

A Brief History Of Evangelism In The Christian Church

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By Richard D. Balge

For the purposes of this survey, the word “evangelism” will be defined as a sharing of the Gospel facts (Christ’s coming, ministry, death, and resurrection for lost and condemned sinners). It will not be used in the broader sense of “Christian presence” or “the testimony of a Christian life.” It will not be used in so narrow a sense as to suggest that there was no evangelism between the time of Constantine and the rise of the Anabaptists in the 16th century.

Although the written record of the Church’s evangelism efforts in the first three centuries is rather sparse, it may be assumed that the activity described in Acts 8:4 continued during that time. Those that were scattered abroad by persecution, by the demands of their vocation, or by business interests heralded the Happy Message where they were. By the middle of the second century, there were discernible Christian communities in cities and areas that were not mentioned in the book of Acts and were not recipients of Paul’s letters. The Rhone Valley, North Africa, and Alexandria were centers of Christian activity. There were Christians in Britannia.

Although the surviving Christian literature of the time evidences some unclarity in the article of justification and some confusion of Law and Gospel, the facts of God’s saving acts were explicitly affirmed. We would like to think that this example from Clement of Rome (ca 96) provided a pattern of content for the Christian witness of the post-apostolic era: “We . . . who are called by the will of God in Jesus Christ are righteous, not of ourselves, neither through our wisdom, nor through our own works which we have wrought in purity of heart, but by faith through which the almighty God justified (Old Testament believers) from the beginning.” Others of the early fathers and apologists offered clear statements on the substitutionary work of the Savior and emphasized salvation by grace alone (but not faith alone).

Whatever imprecision, lack of definition, or error there was, ordinary Christians talked about the Savior as man’s only—but sure—hope. They did more than pray, pay, and obey. They “gossiped the Gospel.” In the mines, in the army, in high places, and in their places of business they witnessed to Christ. The pagan critic Celsus complained about the “wool workers, cobblers, laundry workers and the most illiterate and bucolic yokels” who were imparting the story of Jesus and his love to others. There is no record of mission societies as such, but the Church seemed to carry out its mission in the world with a steady zeal. Origen spoke (early third century) of itinerant evangelists who visited cities, villages, and villas; but there are not many clues to how they did this or how the Church was organized for its mission. The point of this is not that they lacked organization or method. We don’t know about that. The point is that the work was being done. The percentage of Christians in the Empire in 250 has been variously estimated between 20 and 50.

Lest we idealize conditions in the Church during the pre-Constantinian age, let us acknowledge that there were also a great many Christians who denied in the persecutions under Decius and even more under Diocletian. But the real recession in the life and testimony of the Church seems to have set in after 315, when Christianity began to displace the old Roman religion. After 381, the Church was formally established as the religion of the state. All citizens were now by definition orthodox Christians or exiled citizens. (This was never absolutely true.) There was no longer time to catechize and scrutinize novice Christians. Instruction in ritual and custom virtually replaced instruction in the faith. In a sense, it was no longer necessary to evangelize pagans because there were (legally) no more pagans. In another, and more real sense, it was necessary to evangelize church members. This was done, but with ever less clarity in answering the question: “What must I do to be saved?” On a smaller scale, and with many variations, the phenomena of establishment, mass “conversion,” and nominal Christianity were repeated in Armenia; and among the Germanic, Celtic, and Slavic tribes.

Tribes and nations did not, of course, become Christian unless their leaders had been evangelized. Beginning in the fourth century monasticism in general tended away from strict isolation and retreat toward involvement and service. Basil the Great in the East and Martin of Tours in the West led in this development, and the result was that Celtic monks did evangelistic work in Europe and the British Isles and Byzantine monks worked among the Slavs and eastern Germanic tribes. It was not Rome that evangelized Europe. Rome **organized** the Christians of Europe. Like much of this “brief history,” these are generalizations that require more qualification than we can give space to in a survey.

During the Middle Ages, the sword frequently prepared the way for the Word. The imperialism of Charlemagne, the ambitions of the Teutonic Knights, the folly of the Crusades come to mind. A more enlightened and evangelical approach to the heathen was used by Cyril (Constantine) and Methodius, who in the 9th century translated part of the Bible as well as the liturgy into Slavonic, a language understandable to all Slavic peoples.

To report on the evangelistic activities of monks among pagans is not to deny that non-specialists (laymen) shared the Gospel with those around them. We simply do not have a record of it. We do know something of the limitations of the specialists, as to their message. They were usually addressing illiterate tribes and so they did not leave behind a vast literature of evangelism. What does remain suggests that they spoke of the incarnation, Christ’s suffering for mankind, his resurrection, his return to judgment and that these shared the stage with laws and customs of the church. A Slovene fragment speaks of Christ as “the medicine of our bodies and the Savior of our souls,” a typically Eastern formulation. The Gospel that was preached to the heathen, like the Gospel preached to the Christians was not unalloyed with work-righteousness.

