everything we do in mission.

Whilst the Five Marks of Mission remind us that mission as a category consists of more than simply evangelism, they also insist that without an evangelistic dimension to them, our other activities might not properly be described as being a

sharing in God's mission and therefore not truly holistic. There are solid theological grounds on which such an assertion might be made. It is the purpose of this paper to offer a brief examination of such grounds.

The Nature of God

One of the most significant developments in the theology of mission over the course of the last fifty years has been the growth in understanding that mission is an activity of God before it is an activity of the Church. Rather than undertaking mission on God's behalf, the Church participates in the very mission of which God himself is the author.

'IT IS NOT THE CHURCH OF GOD WHICH HAS A MISSION BUT RATHER THE MISSIONARY GOD WHO HAS A CHURCH.'

Although attributed to various different authors, a version of this statement is to be found in *The Mission of God's People*, Christopher JH Wright (Zondervan).



Because our own mission is a sharing in God's mission it must always be undertaken in a manner which accurately reflects, and indeed imitates, God's own missional activity.

Much of the biblical account is concerned with God's determination to be reconciled to humankind who have become estranged from him through their own rejection of his loving authority and care for them. This is the key to the wider restoration of creation and of human society, both of which bear the scars of human rebellion against God. God acts decisively for and on behalf of humankind, in the events surrounding the Exodus, and, supremely through the death and resurrection of Jesus, in order to rescue them and to reconcile them to himself, something of which they would be incapable without God's redemptive activity. However, he is equally concerned that the news of his saving acts should be communicated clearly to humankind in order that they might know of and experience his saving love for them. Thus God is not only redeemer but also revealer, taking the initiative in making himself known to people who have lost sight of him.

Early instances of such self-disclosure come in the Patriarchal narratives when God makes himself known to Abram (Genesis 12:1), Jacob (Genesis 28:13) and, subsequently, Moses (Exodus 3:4). The life and society of the nation of Israel is shaped around a body of law which has been spoken by God to his people for their blessing and flourishing. Throughout their history God repeatedly calls prophets to serve him and to speak his word to Israel, especially when they have lost sight of God himself and of the law which he has graciously given to his people. The responsibility incumbent upon God's servants, to speak for God to those who in some way lack knowledge and understanding, is made especially explicit in passages

such as Ezekiel 33, where the prophet is likened to a watch-person called to alert others to the presence of those things they have not yet seen.

When God himself enters, in the person of Jesus Christ, into human history, he does so in order to make himself known to those to whom he is unknown. One of John's characteristic titles for Jesus is the Word of God (John 1:1-14), God speaking to us, whilst the writer of the letter to the Hebrews (Hebrews 1:2) reiterates that God, having spoken in various ways in the past to us, has spoken definitively to us in these last days in his Son. The mysterious and unknown God is one who speaks to those whom he has made in order to reveal himself to them and to be known by them. Participation in God's mission will always reflect, and be shaped by, a concern to enable him to be known by those who do not yet know him.

Christian Anthropology

Humankind, in Christian tradition, is presented as something of a paradox. On the one hand, created by God and as bearers of his image, humans possess great dignity. On the other hand, by virtue of their fallen nature and participation in human sinfulness, both through their solidarity with Adam and their imitation of him, they are those who are now flawed creatures, incomplete and in need of salvation which can only be provided by God.

The consequences of rebellion against God's proper authority and of setting ourselves up as our own supreme authority are described, in the Genesis account, in terms of alienation, and of the rupture of relationship in four related dimensions. Firstly, rebellious humankind experiences rupture in relationship with God and banishment from his immediate



presence. Secondly, this leads to a sense of inner alienation evidenced by an experience of shame (and the need to hide from God), fear and an unhelpful self-consciousness. Thirdly, inner personal disease leads to the breakdown of relationships between individual human beings. The man and woman argue and seek to blame each other for the wrongs which have now befallen them. The subsequent chapters of the book Genesis present a picture of humankind descending into an ever-deepening spiral of violence, disordered relationships and dispersal. Finally, humans experience a disordered relationship with the stuff of creation. The very thing which was designed to be a favourable environment in which they might flourish now becomes a hostile place of toil and struggle.

