

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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APOSTOLIC EVANGELISM

Oxymoron is a term that describes a figure of speech in which opposite or contradictory ideas are combined. Here are some examples: *thunderous silence, living death, sweet sorrow, jumbo shrimp, known secret, doing nothing, going nowhere, mud bath, vegetarian hamburger*. To this list we can now add *Emergent evangelism*. From time to time over the last couple of years, I have made reference to this latest Evangelical fad, particularly to Brian McLaren, who *Time* magazine listed recently as one of the 25 most influential Evangelicals. Recently, McLaren gained national attention by becoming one of Barack Obama's political consultants. But it is not simply McLaren's political views that are liberal. So is his theology. For example, McLaren is on record declaring that the gospel is not cross-centered, especially any notion of penal substitutionary atonement. He writes: "Bonafide evangelicals are suggesting that the gospel is not atonement-centered, or, at least, not penal-substitutionary-atonement-centered.... This suggestion represents a Copernican revolution for Western Christianity, in both its conservative Catholic and Protestant forms. It may be judged erroneous—and likely *will* be judged so by many readers of this paper—but even those who dismiss it would be wise to consider the possibility that there is at least some small grain of truth to these ruminations on the nature and center of the gospel. A lot is at stake either way.... For reasons I have detailed elsewhere, I have put my eggs in the basket that suggests we need to rethink our understanding of the gospel—both for the sake of faithfulness to Holy Scripture, and for the sake of mission in the emerging postmodern culture."¹ Other Biblical themes that are critical to understanding the Gospel (original sin and the Reformation's understanding of justification) have been muted as well.² In a popular book on the subject of the Emergent church, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger boldly declare that *evangelism* as it has been traditionally understood has little appeal to those who like to be identified as Emergent. *Evangelism* has been redefined. It has been reconfigured. It has more to do with *presence* than proclamation; more to do with a lifestyle than with theological proposition; more to do with conversation than conversion. Emergents are very fond of citing the words of St. Francis of Assisi – "Preach The Gospel – if necessary use words." The authors, both professors at Fuller Theological Seminary describe one Emerging evangelism project as "the reverse of most forms of evangelism. They visit people of other faiths and spiritualities and allow themselves to be evangelized in order to learn more about other walks of life." In other words, *We deemphasize the idea that Christians have God and all others don't by attempting to engage in open two-way conversations. . . . We are also genuinely open to being wrong about parts and perhaps all of our beliefs-while at the same time being fully committed to them.*" Another says, *evangelism "is no longer about persuading people to believe what I believe. . . . It is more about shared experiences and encounters. It is about walking the journey of life and faith together, each distinct to his or her own tradition and culture but with the possibility of encountering God and truth from one another."*³

How different is the emphasis of the Apostle Paul in this section of Romans! He continues his stress on the culpability of the nation of Israel in not responding in faith to the gospel message. As Barnett has pointed out, "Paul's highly rhetorical exposition of 'righteousness based on faith' continues (as from verse 4). Verses 14-15 link back to verses 12 and 13 (by the opening, 'Therefore...') and pick up 'call on him/his name.' A powerful dramatic effect is established by four questions beginning,

'How ...?,' and by the carry over of the keywords 'believe,' 'hear' and 'proclaim' into the next question. Finally, the passage is rounded off by a moving biblical citation."⁴

I. FIVE LINKS IN THE CHAIN OF EVANGELISM

A. Sending

The first step in the chain of evangelization is the necessity of the *sending* of the messenger. The apostle, citing Isaiah 52:7, comments on the beauty of the work of evangelizing, and every saved soul can empathize with that sentiment. But, first, the preacher must be *sent* by God.

B. Preaching

The second link in the chain is found in the word, *preacher*, or *preach*. The evangelist must not only be sent; he must preach. The word *preach* is a Greek word that means simply *to proclaim*. It reminds us of an important fact. Those who are God's messengers are to set forth God's truth. Stott put it best when he said the preacher "is to lift up his voice without fear or favour, and boldly make the message known."⁵ In gospel preaching there can be no innovating with the truth, although there may be varied ways of offering the message.

C. Hearing

The third step is *hearing*. Paul writes, "And how shall they believe Him whom they have not heard?" (v. 14). He is heard through His message, the text points out, but the main stress is upon the necessity of *hearing*. "All people without exception," observes Schreiner, "reject the revelation of God heralded in nature and turn to idolatry. Romans 10:14-17 verifies this interpretation, for it excludes the idea that salvation can be obtained apart from the external hearing of the gospel. Those who call on the Lord in a saving way must believe in him, but this belief is not possible apart from the *hearing* of a message that someone preaches. And the message is not preached unless one is sent by God. Finally, one does not truly proclaim the message unless one heralds the gospel of God's Son (1:2-4), who is the resurrected Lord and who has accomplished salvation for his people through his work on the cross. When one combines 1:18-32 and 10:14-17, it seems fair to conclude that people are not saved apart from the preaching of the gospel. It is this conviction that has driven the missionary impulse throughout history."⁶

D. Believing

And the fourth link is *belief*. "How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed?" Paul asks. It is not enough to hear; one must believe. The word *believe* denotes first and foremost the idea of putting one's trust on the line. In John 5:24 we read "Anyone who...puts his trust in Him who sent me." Likewise in I John 4:1, "do not trust any and every spirit." John 14:1 is significant where Jesus says, "Trust in God always; trust also in me."