When some monks in the West returned to hermitism and others concentrated on the aggrandizement of the institutional church, a number of lay movements sought to do what the ordained churchmen were neglecting to do. In the 12th and 13th centuries the Humiliati, Beguines, and Beghards were voluntary (but disciplined) lay people who cared for the bodies and souls of society’s castoffs. Peter Waldo’s followers went out two-by-two in the 12th century. They preached repentance, they distributed Bibles, they heard confessions and spoke the word of forgiveness. In England, in the 14th century, John Wycliff trained itinerant lay preachers. Hussites and a remnant of German Waldensians combined in the mid-15th century as the *Unitas Fratrum* to evangelize in Europe and to take the Gospel to Turkey, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. Formally, none of these groups preached an unconditioned Gospel. Nevertheless, all of them spread abroad the substance of the Happy Message: God has acted in Christ to redeem us.

Another reaction to the sluggish neglect of evangelism on the part of the professionals was the band of “little brothers” which Francis of Assisi gathered around himself. He believed that poor lay people could best communicate the Savior’s love to poor lay people. Taking the vows of a monk, he did not seclude himself like a monk, but undertook an urban ministry of evangelism. Even during his lifetime, the lay character of his society was lost. It became an order of priests (predominantly). But his idea of **tertiaries**, unordained Franciscans living in the world and doing ordinary work to support their evangelistic and charitable work, caught on in a variety of forms and movements. In the same century the Dominicans, Carmelites, Servites, and Augustinian Hermits all organized to preach the Gospel to unbelievers, teach in universities, win back heretics, and carry on urban evangelization of the nominally Christian masses. That their Gospel was not unmixed with grievous error we know from the early career of the most illustrious of all friars, the Augustinian Luther. Incidentally, the earliest concentrated efforts to evangelize and instruct natives of the New World, was also carried on by “regular” clergy and “secondaries” (nuns) of the mendicant orders. In every century the Franciscans and Dominicans have been pioneer evangelists in new fields all over the world. Although they were not “ordinary” lay folk, it is interesting to note the responsibility which Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain laid upon an extraordinary layman when they underwrote his first voyage of discovery: “We send the knight Christopher Columbus with three well-equipped caravels over the ocean towards India with a view to certain undertakings for the propagation of the divine Word and the true faith.”

It has been charged that Luther and Calvin lacked the evangelizing impulse and/or failed to transmit it to those who followed their respective theologies. “The Fruits of Luther’s Mission-Mindedness” were documented 20 some years ago by Dr. Paul Peters (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, vols. 67 and 68). Certainly Luther’s comment at Isaiah 40:9 was not atypical: “Every Christian is also an evangelist, who should teach another and publish the glory and praise of God.” His contemporary Kaspar Schwenkfeld (1489-1561) was typical of those who stressed this truth more rigorously, one might even say legalistically. For him and others in the Anabaptist and Spiritualist wing of the Reformation salvation meant “heartily confessing Jesus as a living reality, accepting him and his manifold promises, feeling and experiencing, yes, tasting and knowing the sweetness and loveliness of the Lord.” The most aggressive of the 15th century “left-wing” Protestants were the Hutterites. Stressing that every baptized believer has received the Great Commission, they evangelized where they were and sent missionaries to distant points in Europe, where some of them were put to death as heretics.

The emphasis on personal experience and the constraint to witness in terms of that experience eventually found a home within the Lutheran and Reformed communions. In the state churches of northern Europe and the United Kingdom there were many people who were not Christian by conviction. The situation worsened where orthodoxy lost its evangelical heart and further worsened when rationalism took over the pulpits. We will not recount the horrors of what was widely taught and preached during those two centuries. Nor will we recount the excellences and excesses of the Pietists of Europe and the Evangelicals of Great Britain. Suffice it to say that these earnest Christians fell into the habit of distinguishing between the saved and the unsaved on the basis of prescribed forms of sanctification; on the other hand their spiritual offspring would provide the impetus, the funds, and the people for the great home and foreign mission efforts of the century 1815-1914. Once again shoemakers, tailors, and weavers, as well as nobles and men of affairs would play a very active—a vital—role in the proclaiming of the Good News. Whatever their flaws and fallibilities and foibles (we think of men like Zinzendorf) they were people who had heard the old message of Law and Gospel, were renewed by it, and made it their life’s business to share it.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves in speaking of the Great Mission Century. We must return to the century of Ludwig Count Zinzendorf, John Wesley, and George Whitefield. In 1727 Zinzendorf gathered the remnants of the *Unitas Fratrum* and certain other elements into the Moravian Brethren. In 1729 the Holy Club was organized by earnest Christian students at Oxford were given the nickname “Methodists”. In 1738 John Wesley who had been the leader of that student group, attended a Moravian meeting in London where he heard a lecture on Luther’s introduction to “Romans.” He ever after marked May 24, 1738 at 8:45 p.m. as the moment of his real conversion. Meanwhile, in the New World, a religious revival had begun in the Middle Colonies among German and Dutch Reformed Christians. Then, in 1732, Jonathan Edwards’ great revival broke out in Northampton, Massachusetts. From 1740 on George Whitefield crossed the Atlantic thirteen times to visit the American Colonies and preach to great throngs. It was a time of “Great Awakening” in both the mother country and the colonies. It is not just that three great evangelists were active, but that they and many others preached Christ and salvation by faith alone. No longer were they, like the Puritans, trying to Christianize the social order and establish a theocracy. Rather, they preached to the hearts of individuals and sought to win them for Christ. They were Law and Gospel evangelists, and so were many of their lay converts. If Zinzendorf’s Moravians (like the Methodists) tended to overemphasize subjective experience, still Christ was at the heart of their preaching. And they organized to evangelize, not to steal sheep. They thought of themselves as an army corps in the Church Militant. They geared themselves for battle. They went where the work was most challenging, and they fought the good fight.

