

GOD'S EXPRESSION: GROUND FOR EVANGELISM

Mel-Thomas Rothwell*

For all who take the Scriptures seriously, the evangelization of the world is a matter of primary concern. This endeavor can and should enlist the total intellectual as well as the spiritual energies of dedicated men and women. Even men engaged in the task of secular philosophy have recognized this.

Professor P. A. Schilpp, in his presidential address to the Western Division of the American Philosophical Society in Loyola University in 1960, urged the philosophers of western American to become involved in the world's serious plight, that their great ideas might serve the purpose of a society hard pressed for survival. Said Professor Schilpp, "unless we act now we may be too late. Revolutionary changes render speed a value. We may not meet thus another year. We should act now."

An intellectual commotion across the country arose against his bold suggestion. Did he propose to cast the pearls of philosophy before swine? Was he inviting the speculative philosophers to make philosophy bargain counter merchandise for the unsophisticated, including presumably, Christians concerned for the Great Commission, to handle and buy?

At the 1961 annual meeting of the division, Professor Schilpp requested time to answer the charges of his critics, that he had betrayed the trust of speculative philosophers by lowering the sights of the highly-calibrated philosophical "big berth." Fearlessly and shamelessly Professor Schilpp repeated his recommendation of the preceding year; make philosophy useful to a society in distress.

Taking Professor Schilpp's pertinent exhortation as a reasonable hypothesis, we too, as messengers of the Cross of Christ, must recognize

*Dr. Mel-Thomas Rothwell is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Bethany Nazarene College, Bethany, Oklahoma.

the gravity of our day, and act. Thought must combine with loving concern and eventuate in immediate action. There is no time to be lost; with John we should say: "I must work the works of Him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work" (9:4). Our calling, without delay, is to reach the perishing for whom Jesus died in a calculated and mighty evangelistic thrust.

If we begin our quest with the assumption that God is holy, we shall invariably see that evangelism is the innate, spontaneous disposition of holiness, that it is the unaffected tendency of God to redeem. Hence, holiness as redemptive spontaneity and evangelization of the world are inseparably linked.

The nature of God is to change, to spiritually transmute, and to recast the whole moral state in rational beings. Thus, God's expression is the sufficient, and only true, ground for the evangelization of the world.

Redemption, and its accompanying ethics, is rooted in the nature and activity of God. "As a consequence, man's relation to God is thought to be of vital importance, not simply for ethics, but within ethical theory itself."¹ The ethical ought is immediately and actively involved when God looks upon a fallen world. "The core of Old Testament ethics, its central, organizing principle, is to be found underneath an abundance of external codes of law in God's active righteousness, which through the covenant becomes 'the nature of the kingdom' (I Samuel 10:25)."² In the New Testament Christ is the embodiment of the ethical imperative. "When the whole being of God is bent on salvation to men, then his righteousness is operative."³ First we saw it in codified law, then in the crucified Christ. "The antithesis, which in dogmatics we are familiar with, is a righteous and just God and yet a Saviour. The Old Testament puts it differently—a righteous God and **therefore** a Saviour."⁴

The ethical justice of righteousness is redemption. Righteousness cannot be inactive in the presence of the need of salvation and remain just. In the expression of Amos justice and righteousness seem to imply the same thing, "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a perennial stream."⁵ The ethical compulsion which joins God's righteousness and His justice stands as a model of honor and equity to the ages.

The extraordinary righteousness of God binds Him in ethical allegiance to a world in despair. Ramsey has noted that "the biblical notion of justice may be summed up in the principle: To each according to the

measure of his real need, not because of anything human reason can discern inherent in the needy, but because his need alone is the measure of God's righteousness toward him."⁶ According to Ramsey, such justice or righteousness is primarily neither "corrective" nor "distributive," as the Greeks believed, but "redemptive," "with special bias in favor of the helpless who can contribute nothing at all and are in fact 'due' nothing."⁷

