

Evangelistic Preaching at the Beginning of the New Millennium

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The mere mention of evangelistic preaching either thrills or chills clergy. Some embrace the prospect with gusto, as they envisage church growth, conversion, and the challenge of reaching the unchurched. Others view evangelistic preaching as a garish manipulation of persons into faith through emotional appeals. Naturally, then, an essay on “Evangelistic Preaching at the Beginning of the New Millennium” already has its friends and its foes.

We would like to suggest a modest proposal in this piece to break that impasse. What we commend here is a view of evangelistic preaching that is centered on the community rather than the preacher. In other words, evangelistic preaching in the new millennium should give priority to the character and commitments of the community fulfilling the commission to evangelize.

This novel proposal cuts against the grain of nearly every book written on evangelistic preaching. Most books consider the evangelistic sermon out of context, as if it occurred in a vacuum. The clearest examples of this approach are the books of collected evangelistic sermons, in which too little attention is given to audience or context; typically included in these books are various biblical texts and related sermons.¹ The clear implication? That evangelistic preachers are the primary evangelists, that the community need not enter the purview of the consummate expression of the great commission — the evangelistic sermon.

Some resources on evangelistic preaching admittedly fare a bit better in this respect by acknowledging that people do hear these sermons and that such hearers live in a particular social location. For instance, in *Evangelistic Preaching That Connects*, Craig Loscalzo discusses in his opening chapter the need to discern “Contemporary Contexts for Evangelism and Preaching.” Still, these three or four pages are minimal in comparison with the bulk of the book — 160 pages that analyze evangelistic preaching, replete with model evangelistic sermons.²

An exception to the trend to focus almost exclusively on the preacher as evangelizer is a chapter entitled, “Evangelism as Proclamation” in Darius Salter’s *American Evangelism: Its Theology and Practice*. Salter recognizes that evangelistic preaching never happens “in isolation from a real live congregation.” He advises, therefore, that the preacher consider specific persons within the congregation while he or she is preparing the evangelistic sermon: “The rigor of preparation is never done in a vacuum, but is surrounded by people’s faces, voices, frowns, smiles, and sheer bewilderment.”³ Nonetheless, what Salter fails to consider is the role of the non-preachers in the evangelistic sermon, not as hearers or recipients but as actors, as the embodiment of evangelistic preaching which lends courage, a Christian tenor, and credibility to the process of evangelistic preaching.

What are we suggesting? Upon what can both foes and friends of evangelistic preaching concur? Friends of evangelistic preaching ought to recognize that the community of faith, not just the preacher, is indispensable to the activity of evange-

listic preaching; foes ought to engage the possibility that evangelistic preaching can be compelling if it transpires as an outgrowth of a lively Christian community. We are suggesting, therefore, that the essential but neglected element of evangelistic preaching is the community, not only as the hearers of the message (as Salter presents them) but even more as actors who make ready and visible the message. The community of faith pre-exists the evangelistic sermon, situates the evangelistic sermon in a context of praise and worship, and tangibly embodies the good news both within the community and in the world.

The Community as Evangelist

It is hardly surprising that the community within which evangelistic preaching takes place has been overlooked in North American books on evangelistic preaching. One sociologist of American society has argued that “all American values point to a central constellation: the value of the individual personality.”⁴ Evangelism, in particular, tends to be seen, within this North American perspective, as the appeal of one individual to another individual. This emphasis is evident in the more popular evangelistic models, such as friendship/personal evangelism, lifestyle evangelism, and televangelism, which targets an individual alone watching an individual televangelist, who appeals for the conversion of the individual even in the privacy of his or her room. Although it might make sense to exploit this cultural tendency, as one seeks to inculturate evangelism in North America, such individualization may also be myopic and, therefore, limited both in terms of effectiveness and fidelity to the Christian tradition.

An important complement to a one-sided, individualistic understanding of evangelism can be garnered from the writings of the Mennonite theologian, John Howard Yoder, who recasts evangelism as a communal activity. While Yoder acknowledges that “each individual must make his [or her] decision about whether to respond in obedient faith to this message or to reject it,”⁵ he attempts as well to redress the balance between individual and community — over against North American preoccupation with the individual. He underscores that the community pre-exists the evangelistic sermon and that this community is to embody the good news.

