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# What Is Evangelism?

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*by Michael Green*

Evangelism is much misunderstood and in some circles it is much hated—even by some United Methodist circles. Others view evangelism as a regrettable necessity for pew filling. Still others regard it as a legitimate activity for a particular individual who likes that sort of thing. Elsewhere it is totally reprehensible proselytizing.

There is an increasing opposition to evangelism worldwide because we live in a global village in which everybody tries to be “nice guy” to everybody else and succeeds at it lamentably. Therefore, great numbers have fallen for relativism. In other words, there’s this one mountain and we’re all going up it, and it doesn’t matter which route we take since we are going to the same place in the end. To believe that is totally illogical, totally untrue, and if we have the crudeness to point it out, we become totally unpopular. After all, why should any faith claim ultimacy?

As a result, evangelism tends to be ignored by many preachers, or if it happens it comes off as a mild exhortation, a sort of tailpiece at the end of their sermons. This only injects people against the real thing; they’ve become inoculated against it because of the very mild doses.

## **A Student Warning**

Students need to be particularly wary of “innoculation.” When a student at my college shows me a sermon he is preparing to preach, I say, “What sort of sermon is this?” And if he says, “It’s sort of a bit of teaching and it’s also a bit evangelistic,” I then say, “Look, you can’t do that. You’ve got to go for one clear aim. If you’re going evangelistic, then go overboard on it. Go to town on it.” Everything has to be subservient to one clear aim.

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### **What Is Evangelism?**

I think the best definition of evangelism I've ever heard was given by British Archbishop William Temple in the days of World War II. He said, "To evangelize is to so present Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit that men and women shall come to put their faith in God through Him, to accept Him as their Savior and to serve Him as their King in the fellowship of His church." That's a very rich definition. To present Jesus Christ, you do the presenting, but it's in the power of the Holy Spirit. He drives it home so that men and women put their *trust* in God, not just *believe about* Him, but truly put their trust in God. He is the Good News. In Luke 4:4-18 you find Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth telling the essence of the *kerygma* straight out of the Bible, His Bible, the Old Testament, that God had anointed Him to announce release to the captives, and that sort of thing. Marvelous news! Jesus said, "Today it's fulfilled in your ears." He is Himself the Gospel and the healing, the pardon and the liberty of God's favor all wrapped up in Himself, Jesus Christ. So we need to be constantly proclaiming Him. Evangelism is the Christian community sharing Jesus Christ.

*Evangelism is not the same as mission.* Mission is the total man-directed function of the church as opposed to worship which is the God-directed function of the church. Mission is much, much broader than evangelism. Evangelism is not the same as a drive for church membership, which often has nothing to do with Jesus Christ.

*Evangelism is not telling people what to do.* People hate being told what to do, and evangelism isn't that.

*Evangelism is not proselytizing.* I met a Jew who had come to faith in the Lord Jesus and I said to him, "I hope you will stay a Jew," and he was rather surprised. He thought I wanted him to be a Christian. I said, "I don't want you to be a Christian. You are the stock of Abraham. You have now found the Messiah. You're a Messianic Jew. You are the rightful member of the kingdom and I am just a Gentile grafted onto your olive tree. That's all I am." He began to see that becoming a Messianic Jew didn't mean that he would have to buy all the sludge that Christianity has accumulated for two thousand years worldwide, but that he would indeed be a Jesus man in the midst of unbelieving Jews.

It is wonderful to observe the different backgrounds of those

who come to Jesus. When a Hindu comes to Christ he doesn't repudiate his background. He thanks God for the good things in it which were pointers along the way to Jesus. In turn, when he evangelizes he knows he can identify with his people to a certain extent. He can build bridges to them, and then lead them on to Jesus. Evangelism is not proselytizing.

*Evangelism is not shallow.* Presenting the truths of the Gospel is a deep matter, but should be presented in simple language, simple enough for a child to understand.

*Evangelism is not individualistic* because it draws you into the fellowship of God's people.

*Evangelism is not a system.* Whether it is three quick points or four spiritual laws, or five things God wants you to know, these are all man-made systems. They are boiled down; they are pills. That's all right if they have the right mixture in them, but don't get so caught up in your pill that you can't see the meal of which it is the synthesis.

*Evangelism is not proclamation alone*, as some evangelicals have tended to think; or presence alone, as Christian radicals and liberals have tended to think. No, it is the Good News of the kingdom of God that has broken into our world. The early Christians knew Jesus risen and their evangelism overflowed. When we have full hearts and Jesus comes into the center of our hearts, the whole thing will overflow.

### **Preparing for Evangelism in Church**

*First, you've got to prepare the congregation.* Most congregations are not ready for evangelism to be done in their midst and that's why it doesn't happen. God isn't going to bring new chicks to birth and put them in a refrigerator. Live chicks go under live hens. Therefore, you've got to work to have live hens around. Most church members think they know what the church is, and what it's supposed to be doing, and there you are as a new minister. It isn't the church that's on trial; it's you that's on trial. They will squeeze you into their mold. Now, it may be a lovely mold, but it may not be. The mold you seek, the mold to which God will entrust new converts is a church where love flows in the congregation. If love doesn't flow, then all the technique is a travesty, a blasphemy. Love is the very atmosphere of heaven; it's the heart of God. How

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can you love everybody in a large congregation? You can't, and therefore, you are driven back to house fellowships. These groups of a dozen or so are where people can really get to know and love one another. Everyone matters and everyone is a limb in that miniscule body, and forms part of the great body of the main congregation.