The gist of Ramsey's view is essentially true; God is not obligated to man because man deserves it. The urge to redeem is fundamentally inherent in God's holy nature. On that account, redemption is not predicated on man's need, but on God's involvement in that need. Man is redeemed because God is righteous, or holy, not because man is needy. The impelling act of redemption arises in God's end of the bipolar situation. We should recall Plato's view on the subject, in which the urge to perfection is potential in man in the sensuous pull of the perfect called Eros. Man envisages perfection and reaches out to it. The insights, purpose, and strength of persuasion are his own. Redemption is a human project resting squarely on reason, with the dialectic, not a dying Saviour, as the brightest hope. How far this humanistic improvisation misses the mark is not a problem of calculus, but a problem of ethical reflection. If the urge to perfection arises in men, then it is by ethical deduction dependent on man's insights and strength. What better thinking it makes to assume that the urge to save comes as a result of the love impulse of God's righteousness, expressed not in the erotic and erosive instincts of Eros, but in the non-sensual, spiritual Agape, or redemptive love of Christ.

This viewpoint does not add a different dimension, "the other half of the truth which I now think naturalism misses,"⁸ as W. T. Stace grudgingly admits. The thesis is not involved here in the question of whether the moral impulse must arise with God or man. The important, and deciding factor, is whether it should start with God, or with man, and what difference it would make. Garnett, Sorley, and others have held, or hold, that the movement in morality is from man to God, or religion. Garnett says that "the moral consciousness is not necessarily dependent upon any specific religious belief."⁹ "Even though it is possible to argue logically that there can be a morality apart from religion, and as Von Hartmann held a morality apart from God, yet if the concept God is included in a system of ethics it seems to follow necessarily that He would be the supreme referent, the Cause of all things, including morality."¹⁰

At this point we engage the inquiry head on as to whether actually there can be a morality apart from God. The speaker thinks not. And the basis of judgment revolves around the problem of home base. On what is morality predicated? Shall we say reason? Then we are shut up to some form of Platonism. The paucity of values has already been pointed out in Plato's brave, but futile, attempt to ground morality in man. To what shall we turn next? To the other end of the redemptive line, to God. He is the lone, and logical, alternative.

To base morality on reason is to trust the insights of the human mind, and already there is ample proof that this foundation is far too frail to support the heavy, complex superstructure of personal morality, to say nothing of the universal need. It would be far wiser and better to found morality on the character of God, His holiness. God's holiness is the valid universal ground for moral being and acting. From it the norms of right and wrong must be derived. By its nature, God's holiness is not only a sound base for morality, but it contains within itself the needed clarity of vision and the strength of motivation. "God so loved" is the mainspring of hope, but it is also the springhead of action, for out of the great heart of God redemption proceeds, inherent in His righteousness and motivated by His love.

The preceding may seem like an overworked enthusiasm for ethics. But unless we see clearly that the whole moral scale is involved in redemption, that it is not a side issue or after-thought with God, we bid fair to miss the import of what lies ahead in this study. We cannot pass simply from the majesty of God's existence to world evangelism. In fact, it may prove to be the most difficult step taken yet. But the writer is confident that it can be accomplished Scripturally and logically. To build up the force needed to lay the proper stress on the relation between holiness and evangelism, it seems advisable to begin with the crucial nature of the redemptive urge in God.

Holiness is God's love infolded; evangelism is God's love unfolded. Evangelism, therefore, is holiness in action through love. The point of emphasis is that holiness embodies love, the redemptive urge, and evangelism expresses it. Hence, God's expression is true, and sufficient, ground for evangelism. Holiness, or God's characteristic righteousness, is the lifeline of redemption, arising in God's existence in eternity and extending down to fallen man in time. The stages, or levels, of that linear movement of Divine love arises in God's very existence, amends in His exclusion, appropriates in His extension, and activates in His expression. Let us proceed to examine this thesis more closely.

The popular meaning ascribed to the term evangelism tends to be too imprecise. It will be necessary, because of this prevailing lack of exactness, to note the distinction between revival, as such, and holiness evangelism.

In current use, the terms revival and evangelism are interchangeable. Both terms refer to the common effort put forth in evangelical churches semi-annually, or at least at some conventional time of the year. These extended meetings are called revivals, or sometimes evangelistic services. Whichever name is given, the purpose is the same: to revive or uplift the church, and to get sinners saved, or the community evangelized. It is, with variations, a two-fold work, and the name given to the program matters very little, if at all, so long as the design is understood and maintained.