This focus upon the communal context of evangelistic preaching accords remarkably well with the early Christian conception of evangelism, as Luke presents it in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. Take Pentecost, for example. Peter does *not* stand up to speak in isolation; on the contrary, his sermon is the climax of communal events that testify to the power of God. What are those experiences? They begin with unified prayer: “All these [the apostles] were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women [Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis adds “and children!”], including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers” (Acts 1:14). They were together — typically — at Pentecost when the holy spirit descended upon each one of them (2:4). The result of this prayer and spiritual infilling was the ability to declare “God’s deeds of power” (1:11) in languages that were comprehensible to a variety of ethnic groups. Peter’s evangelistic sermon, in this context, is not the preaching of an individual evangelist in isolation. Its intent rather is to explain a remarkable series of communal experiences to his hearers, when he declares, “Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose ... No this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel ...” (2:15-16). In short, Peter as the first evangelist is acting as *interpreter of the community!* He is

responding, as he stands symbolically *with the eleven rather than alone* (2:14), to observers who want to know the meaning of the community's extraordinary experience!

Peter's sermon at Pentecost provides a paradigm of evangelistic preaching. According to this paradigm, evangelistic preaching arises out of and serves to explain the remarkable experience of an authentic Christian community devoting itself to prayer (1:14) and testimony to the mighty acts of God (2:11). The lesson for us is obvious: if the church lives a life of devotion and proclamation, evangelistic preaching will arise naturally and genetically from its communal source. Evangelistic preaching ought to explain the vitality of the church's experience, the ongoing life of devotion it exercises, God's blessings in response, and the church's uncanny ability to proclaim God's wonderful deeds of power. The community, in other words, provides the substance and occasion of evangelistic preaching.

This understanding of evangelistic preaching places the onus rather more upon the character of the community than upon the rhetorical abilities of the individual communicator. For this reason, Yoder emphasizes the need for distinctive communities that embody the good news by their lifestyle of love for their own members and their enemies, their willingness to undergo suffering, their distaste for power, their commitment to peaceful resolutions, and their embrace of a diverse social composition. The community is "not only a vehicle of the gospel or only a fruit of the gospel; it is the good news."⁶ The church as a distinctive community is foundational to evangelism because "there can be no procedure of proclamation without a community, distinct from the rest of society, to do the proclaiming. Pragmatically it is just as clear that there can be no evangelistic call addressed to a person inviting him or her to enter into a new kind of fellowship and learning, if there is not such a body of persons, again distinct from the totality of society, to whom to come and from whom to learn."⁷

In this case we are compelled to see that the church is not just the hearer of the evangelistic message, it is not just the passive vehicle that provides a pulpit from which the evangelist addresses outsiders, it is not a group incidental to evangelistic preaching. The community of faith provides the experiences that evangelistic preaching is intended to explain, the integrity that embodies the good news, and the distinctive community in which radical believers in Jesus are created anew.

Worship as Evangelism

If it is true that the community provides the occasion and substance of the evangelistic sermon, then it would follow that one of the church's primary tasks, to worship God, has an evangelistic dimension. Worship is "one of the primary and irreplaceable ingredients in evangelism."⁸ In a community that is occupied in praise of God, evangelism flows out of a sense of gratitude, an attitude of awe, even an experience of enjoyment. In fact, this sort of worship "alone inspires that sense of freedom and confidence that is one of the hallmarks of authentic evangelism. Worship releases the church to relax; it makes her aware that God is the primary agent in evangelism; it breaks the temptation to manipulate for worthy ends; and it sets her free to mediate the presence of God ..."⁹

If we revisit Pentecost for a moment, we may recall that Peter's sermon arises in the context of worship. The Christians were praying, receiving the spirit and, most importantly, declaring "God's deeds of power." It is this declaration that attracted

outsiders, that raised questions for them, and that created a clear division between those who were intrigued by this sort of praise and those who saw it as drunkenness (Acts 1:12). Early Christian worship was simultaneously evangelistic. Later, after Peter and John had been released from prison, the church again engaged in communal prayer. The purpose of such prayer was to obtain from God communal courage for evangelism: “And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:29-30).

Paul certainly recognizes the evangelistic dimension of worship. He addresses corporate worship in 1 Corinthians 11-14. The Corinthians, we may recall, were exercised about the hierarchy — power dynamics, if you will — of the various spiritual gifts. In response, Paul goes to the heart of the matter and reminds them that true worship, characterized by prophetic proclamation, has a distinctively evangelistic impact upon visitors: “If, therefore, the whole church comes together and ... all prophesy, an unbeliever or outsider who enters is reproved by all and called to account by all. After the secrets of the unbeliever’s heart are disclosed, that person will bow down before God and worship God, declaring, ‘God is really among you [plural!]’” (1 Corinthians 14:3-25). It is not, in Paul’s opinion, the word of the individual evangelist that brings conviction and conversion, but words spoken by “all” in the context of worship: an unbeliever is reproved “by *all*” and called to account “by *all*” when “*all* prophesy.”