*Second, there needs to be worship that is alive.* Our worship is so often dull and totally predictable. Everything is set up in armor plating and the Holy Spirit isn't given a chance to have a say in the service. Don't think I'm against planning. Careful planning, worship, and evangelism go hand in hand. Evangelism leads to worship and worship leads to evangelism. If you maintain fabulous worship in your church you don't need to do much evangelizing. People will just topple into the kingdom when they're not looking. They will. We've had many people converted at our communion services. We've had some converted who came to our church when nobody was there. I didn't think that was possible, but it has happened. The aura of thousands of people praying down through a thousand years must do something; I don't understand it, but people have been won. Of course, they were taught the implicit faith beforehand, but that visit to the church toppled them into the kingdom. We have evangelistic services a few times a year, prepared for with great care, and I can tell you the thing that is most important is the worship.

We get college kids in large numbers at Oxford, and they come cynical, atheistic, and arrogant as they can be. After all, they've made it to the top Ivy League place, you know. As Oxford students they are amazed to find there are Christians on their corridor who say, "Come to lunch and we'll tell you what the Gospel is about." And so they drag off to our place and they get a lunch and a brief drama sketch and some slides about the work. Then they get an invitation to come on Sunday. The first Sunday of the term is a big evangelistic occasion at our church. They have to line up to get in. They have to line up across the street and down the street and that blows their minds. They've never known a church where they had to actually line up to get in and so they say to themselves, "What on earth's happening in these parts? Here we go to Oxford and find that religion is a very important part of the scene. All our friends, not the old gang, but all our friends are inviting us to hear about

Christianity and they line up to get in.” Eventually, when they get in they have to sit on the floor or the window sills, and it’s just amazing. There are far more people in the building than the building is supposed to hold.

And then the worship starts! The worship will include old hymns, modern songs, orchestra, testimony, dance, the use of movement. We use our voices, don’t we, as instruments to God? Why shouldn’t we use the most flexible instrument we have, our bodies? It’s a God-directed thing and it lifts people’s hearts toward God. By the time I get up to preach it’s dead easy. People topple into the kingdom like ripe fruit off a tree. Because there’s a massive question mark implanted by the worship. The worship says, “What have these people got?” They’re lost in praise. And some people have their hands in the air, and some people don’t and nobody seems to mind, but there is a complete openness to God Almighty and the glory of God is upon the place. Worship is crucial in evangelism.

You need time for worship; not the one quick hymn and then you’re in. These are not preliminaries, but the heart of the matter. Then the Gospel is simply presented explaining how this phenomenon that they see all around them has come to be.

So, preparing the congregation in love and worship and expectancy is of prime importance. If people don’t expect anything, they won’t get anything. You can’t start with one massive service like that, but you start with one person coming to Christ and that person gives a testimony. Then the old hard wood in the congregation says, “Goodness me, people do get converted today! Amazing! It shouldn’t happen!” The level of expectancy has got to rise because God will entrust to you that which you are capable of handling and no more. He is not going to bring new babes in the church to die by exposure.

*The congregation needs to be taught to pray.* When we have a major evangelistic address, there’s a hundred people across the road in my house praying for the whole thing while it’s going on. Prayer is releasing the Holy Spirit of God to do His work in the hearts of people. Who convicts of sin? Can you? I can’t. Who can make Jesus attractive? I can’t. Who can enable anybody to say from their heart, “Jesus is Lord”? I can’t. Who can baptize somebody into Christ? I can’t. Who can enable a new convert to

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croak, “Abba, Daddy”? I can’t. Who can give graces of character and gifts of spiritual power? I can’t. It’s the Holy Spirit. He does all these things. So relax. It’s the Spirit’s business, but the Spirit is wooed by prayer and by love and by faith and by expectancy. And by someone like old Mrs. Botts who is willing to get up and chat with somebody on the way out. She just looks in his eyes and says, “Do you know Jesus yet?”

*Not everybody is called to be an evangelist, but everybody is called to be a witness.* And when you’ve got a whole congregation that you’ve trained up so that they are witness-bearers to Jesus, then you’re getting somewhere, and then when you preach the Gospel to the masses more will happen, because you’ve got lots of secret agents lying around the congregation. They just say to somebody next to them, “Why don’t we go off and have lunch together?” or, “How about a coffee?” or, “Let’s sink a coke.” This is how people come to the Lord. When we do a big evangelistic shoot, as it were, only about half the people come to the front at the invitation. The other half get hobbled at the back or when they go out the door, or at lunch afterwards, or late at night. People chat them up. Of course, one has to train them for that and that’s what ministers are for, among other things. So prepare the congregation.