From some points of view the differential is unimportant; Christian workers, pastors, evangelists, and missionaries, work side-by-side in the common effort, and under most circumstances the dual purpose is achieved without the bother of definition. The overlapping results make the problem of definition seem non-existent. In most of these protracted meetings the Christian's witness is revived and given a keen edge of clarity and distinctness, and perchance the sinner attends the services he may be converted and added to the church.

However, if reflection is to become a part of the grand venture of soul revival and recovery, clear character-marks must be given to the readily accepted words, revival and evangelism. This we propose to do, for the writer believes that by this method only can the true meaning of both emerge. Even though the meaning of the term "revival" is incidental to the main point of the thesis herein explored, the clarity of the thesis may depend to some extent on careful distinctions present in the proper use of the words, revival and evangelism.

Two questions meet us at the outset: What is Revival? What is Evangelism? When a well-defined meaning is given to each term, one can see in that moment that there are fundamental differences, as well as features, which mark off revival from evangelism. Revival leads essentially to a personal difference made in a Christian or in a church, whereas evangelism seeks to effect a personal difference in the unsaved. Revival signifies the recovery of lost powers, while evangelism suggests the recovery of lost estates. In revival the believer is revived and any spiritual decline is counteracted in his life; in evangelism the sinner is arrested in his evil tracks and sin is directly counteracted in his life. Hence, revival is recovery for the church and evangelism is recovery for the community.

By the very nature of life, whether spiritual or physical, revival is necessary. It means the recovery of health and energy in the physical realm. If the strong influences of revival are not imposed, death ensues. It is revive or die. Since spirituality is also a kind of life it, too, must experience revival. Lost vigor is restored, lost fire is rekindled, and lost motion and activity are brought back to full potential. Owing to the perpetual drain on the believer's spiritual resources, revival is imperative to his well-being. Unless the sapping process of use is not offset, he will be emptied of spiritual power. Life may be outpoured but it must also be effectively and fully restored. The process of decline must therefore be balanced by the process of revival. In this way alone can sound spiritual health be maintained. It is at this point, precisely, that the throes of backsliding set in. So, in like manner as physical death must be countered by revival, spiritual death must be counterweighted by revival also. Herein lies the secret of personal revival, and herein lies the only possibility and hope of revival at all.

If this is what we mean by revival, wherein does the essential work of revival differ from the essential work of evangelism? The answer should be almost self-evident. Only as the soul of the believer is restored by spiritual renewal does he feel and express genuine concern for the sinner. In the words of David the Psalmist we read in that great, but commonplace, twenty-third Psalm, "He restoreth my soul." The soul needs frequent instances and periods of refreshment, renewal, and recovery. Therein is authentic revival, and these times of renewal are the sole occasions of revival. Revival in its truest sense can occur only in a Christian's soul where spiritual life subsides, for apart from being the instance of recovery from decline of spiritual power, vigor, and activity, revival has no meaning.

We have noted that revival and evangelism, though bearing vital distinctions, are complimentary relations and reactions in the plan of redemption. Revival is always followed by evangelistic reaction. The fullness and force of vigor and spiritual health experienced in revival are expended in the program of rescue and soul-winning for which evangelism is the proper description. Hence, evangelism is the expression of the high potential built up in the soul in real revival.

The term revival as used here does not indicate a new level of religious melodrama. Although there is nothing more dramatic than true revival, spiritual restoration of the diminished powers of the soul is vastly more than a delirium of ecstasy, no matter how typical or realistic

that may seem. When actual revival occurs, there will be spiritual dimension added to whatever human traits attend it; the holy and the heavenly will out-shine the creaturely and the mundane. Unless there is basic spiritual recovery for the dwindling resources of the soul, revival has not taken place.

Evangelism is God's Expression

Now for a moment of summary. The main line of thought proposes to establish the logical conclusion that evangelism is God's expression. His utterance is love, His language is holiness, His rhetoric evangelism. The urge to redeem is both natural and ethical for God, who is the personalized effulgence and effluence of holiness and love penetrating and transforming human souls. Thus God's expression intends and institutes evangelism.