E. Calling

And, finally, we must call upon Him (cf. vv. 14, 13). This is THE invocation. This invocation does. Its content is found in verses nine and ten, "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." As S. Lewis Johnson observed, "One notices that the chain of evangelization, the divine program of saving the people of God, begins with God and ends with Him. It is He who sends His messengers, and in the end His people call upon Him for salvation. The process that begins with the divine initiative ends in the divine saving of the soul. What a magnificent illustration of the great truth that "Salvation is of the Lord" (cf. Jonah 2:9)."⁷

CONCLUSION: During the early part of the twentieth century, J. Gresham Machen found himself embroiled in controversy over the truth of the Bible and the nature of the Gospel. The so-called "moderater" of his day was like the Emergents of our day in that they are in fact closet liberals. Machen was denounced as a trouble-maker because he insisted on Biblical Orthodoxy. While his opponents wanted *tolerance* and *diversity*. Machen noted, "We are told that our theological differences will disappear if we will just get down on our knees together in prayer. Well, I can only say about that kind of prayer, which is indifferent to the question whether the gospel is true or false, that it is not Christian prayer; it is bowing down in the house of Rimmon. God save us from it! Instead, may God lead us to the kind of prayer in which, recognizing the dreadful condition of the visible Church, recognizing the unbelief and the sin which dominate it today, we who are apposed to the current of the age both in the world and in the Church, facing the facts as they are, lay those facts before God, as Hezekiah laid before Him the threatening letter of the Assyrian enemy, and humbly ask Him to give the answer. Again, men say that instead of engaging in controversy in the Church, we ought to pray to God for a revival; instead of polemics, we ought to have evangelism. Well, what kind of revival do you think that will be? What sort of evangelism is it that is indifferent to the question of what evangel it is that is to be preached? Not a revival in the New Testament sense, not the evangelism that Paul meant when he said, 'Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel.' No, my friends, there can be no true evangelism which makes common cause with the enemies of the Cross of Christ. Souls will hardly be saved unless the evangelists can say with Paul: 'If we or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel than that which we preached unto you, let him be accursed!' Every true revival is born in controversy, and leads to more controversy. That has been true ever since our Lord said that He came not to bring peace upon the earth but a sword. And do you know what I think will happen when God sends a new Reformation upon the Church? We cannot tell when that blessed day will come. But when the blessed day does come, I think we can say at least one result that it will bring. We shall hear nothing on that day about the evils of controversy in the Church. All that will be swept away as with a mighty flood. A man who is on fire with message never talks in that wretched, feeble way, but proclaims the truth joyously and fearlessly, in the presence of every high thing that is lifted up against the gospel of Christ. But men tell us that instead of engaging in controversy about doctrine we ought to seek the power of the living Holy Spirit. A few years ago we had a celebration of the anniversary of Pentecost. At that time, our Presbyterian Church was engaged in a conflict, the gist of which concerned the question of the truth of the Bible. Was the Church going to insist, or was it not going to insist, that its ministers should believe that the Bible is true? At that time of decision, and almost, it seemed, as though to evade the issue, many sermons were preached on the subject of the Holy Spirit. Do you think that those sermons, if they really were preached in that way, were approved by Him with whom they dealt. I fear not, my friends. A man can hardly receive the power of the Holy Spirit if he seeks to evade the question whether the blessed Book that the Spirit has given us is true or false. Again, men tell us that our preaching should be positive and not negative, that we can preach the truth without attacking error. But if we follow that advice we shall have to close our Bible and desert its teachings. The New Testament is a polemic book almost from beginning to end. Some years ago I was in a company of teachers of the Bible in the colleges and other educational institutions of America. One of the most eminent theological professors in the country made an address. In it he admitted that there are unfortunate controversies about doctrine in the Epistles of Paul; but, said he in effect, the real essence of Paul's teaching is found in the hymn to Christian love in the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians; and we can avoid controversy today, if we will only devote the chief attention to that inspiring hymn. In reply, I am bound to say that the example was singularly ill-chosen. That hymn to Christian love is in the midst of a great polemic passage; it would never have been written if Paul had been opposed to controversy with error in the Church. It was because his soul was stirred within him by a wrong use of the spiritual gifts that he was able to write that glorious hymn. So it is always in the Church. Every really great Christian utterance, it may almost be said, is born in controversy. It is when men have felt compelled to take a stand against error that they have risen to the really great heights in the celebration of truth."⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ Brian McLaren, “A Radical Rethinking of Our Evangelistic Strategy,” *Theology, News, & Notes* (Fall 2004), 6.

² G. P. Waters, writing in reference to McLaren (and the influence of N. T. Wright) correctly observed, “Little is heard of the sinner’s native depravity; of the sinner’s guilt before a holy God; of reconciliation between God and the sinner through the atoning, propitiatory, and substitutionary death of Jesus Christ; and of the eternal state. It is not that McLaren expressly denies these points. It is that they occupy no appreciable position within McLaren’s overall discussion of the teaching of Jesus and Paul. McLaren’s primary concerns—horizontal reconciliation among human beings, and principled inclusivism within the church—stand more or less independently of them. It is here that Wright’s influence upon McLaren’s exposition of Jesus’ and Paul’s teaching is most palpably observed, and it is here that Wright’s influence is most disconcerting,” in Reforming or Conforming? Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church, eds. G. L. W. Johnson and R. N. Gleason (Crossway, 2008) p. 210.

³ E. Gibbs and R. Bolger, Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Culture (Baker, 2005).

⁴ P. Barnett, Romans: The Revelation of God’s Righteousness (Mentor, 2004) p. 242

⁵ J.R.W. Stott, Guard The Gospel: 2 Timothy (IVP, 1973) p. 106.

⁶ T. Schreiner, Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker, 1998) p. 568.

⁷ S. Lewis Johnson, Class lecture Notes on Romans, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1984.

⁸ J. Gresham Machen from a lecture he gave in London on June 17, 1932. The substance of this lecture is based on his book Christianity and Liberalism which has just been republished and can be purchased at www.wtsbooks.com.