The redemptive work undertaken by God in Christ is addressed to the healing and restoration of each of these different dimensions of human experience. Because humankind is the pinnacle of God's creation, designed by God to share with him in his stewardship over creation, and because the key to effectiveness in fulfilling such a destiny lies in maintaining relationship with God, the key to the reconciliation of humans to themselves, to others and to the creation is reconciliation with God. It is for this very reason that the five marks of mission, whilst seeking to address the work of reconciliation in a holistic way, recognise the need for reconciliation with God to be paramount. Unless this issue is addressed our missional endeavours will be incomplete and could easily be a reflection of the human impulse to achieve our aims without recourse to God.

One of the consequences of the Fall is that humankind, through its separation from God, has lost its capacity to intuit God's will and to hear God's voice unaided. Jesus himself seems to allude to this in his explanation of his own teaching ministry (Matthew 13:10-17) and in his insistence that no-one

can come to faith in him unless enabled to do so by God (John 6:44). This is a note repeatedly echoed by the apostle Paul, for example in his explanation of the spiritual dullness of the unbelieving as being due to their minds being blinded by the god of this world (2 Corinthians 4:3-47).

Another way in which the incapacity of humankind simply to find our own way back to God is expressed in Scripture is through the diagnosis of the human condition apart from God as being that of spiritual death (for example in Ephesians 2:1). Those who are dead require not improvement nor assistance but resurrection. Like Lazarus they need to hear God's word of command to rise from death, and to respond by leaving their tomb of isolation from him.

When we ask, how is it that God opens the spiritual eyes and ears of those estranged from him, or how is his word of command to rise from death heard, the consistent answer offered by the New Testament seems to be that it is the gospel itself which has the capacity to accomplish this. Jesus' parable of the soils (Matthew 13:1-23) implies that the action of sowing the seed of God's word is that which either elicits faith or reinforces resistance to God in the human heart. The apostle Paul is eager to proclaim the gospel (Romans 1:15-16) because of his confidence that it is this gospel which is God's power for salvation to all who respond to it. For people to have the capacity to respond, for the possibility of faith to be aroused in them, the gospel needs to be proclaimed.

'HOW THEN WILL THEY CALL ON HIM IN WHOM THEY HAVE NOT BELIEVED? HOW WILL THEY BELIEVE IN HIM WHOM THEY HAVE NOT HEARD? AND HOW WILL THEY HEAR WITHOUT A PREACHER?'

Romans 10.:4

The Person and Work of Christ

Consideration of the person and work of Jesus Christ shapes and influences our current discussion in two distinct but related ways. On the one hand, Jesus' own ministry serves as a model and example for us, a pattern around which our own actions should be formed. Jesus himself makes this explicit in describing to his first followers the nature of their own task. Having explained earlier that they would be engaged in exactly the same works as he himself had been during his earthly ministry (John 14:12), subsequent to his resurrection, he sends them out 'in the same manner that the Father has sent me' (John 20:21). Equally, our understanding of the priority of evangelism as a ministry for followers of Jesus is reinforced by Jesus' own teaching and instruction to his first disciples.

We have already noted that Jesus is sent into the world both to redeem the world and to reveal, as Word of God, the truth about God. Motivated by love of people and compassion for their condition, from the very beginning of his public



ministry, these two emphases come to the fore in his announcement of God's good news and his invitation to his hearers to respond in repentance and faith (Mark 1:14-15). Although entirely holistic in his approach to mission¹, and although his works of power have a revelatory dimension to them, Jesus' first priority seems to be that of preaching², or announcing publicly the news of the coming of God's kingdom and inviting others to change the direction of their orientation towards God (repent) and to follow him. Jesus is frequently depicted as taking initiatives in introducing others to the possibility of relationship with God and describes his own primary purpose as that of seeking and saving those who are lost (Luke 19:10). Mission which is undertaken either as a participation in the mission of Jesus or as a faithful imitation of that mission will always be shaped by the impulse to make the invitation of Christ known, especially to those who are uninformed about or alienated from Christ.