Before we proceed to a closer view of evangelism as Divine expression, another factor needs careful underscoring. By the nature of the subjects and means involved in both revival and evangelism, both relate to the person primarily and to the community only in an indirect and accessory sense. Hence, revival and evangelism are clearly personal. Persons are changed first, then society incidentally. To begin with, society is to reverse God's order. God changes society by changing men. The social gospel is, therefore, a converse fallacy; it proposes to change man by changing society. Cultural amendment and enrichment are not anti-Christian, nor are they in any sense contrary to Christian idealism. However, social reformation and refinement brought about by the application of the arts and sciences is not what is meant by revival and evangelism. *Bona fide* art and science do not stand in opposition to spiritual recovery, but a sharp distinction marks one off from the other. Treating the psychological and sociological imperfections of a community for the express purpose of improving and enriching its culture is commendable to be sure, but the procedure may be secular, and even carnal, even though it involves religion and employs it as part of the facility. Revival and evangelism are supernatural, not merely natural, ways and means of altering society by first changing the social unit, man. On that account, Christian evangelism is directed to the person, not the community. What social elevation obtains is a result, not a cause, of evangelism. Socializing the Gospel tends to stress human motives and methods, with the consequent neglect of the supernatural.

Evangelism is God's Immediate Expression

Evangelism by meditation, the sanctified believer serving as the human means, does not by any odds preclude the Divine immediacy in the work of world evangelism. Evangelism cannot proceed without human beings acting as intermediates between God and the world, but these same intermediates cannot serve the cause of evangelism unless God is immediately present in the process of personal redemption. The effective rescue of the sinner can take place only as man, as go-between, makes common cause with God, supplying the means of God's expression. Man as agency in the work of evangelism is incidental to the mediation which must take place, not between God's agent and the sinner, but between God, Himself, and the sinner.

The persistent problem in evangelism is to establish rapport between the redeeming Saviour and the lost creature. God and man must meet in reconciliation and recovery. Theologians and philosophers have sought for a term to describe what ensues in this meeting of God and His fallen creature. Emil Brunner suggests the "Divine-Human encounter." By it he means a relation in truth, or as he puts it, "The Biblical conception of truth is: truth as encounter."¹¹ "Our understanding of the message of salvation and also of the Church's task is still burdened with the Subject-Object antithesis which originated in Greek philosophy," Brunner explains.¹² It may be true that the stress on the Subject-Object antithesis arose in Greek philosophy, as Brunner notes, but the moral and spiritual distinction which separate the Subject and the Object took place in the Garden of Eden before Greek reflection made history. Whether there is enough in Brunner's thesis of the Divine-Human encounter to heal the breach will have to be determined by someone who is more conversant with byways of Brunner's thought than is the writer. The translator, Armandus W. Loss, says the central theme of Brunner's discussion can be simply stated, "when God meets man, Christian truth comes into being."¹³ This actualistic concept of truth is offered in opposition to the Greek notion of substantialism. Christian truth, according to Brunner, is an act, and event. It has to do with something happening. Truth comes into being in the Divine-Human encounter, a personal coming together of God and man. The German word for "encounter," *Begegnung*, does not imply that a state of hostility exists between God and man, according to Principal Cairns,¹⁴ and if that be true then Brunner has missed the purpose and meaning of the Divine-Human encounter in the line of redemption. His idiom is clearly incapable of transmitting the correct meaning of the "encounter."

Edgar S. Brightman offered the following explanation: "the mind, interacting metaphysically with an agency not its own, finds itself having experiences which it cannot reasonably explain except as the affect on it of the interaction of other minds."¹⁵ "Selves, subpersonal, personal, and cosmic, are no part of each other, and yet their interaction and their inner experience as purposive unities constitute the structure of the universe," he adds.¹⁶ Professor Brightman completed his metaphysical quest, however, leaving the riddle, interaction, unsolved. Not with any intent of giving sanction to Brightman's concept of metaphysics, the writer recognizes value in his erudite conclusions.