Many communities cannot apply Paul’s words directly to their liturgical life; the centuries may have stilled the communal prophetic impetus in our churches. Still, from the perspective of Acts and 1 Corinthians, both friends and foes of evangelistic preaching — as it is typically understood in the North American context — ought to be able to find a point of agreement in the acknowledgement that authentic worship *can* possess an evangelistic dimension. It would be unwise, then, to ignore discussions of evangelism and worship. Liturgical evangelism, in particular, is a model that values the church’s rites and rituals as venues of spiritual transformation for both individuals and the gathered community. As Robert Webber explains in his book, *Celebrating Our Faith: Evangelism Through Worship*, “external rites have the power to order an inner experience.”¹⁰ In this way, the liturgy of the worship service can be used as a vehicle for persons to experience concretely the good news of Jesus Christ. This can happen as the liturgy invites the gathered community — including unbelievers — to God’s activity in and through Jesus Christ.

The conscious incorporation of the evangelistic dimension can revitalize worship for believers and bring unbelievers to faith, for in worship the good news is proclaimed again and again, not merely through an isolated evangelistic sermon, but from the first note of the service to the last. Moreover, various dimensions of the Christian life, various aspects of the good news, are accentuated throughout the liturgical year. As Henri Nouwen writes in his book, *Letters to Marc About Jesus*, participation in the church’s ongoing liturgical life leads to an increasingly profound knowledge of Christ. “Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost: these seasons and feasts teach you to know Jesus better and better and unite you more and more intimately with the divine life he offers you in the church.”¹¹

Economics and Evangelism

The worship of God that ends in a communal plea for boldness which Luke records, as we noted, in Acts 4:23-31 — led the earliest Christians, as earlier at Pentecost, to be filled with the spirit and to speak “the word of God with boldness.” Significant in Luke’s account is how he continues: “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need” (4:32-35). We see from this summary account that the praying community did not live with an easy bifurcation of purse and prayer, of economics and spirituality, of individual piety and communal disparity.

Luke makes unavoidably clear that the power of apostolic testimony was directly related to communal integrity. He notes that “no one claimed private ownership” (4:32), then describes how “with great power the apostles gave their testimony” (4:33), then returns to the reality that “there was not a needy person among them” (4:34). This is a narrative sandwich (common possessions — powerful testimony — no needy people) that may leave a disquieting distaste in our modern mouths but indicates unequivocally that, according to Luke, the shared bread of early Christian economics held a powerful evangelistic message.

The integral relationship between deeds of justice and words of witness has been revived in our era by Christians such as Ron Sider, a professor at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, founder of Evangelicals for Social Action, and author of *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. Sider maintains that evangelism and social action are separate activities but inseparable partners. He distinguishes between evangelism and social action on the basis of their intentions. The intent of evangelism is to invite “non-Christians to embrace the Gospel of the kingdom, to believe in Jesus Christ as personal Savior and Lord, and join his new redeemed community.” The intent of social concern is to improve “the physical, socio-economic and political well-being of people through relief, development, and structural change.”¹² Yet these are also inseparable partners, for Jesus’ model of the kingdom of God binds together evangelism and social action as equal partners.¹³ Sider, in fact, is committed to recreating this partnership in what he calls shalom revivals — revivals that would retain the general characteristics of a Billy Graham Crusade along with a central focus on God’s preference for the poor and the oppressed. The invitation would include calling people forward to commit themselves to a concrete area of social action.¹⁴

Typically in North America, the relationship between evangelism and acts of social justice is viewed as sequential rather than simultaneous. From this perspective, an individual ought first to be converted by an evangelistic word and subsequently trained in the ways of justice and discipleship. This view is exemplified in an article by Billy Graham entitled, “Conversion — A Personal Revolution,” written in the late 1960’s: “I am equally convinced that the preaching of the kerygma and the call for conversion would do more to remedy the social ills of our time than anything we could possibly do. There is no doubt that the social gospel has directed its energies toward the release of many of the problems of suffering humanity. I am for it and I believe that

it is Biblical! *However*, I am convinced that we do not have a personal gospel and a social gospel. There is one Gospel and one Gospel only, and that Gospel is the dynamic of God to change the individual and, *through the individual* society.”¹⁵

Emilio Castro, former General Secretary of the World Council of Churches and a Uruguyan Methodist theologian, disagrees: “... it appears to me an erroneous theology which teaches ... a movement of love to God first and a movement of love to neighbor after. ... in evangelistic preaching we will call people to a vertical relationship and afterwards we will market Christian education to teach them the horizontal relationship with the neighbor.”¹⁶ Along with the arguably unbiblical separation of the divine and human relationships, there remain the pragmatic questions, *When* will the second movement of love to neighbor — social concern — be taught, and *who* will teach it?