Not only are we moved by the example of Jesus, but we are also compelled by the instructions he has given to those who follow after him. Frustrated and grieved by the spiritual plight of his contemporaries, Jesus first of all urges his followers to pray for God to raise up yet more workers to share in the work which Jesus himself was undertaking (Matthew 9:36-38). Immediately after this exhortation Jesus commissions his twelve closest followers and sends them out to preach the good news of the kingdom of God in word and deed (Matthew 10:1ff). This commission first entrusted to the twelve is shortly afterwards extended to a larger group of 'other' disciples (Luke 10:1-20). Luke's narrative carries within it a delightful

description of the ministry of evangelism: the disciples are sent ahead of Jesus, to every place where he himself was going to come, effectively to prepare the way. It is often helpful to construe our own evangelistic task as simply that of informing others about Jesus in such a way that they will be able to recognise signs of his presence and activity when he draws close to them, as he surely will.

The commission is finally widened even further to include the entire Christian community³ who are commissioned as witnesses to the events surrounding Jesus and to their consequences for the world (Luke 24:47-48). To belong to the community of Jesus Christ is to share with sisters and brothers in the task entrusted to that whole community by its founder of bearing witness to him.

The Ministry of the Holy Spirit

In the same breath with which Jesus instructs his first followers about their task as witnesses he also promises them the resources they will require to undertake this task effectively. When the Holy Spirit comes upon them at Pentecost, then these followers will receive God's power in a dramatic fashion. The consequence of this endowment will be that they will find themselves bearing witness to Jesus, not simply to those amongst whom they live, but in every corner of the world and to those with no previous knowledge or understanding of Jesus. The way in which this is framed by Luke (Acts 1:8) gives the impression that there is something of an inevitability about the consequences of the indwelling of the Spirit – those who possess the Spirit will become

¹Luke 4:18-21 is possibly the fullest summary description from the lips of Jesus of his own mission. As well as verbal proclamation, he is concerned to bring healing, restoration and release to those who are crushed by disease, demonic and other oppression, and to bring grace to those who are victims of injustice.

²Mark 1:38 – Jesus is unwilling to stay in one place where he has seen remarkable fruit from his ministry, insisting that he must go to preach in other towns 'for this is what I came for'.

³Those addressed in the final verses of Luke's gospel include the eleven 'and those who were with them' (Luke 24:33).



witnesses as the Spirit directs them and inspires them. Certainly, in the immediate aftermath of Pentecost, and despite much opposition, the first followers of Christ, both apostles and ordinary church members (Acts 11:19-21) are found bearing witness to Jesus publicly, and in the privacy of individual homes, as the Spirit works in and through them.

At key moments in the development of the mission of the early Church it is the Holy Spirit who takes fresh initiatives, inviting others to partner with him in missional activity. So, the Spirit leads Ananias, through a vision, to baptise Saul (Acts 9:10), and leads Peter, through another vision, to break new ground by throwing off historic religious taboos and entering a non-kosher household to preach the gospel to a spiritually hungry Gentile (Acts 10:9ff). It is the Spirit, some years later, who instructs the elders of the Antiochene church to set apart two of their number for the purposes of planting churches in as yet unreached territory (Acts 13:2), and the same Spirit who sends these two apostles out on their way (Acts 13:4).



The Holy Spirit may be described as the missional Spirit who is sent by the Father and the Son into the Church to mobilise the Church for witness. Many phenomena are held up as constituting definitive signs of the presence of the Spirit within the life of an individual. Perhaps the one sign above all which might be identified as indicating an authentic experience of the Holy Spirit is that the recipient has developed a desire to engage in witness on behalf of Jesus Christ. Where the Holy Spirit is truly present then such witness will be the result. Perhaps it is such an experience of the Spirit which the apostle Paul has in mind when he describes his own experience of being compelled by the love of Christ to speak out on behalf of God and of his desire to be reconciled to those far from him (2 Corinthians 5:14ff).

Evangelism thus becomes not merely a duty imposed upon those who are Christians, but the very (super)natural outflow of the indwelling Spirit, the most normal evidence of having been initiated into Christ.

Ecclesiology

More recent studies in missiology have not only firmly rooted the impetus for mission in the very character and being of God (*missio dei*) but have also, at the same time drawn attention to the essentially missional nature of the Church.