With no satisfactory word to bridge the chasm between God and man, some theologians have adopted a French expression, *en rapport*, which implies a harmonious relationship, a state of mutual accord. Another French term seems even better, *reaprochement*, which signifies a bringing together, "or the establishment or a restoring of harmony and friendly relations."¹⁷

Whatever term is employed, it must carry the full weight implied in the circumstances of God meeting man so that the proper meaning will be construed. Perhaps there is no single word which can mean enough. When God meets man the circumstances involved include hostility, moral duality, change, and complete spiritual transformation. If there is a term which says all of this, let us use it, but if there is not, then do not let us reinterpret and refashion circumstances to fit a word. We might better make several trips than break down the wagon by overloading it.

It may be necessary to settle for as simple a word as direct, or immediate, contact between God and man, and leave the marginal results to additional terms as the need for a better understanding arises. The point begging for emphasis is that God does in reality meet man in true personal relationship. The moral values involved in that meeting have already been discussed under the terms, existence, eradication, and extension. We are anxious now to see how God's expression is incorporated into the plan of redemption.

Force and Immediacy Equivalent

Evangelism as God's expression implies that God's force of love is applied immediately, or directly, to the souls of men. He works through His spiritual ambassadors, the Christian people, as channels to reveal His love to the world, and He also operates directly by His Holy Spirit on the living souls and conscious minds of the unsaved. By this

means, and this means alone, is contact established and maintained with the human soul. All that happens in the mighty act of redemption transpires in the citadel of man's soul; it is the place of emancipation and then the altar of consecration and peaceful worship. "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me."²⁰

Thus, with the consent of man's free will, God invades his personality in some peculiar and mystical way. How this can, and does occur, has never, to the speaker's peace of mind, been answered by either theologians or philosophers. Apparently no words are known which can make clear what actually takes place when God saves a soul by cleansing and possessing it. Yet, the reality of that blessed union and tenancy is common experience to millions, who enjoy the power and pleasure of it without the trouble of explanation. And the disturbing fact about it to scholars is that they evidently possess a peace and assurance unknown to so many of the inquisitive ones who are always asking questions and never seem to come up with the right answers. The disquieting truth regarding the contemporary theologian is that he has the answers to a lot of questions nobody bothers to ask. There has been, without question, and in fact still is, a breakdown in communication between theologians and practical needs. Too often theology has been elevated in the theological seminaries to a sort of metaphysical heaven far removed from the common man and his deep spiritual needs. Too many, like Tillich, are playing "hard to get" and their thoughts are no nebulous that anyone trying to pick up their trails are soon lost in the fog. Small wonder that some of the best minds of western America, at the annual meeting of the Western Division of the American Philosophical Society at Loyola University in May, 1960, scratched their weary noggins in a futile attempt to decide whether Tillich is an atheist or not. It seems to the writer that he is saved from atheism only by a private definition of God, an idea which he is unable to articulate for intellectual consumption. Such terms as neo-orthodoxy, existentialism, and contemporaneity appear on the flash cards and those who watch the theological show discover by personal experience what Plato meant by the "Myth of the Cave."

The writer does not hereby cast reflection on the necessary, and noble, efforts of theologians diligently concerned with the problem of theory. Nor does the foregoing constitute an invitation to plunge blindly into practice, forgetting the need of sound theological support. Far

be it from the purpose of the writer to get involved in the perpetual controversy swirling around the terms theory and practice. In his rather unqualified thinking, both are important to the cause of redemption. The point to be made, with your forbearing indulgence, is that whether we be theologians, practitioner, or even philosopher, we are under obligation to make Christ real to a world in need. We are all on the team; our positions in that team vary, but our purpose and mission are to win for the kingdom of Jesus Christ. I desire to be on the team regardless of position. I would rather be a waterboy for Captain Jesus than a homerun idol for the adversary.

So whether or not we can capture the full force of God's expression in a solitary word or phrase is not of major consequence in the world of evangelism. To bring God and the sinner into direct relationship is the need of the hour. It will always stand as the prime concern for those interested in true revival and effective evangelization of the world. To bring God into personal contact with the sinner and into direct relationship is the need of the hour. It will always stand as the prime concern for those interested in true revival and effective evangelization of the world. To bring God into personal contact with the sinner is the ideal and the real. By this connection alone will the sinner ever be convicted of his sins and eventually changed by the grace of God. To bring about a state of immediacy, to associate God and the sinner in direct contact, is to put into effect the force of God's redeeming love and holiness as the primary components of salvation.