Once again, the story of Pentecost lends peculiar clarity to this discussion. We observed first that Peter’s evangelistic sermon explained the church’s experience; it was occasioned by the remarkable work of God in the living community that demanded explanation. We discerned, second, that the church had devoted itself to worship: persisting in communal prayer, receiving the spirit, and proclaiming the mighty deeds of God. It was, in fact, that recitation of God’s mighty deeds, rather than Peter’s sermon, which attracted observers’ attention. Now, third, we can cull from Luke’s account of Pentecost that the evangelistic message is clearly joined at the hip with the way of radical discipleship. Luke records that, *as soon as* three thousand were baptized, they “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). There is no sequential relationship between evangelism and subsequent discipleship. In Luke’s description of this very earliest community, they continued with apostolic signs and wonders — healing of the oppressed and helpless; they “had all things in common” and would “distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need”; they prayed in the temple often and ate together in homes; they praised God; and, of course, as a by-product they grew in number (Acts 2:43-47). In this summary — whether Luke has idealized the situation or not is irrelevant to the point — there is not the slightest hint that a distinction exists between piety and possessions, between economics and communal euphoria, between evangelism and social justice.

Evangelism and the New Millennium

The twentieth century has known excruciating divisions between those who espouse evangelism and those who eschew it. We have suggested that a re-positioning of emphasis with respect to evangelism may lead to concord and shared vision among proverbial friends and foes of evangelism. We have urged that evangelistic preaching be centered in the congregation, in the distinctive community in whose worship resides evangelistic potential and whose activity on behalf of the poor and broken goes hand in glove with evangelistic preaching. All of this we have already known, of course, for two millennia, by way of the familiar account of Pentecost, in which Peter was called upon as an evangelist to interpret the vitality of the church’s experience, to explain the extraordinary praise that characterized their worship, and to bring three thousand people into a community that, from the outset, seemed to have understood the symbiotic relationship between evangelistic utterance and evangelistic action.

Notes

- ¹ An example of this is V.L. Stanfield, *Effective Evangelistic Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967). Besides a four-paragraph "Foreword" in which the author mentions that these sermons were preached in church revivals, all that is included in the book are ten evangelistic sermons. Certainly there is no interest in where or when or to whom these were preached.
- ² Loscalzo's intention to recognize other factors beyond simply the act of the evangelistic sermon is evident in this quote, "Preaching never happens in a vacuum. Before we compose evangelistic sermons, we had better take stock of the world in which we live, or our efforts may never find ears to hear." Craig Loscalzo, *Evangelistic Preaching That Connects* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), 13. However, due to the discrepancy noted above, he does not achieve his intention.
- ³ Darius Salter, *American Evangelism: Its Theology and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 282.
- ⁴ Robin Williams, Jr., *American Society: A Sociological Interpretation*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Knopf, 1960), 463; reprinted in William Dyrness, *How Does America Hear the Gospel?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 97.
- ⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, Institute of Mennonite Studies Series No. 3 (Newton, Kans.: Faith & Life, 1964), 10.
- ⁶ John Howard Yoder, "A People in the World," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 74.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.
- ⁸ William Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 168.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.
- ¹⁰ Robert Webber, *Celebrating Our Faith: Evangelism Through Worship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 8.
- ¹¹ Henri Nouwen, *Letters to Marc About Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 83; quoted in Kevin Holder, "Liturgical Evangelism: A Model of Evangelism Paper/Presentation," unpublished paper for classroom use, Duke Divinity School, 1997.
- ¹² Ronald Sider, *One-Sided Christianity? Uniting the Church to Heal a Lost and Broken World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 165.
- ¹³ See *Ibid.*, 171-73.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.
- ¹⁵ *Ecumenical Review*, Vol 19 (July 1967), 281.
- ¹⁶ Emilio Castro, *Hacia Una Pastoral Latinoamericana*, Colección "Iglesia Y Misión," No. 2 (San José: Publicaciones INDEF, 1974), 88. Translation ours.