God's intention in establishing a people who would be

uniquely his possession was that they might serve as a witness to other peoples of the presence and goodness of God. Abram and his descendants are to be blessed by God in order that they might extend his blessing to others (Genesis 12:2). The post-exilic prophets speak of the calling of Israel to be a light to other nations who will be drawn to God themselves through the witness born by Israel (Isaiah 60:3). If the witness of Israel is seen in relatively passive terms, with other nations simply being drawn to their light, the witness of those who are the inheritors of Israel's commission in the New Testament, the Church of Jesus Christ¹, is seen as a more active ministry. Although, like their Old Testament forbears, there is an expectation that the distinctive lifestyle of the Church will be so attractive that others will simply be drawn to Christ as a result (1 Peter 2:12), there is equally an expectation that Christians will look for opportunities to take initiatives in making known to others the good news. God has chosen and called us so that we might proclaim the worth of the one who called us from darkness to light (1 Peter 2:9), and we are always to be ready to give an explanation for the hope we have in Christ (1 Peter 3:15).

Many of the titles and metaphors by which the Church is described in Scripture further serve to underline its evangelistic nature and calling. As the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12), the post-ascension, physical representation of Jesus on earth, the expectation is that the Church will

¹In 1 Peter 2:9-10 many of the distinctive titles given to Israel are now used to describe the Church and its missional vocation.

participate in exactly the same activities (including evangelism in word and deed) which Jesus himself undertook. As light to the world, and a city set on a hill (Matthew 5:14-16), we are called to live and speak publicly in such a way that others are enabled to be drawn to God. Lesslie Newbiggin (for example, in *The Open Secret* and *The Household of God*) has helpfully summarised the vocation of the Church as being a 'sign, foretaste and instrument' of God's kingdom. We are to demonstrate, through the quality of our life lived in the power of the Spirit, the beauty of God's kingdom, and to give to others an opportunity to experience, ahead of time, the nature and quality of that life. Moreover, we are to bring something of the reality of that kingdom to bear in the lives of others as we offer them opportunity to encounter something of God's transforming presence and power in their own lives.

Many of the words frequently used to describe those who hold office or responsibility for ministry in the Church also indicate a focus on proclaiming to others the good news of Christ. The significance of this for us lies in the fact that there is a clear correlation between the core business of the Church and the roles of those who hold office within it. Words such as steward or sentinel, both words that are used by the Anglican ordinal to describe the ministry of the ordained, carry within them a sense of responsibility for passing on God's word. Sentinels are somewhat akin to the watch people of Ezekiel 33, whom we have already noted had the responsibility of alerting citizens to news which had consequences for them. The concept of stewardship features both in the parables of Jesus and also within the writings of Paul as a way of understanding the responsibility of ministry. Paul describes the gospel as a stewardship entrusted to him (1 Corinthians 9:16-17), the discharge of which involves proclaiming it. Indeed, so urgent is this responsibility that the apostle describes himself as under compulsion to fulfil the requirements of this stewardship. Jesus' parables which deal

with faithful and unfaithful stewards (such as Matthew 25:14-30) warn of the consequences of not allowing the word of God to increase and bear fruit through letting it loose. The unfaithful steward keeps this precious gift to himself and thus runs the risk of incurring the displeasure of the one who has entrusted to him its stewardship.

Perhaps the single word group which most clearly informs a distinctively Christian understanding of ministry and leadership in the NT is that of diakonia. Within many of the historic denominations, not only are those who are ordained first ordained as deacons, but, even for those who go on to enter other orders of ministry, there is a sense that one never ceases to be a deacon. So, in some more catholic traditions, it is not unusual for those who are bishops or priests to wear, under their episcopal or presbyteral robes, a dalmatic, the distinctive vesture of a deacon, an ongoing reminder of the foundation for their ministry. Given that, in the Graeco-Roman culture from which the church emerged, the diakonos was a household servant, indentured to a master, it is not difficult to see why such a designation seemed most appropriate to those who had a sense of being bond-servants of Jesus Christ (Romans 1:1).