### **Making Evangelism Special**

Don’t do half-cocked evangelism every other week. Go to town on it once in a blue moon. Plan it, but not too often. Use natural occasions when the unbelievers come in. We have a harvest festival in England, which is a sort of strange pagan hangover, but they all turn up so they get it in the ear. Christmas and Easter are obvious occasions when the fringe of the church is there.

Plan; visit! You need feet to get into homes, and not just you, but the whole congregation. Play it tough with them. Say, “Look folks, we’re going to have an evangelistic address next week. Don’t come in here if you haven’t got somebody with you. Go across the road to my house and pray.” And that means everybody’s got a part to play, but it intends to say that you’ve really got some pagans in the congregation. There’s nothing that so disheartens an evangelist as the beaming faces of the saints there all the time. Remember, in your preparation, that the music, the testimony, the

prayer, the timing, everything must be subservient to the preaching of the Gospel. You'll need time to plead with men and women and to challenge men and women to respond. It is an evangelistic occasion and everything is goaled that way.

### **Preparing the Evangelistic Message**

*You must be crisp—no wasted words.* Use clear headings, be decisive, be humorous, but subordinate everything to the aim of men and women meeting Jesus. You must arouse interest. Start where people are and then lead them on to where you want them to go. That's a basic educational method.

*You can take an assumption people have and blast it out of the water.* For instance, you publicize that you are going to speak on, "It doesn't matter what you believe so long as you are sincere." Then you shred it open in front of their eyes. Some have been wearing this theory as clothing, so you've got to do it very gently. They've been wearing these clothes for years and you are ripping their clothes off and they're naked, and you want to clothe them with the robe of Christ's righteousness. They don't want the beastly robe that's offered to them unless they see that they're naked. One of my books is on common objections people have to the Gospel, such as: "I'm not the religious sort," or "All religions lead to God," or Jesus was just a good man," or "I do my best, no man could do more," or "Nothing could alter the past," or "When you're dead, you're dead," or "You can't change human nature." These are very common chestnuts that you can send into orbit, and when you do people will want to hear about Jesus.

*You can arouse interest* by taking an assumption and destroying it, or you can go the opposite direction *by taking an interest and developing it.* I remember once speaking on love—man's number one interest. Boy, they were all there with their eyes flashing and their tongues hanging out. But you've got to be very fair when you do something like that. I spoke the other day at a college on Valentine's Day. Do you observe Valentine's Day in these parts? You do? Did you know that Valentine was a Christian saint and he got murdered for his love for the Lord? Did you know that? Well, go to a Valentine's Day party, and when you are sure there's an opening for you to speak, inject a balm into that situation. Talk about love and say, "Well, folks, you don't know it but love comes from the

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great lover. Isn't it interesting that this Christian saint is the patron saint of love? It all comes from up there. And real love is personal. Real love is searching. Real love is sacrificial. Real love is lasting. Real love is challenging. We see signs of that in all the love between human beings, but you get it supremely in the great Lover. What are you going to do about Him?" Couldn't you preach on Valentine's Day? Of course you could! Take an interest and develop it.

*Or take an intriguing idea* such as, "Is there life before death?" Recently one of my friends preached on, "Is life worth more than the funeral expenses?" That was at a college. They crowded in to hear him and three of them accepted Christ.

*Or take an interesting modern concern*, "Is there a future for *homo sapiens*?"

Key in with feeling. Some years ago in Africa I started preaching on freedom, which was the most current concern of the whole continent. The Bible is full of stuff about freedom, about the Liberator, the cost of freedom, the path of freedom. It was a marvelous way in to the people.

A title designed to catch freshmen was, "Confirmed Too Young, Agnostic Too Long." Many identified with that so they came and they got more than they bargained for. You might challenge a lazy conviction with a sermon titled, "An Alternative to Agnosticism."

*Be on fire with the Gospel of Jesus*, and love of people. Be bold in drawing in the net, and have a clear, clear follow-up program. You need to establish a beginner's group of new converts. Each group should have about four leaders for each twelve to sixteen people so that they all get real personal care. Make people commit themselves. You're not interested in just a decision. Often people aren't quite converted when they get into the groups. They are nearly there, but not quite, and as they stumble in their discovery of the Bible, as they jerk out those most moving, tear-jerking prayers, it's tremendous. It's one of the joys of my life—working with these beginner's groups.

Then there are the agnostic groups. It's a great thing to run an agnostic group. You have one, and you challenge them, eight or ten of them, and you say, "All right folks, you tell me what you don't believe, and I'll tell you what I do believe. You're in the majority so you should be happy." And then just take the stuff. They'll shoot themselves down largely. But you major on Jesus and the resurrec-



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tion as Paul did when he preached at Athens. Jesus and the resurrection is our “Good News” and woe unto us if we do not preach the Gospel. It is the highest privilege that we’re ever going to have and it’s the most thrilling thing we can do until we get to heaven.

Praise God for the privilege of telling the Good News—something we can do right up to extreme old age—we never have to retire from this job. We can keep on going until the Lord Jesus welcomes us into His home and says, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