God's Expression Ground for Evangelism

On account of God's creativity and disposition to redeem, He is inclined toward world recovery. God by purpose and nature intends redemption. It is wrong to imagine that world redemption can be explained as an after-thought of Deity, or as delayed cosmic reaction. Or, that God had to make up His mind, being provoked by man's tragic need. Redemption is not the result of God's reflection; it is the condition of His being. He does not think that He ought to save the world; His ethical state of existence assures the world of God's amiable and affable disposition to redeem. Not that there is any conceivable break between His wisdom and His love, for it should be stated axiomatically that even God does not redeem because of reason, but on account of love and the nature of the holy. For that cause, one can detect at once the futile attempt of philosophers, and some theologians, to convert the

world through reason. It suggests that God is guilty of the same error, that it is wise to save men, that redemption is the child of prudence rather than love. Only as we examine more closely the liberal views of religion and philosophy do we become aware of the vast, and irreconcilable, disparity existing between them and the Bible plan of salvation.

According to the liberal viewpoint, knowledge is redemptive; good religion is the product of good teaching. Inferentially, the scientific socialism of liberalism rests ultimately on the Socratic dictum, "virtue is knowledge and can be taught." Redemption is merely a concatenation of logical propositions, formulated and held together by human reason. Hence, the more decisive and deductible our knowledge the better able we are to promote world redemption.

This position is grossly in error and flatly contradictory to the teachings of God's Word. God's gracious invitation, "come, let us reason together," was not intended to imply that by reason alone "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1:18). The invitation to reason does not signify that reason can make man's sins as white as snow. It is not a call to execute, but rather to understand. The intimation is clear: though men's sins are red like crimson they shall be as wool is a reasonable view of redemption. Or, in so many words, it means precisely what we are trying to do right now, establish the ground of reason for God's plan of redemption. God is not reluctant to expose His plan of salvation to the rigors and rules of right thinking. Nor need any one fear the outcome of sound reasoning in relation to redemption.

Let us repeat for emphasis, the chief idea in salvation is to bring God and man together in a redemptive relation of love. The urge to redeem and the means to redeem are in that sense one and the same thing. Holy love assures redemption and at the same time provides its active fulfillment. Hence, evangelization of the world is only another way of saying that God is expressing Himself as Saviour in the grand design of world redemption. God's immediacy, His intimate contact, is always an instance of His expression.

In that God's nature is to change the object of His affection, and evangelism is the expedient by which He reaches that object, then God's expression by simple inference becomes the universal and necessary ground of redemption. Therefore, in a word, God's expression is logical and mandatory ground for evangelism.

Review and Restatement

To conclude the study, "Holiness is Philosophical Perspective," a brief review and restatement of the position explored should prove helpful.

The first proposition was that God's existence is ground for holiness. If God is holy, and the mainspring of holiness, then it follows that His existence is the ground for all mentionable and existential holiness. Secondly, inasmuch as God himself is holy, His extension inalterably implies entire sanctification, a spiritual requisite for His extended existence. Thirdly, owing to the inherent nature of holiness to exclude sin, it is reasonable and necessary to believe that God's holiness advancing into the soul of man would require and compel the expulsion of sin in any form from that soul. Finally, to complete the full definition of God we must involve His expression since it is His ethical obligation to make Himself known. Hence, in that His tendency is to redeem, it naturally ensues that God's expression is ground for world redemption through evangelism.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Basic Christian Ethics*, p. 1.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
4. Davidson, *Theology of the Old Testament*, (1904), p. 144.
5. Amos 5:24.
6. Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, p. 14.
7. *Ibid.*, z
8. W. T. Stace, *Time and Eternity*, Preface, vi.
9. Garnett, *Moral Nature of Man*, p. 241. (Taken from doctoral dissertation, p. 304).
10. *Ibid.*
11. Emil Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, p. 7.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
14. *Ibid.*, The Translator's Preface, p. 5.

15. Edgar S. Brightman, *Person and Reality*, p. 279.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Webster's *New World Dictionary*, p. 1205.