However, more recent research into the background to diakonia and its cognates (especially by JN Collins) has expanded our understanding of the role of the diakonos in its secular context. The diakonos was indeed a household servant, but not, as was previously thought, merely one who waited on tables. Rather, the diakonos was a trusted representative of a master, an ambassador, who had the responsibility of speaking out on behalf of that master and whose words came with the very authority of that master. It is very likely this understanding of diakonia which underlies Paul's self-consciousness of being an ambassador for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20), making an appeal to others on behalf of his



master, as if God were making his own appeal through the ambassador.

Whatever the ministry of the ordained might be, and however we conceive their particular areas of service and responsibility, the notion of diakonia, of speaking out on behalf of God, must play a foundational role in shaping the understanding of their task. Extending God's appeal and invitation to be reconciled to him to those far from him is that which must shape and affect all ordained ministry undertaken in his name.

Eschatology

The famous late nineteenth century missionary pioneer, C T Studd, described his ambition as 'to set up a rescue shop within a yard of the gates of hell'. For him, and for many others with similar evangelistic fervour throughout Christian history, one of the most compelling reasons for engaging in evangelism would have been the prospect of eternal separation from God for those currently estranged from him. It seems to be the case that the eternal fate of unbelievers is less significant as a motivation for evangelism, at least in the contemporary western world, than it was for our forebears.

It may be that, given the increasingly secular mindset of contemporary culture, and the move from a religious outlook to a more therapeutic one, the prospect of eternal judgment cuts little ice amongst unchurched people and is thus not a profitable point of entry for discussion of the Christian faith with them. This is exacerbated by the general cultural suspicion of anything which smacks of accountability, of my choices being subject to the scrutiny of another, or anything which might compromise my own right to determine my own trajectory in life. Majoring on the positive offer of Jesus Christ of life in all its fullness may well arouse the interest of listeners more effectively.

Christians equally, as children of the same cultural moment, are likely themselves to be more focussed on an awareness of what Christ offers than on the prospect of the eternal consequences of rejecting his offer. We too are probably more conditioned than we realise by the cultural assumptions to do with the autonomy of the individual and thus of the inappropriateness of anything which might conflict with the right of unrestricted individual choice. This may account for the sense of reticence around things to do with eternal judgement which has grown during the course of the last two or three decades. Indeed, much Christian opinion on the ultimate fate of unbelievers seems to have drifted towards an implicit universalism in more recent times. This may well be one of the factors which most strongly inhibits engagement in evangelism by believers.

Whilst it is certainly true that Jesus seems to reserve his warnings of the judgment to come for those whom he suspected of being self-righteous, nevertheless, there are frequent warnings in the NT of the coming judgement, and of

the fact that ultimately all will have to give account before God for the choices we have made in respect of submitting to or rejecting the offer of Christ. The apostle Paul informs the Athenians that God has fixed a day when he will judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31). In this he is merely reiterating the assurance given by Jesus himself that history will end with God's just declaration over all those whom he has made as to whether they have found refuge in Christ, and thus been put right with God, or whether they have rejected his offer of reconciliation and thus destined themselves to eternal death apart from God.

Whilst we are correct to emphasise that the Christian faith is about far more than simply eternal benefits after death, it is entirely misleading to deny that there are indeed eternal consequences to our response in this age to the offer of Christ. Fresh reflection on this eschatological truth may well restore to us a fresh sense of urgency in our own evangelism. This sense of urgency may be further enhanced by the realisation that, since the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, we find ourselves in the last days, the final era of history prior to the return of Christ in glory.

Sentinels

We have, on more than one occasion, noted Ezekiel's likening of those privileged to know of God's truth to sentinels. Their function was to alert the ignorant and uninformed of impending events with consequences for them. We conclude with the suggestion that this might be a most helpful way of understanding our own task as contemporary Christian witnesses. We are those who are privy to God's revelation of himself in Christ and to the significance for all people of Christ's life, death, resurrection, ascension and anticipated return. Our responsibility before God is to alert others, not in the know, to the significance of these events. We are not responsible for their response to such news, but we are accountable before God for making this news known. The good news of God's saving work through Jesus Christ is not the announcement of one addition to the smorgasbord of spiritual pathways available to modern western consumers. Rather, it is a statement about the true story of the world with significant consequences for every individual human being who will ever walk this earth.