The latter years of this century also marked the beginning of various Bible societies, “inner mission” organizations and foreign mission societies. The Pietists and Evangelicals were not just quietly devout. They were concerned to bring the Gospel to the lost. In many instances lay people initiated, sponsored, and manned these organizations.

At the end of the Napoleonic wars, as Europe settled down for a century of relative peace, these organizations proliferated and prospered. Disaffected industrial workers, corroded intellectuals, soldiers and

sailors, convicts and feeble-minded, orphans and wayward girls, the blind and the deaf, the urban poor, and others were the concern of English and German evangelical Christian societies. In America, frontiersmen were added to the list. In Asia, Africa, and America agents of European mission societies preached the Gospel to those who had not heard it or gathered those who were in danger of losing it. In Roman Catholicism new orders were formed and old orders revitalized. In Protestantism it was the laity who provided the life's blood and the strong hearts and the willing minds. Usually they had the help and guidance of clerics, but sometimes they worked in spite of clerical disinterest and even opposition.

As to evangelistic agencies we mention a few that were organized to meet special needs during the 19th century. The YMCA ministered to Union soldiers during the Civil War and then, with the YWCA, evangelized urban youth. William Booth's Salvation Army preached salvation to the castoffs and dropouts of the cities, and served their basic physical needs as well. Autonomous rescue missions proclaimed the new birth by faith in Christ to alcoholics. John Mott's World Student Christian Federation and Dwight Moody's Student Volunteer Movement recruited world missionaries and home evangelists. These organizations, like Booth's, constantly sought to multiply the workers by insisting that every Christian is an evangelist.

The early years of the century saw a second "Great Awakening" in America and some of those who were converted or imbued with a new zeal under took to evangelize the ever-expanding frontier. The circuit riders were often theologically untrained and their theology often showed it, but the power of the Evangel was demonstrated in the lives of those who heard. We are repelled by the "physical exercises" of the camp meetings; but universal redemption, free and full salvation, and justification by faith were proclaimed. That it was the Baptists and Methodists who waxed numerically strong because of these activities does not spoil our joy that Christ was preached. Would to God that the message of sin and grace were still as clear in Protestantism today!

If there is one man of the 19th century from whom we can learn something about training evangelists in our churches today it is probably Dwight Moody. We are interested to hear that in his revival meetings Mr. Moody discouraged emotional and physical displays, and even stopped them when they occurred. More significant, for our purposes, is the fact that he conducted workshops in connection with his revivals. There he impressed on lay and clerical volunteers the responsibility to evangelize. He taught methods of approach and follow-up. He sought to strengthen and edify recent converts. He believed it was better to train ten than to do the work of ten. Out of these workshops emerged and evolved the Moody Bible Institute, where he and his staff trained "gapmen." He used the term for those who were not theologically trained but who could serve as full-time preachers and evangelists. "Never mind the Greek and Hebrew. Give them plain English and good Scripture. It is the sword of the Lord and cuts deep." Students at the Institute heard Bible lectures in the morning, then spent the afternoon and evening in preaching or evangelism.

A man who is often coupled with Moody in treatments of the 19th century was Charles Finney. In his *New Measures Revivalism* he expressed his distrust of subjective experience, which can deceive. For this we are grateful. For his remedy, we are not. He emphasized the need for a decision, a commitment. As the century wore on, there was an increased emphasis on decision. Ordained Presbyterian ministers like Finney, Jonathan Chapman, and Billy Sunday all espoused this Arminian concept. (It is of some interest that Billy Graham, too, came from a Presbyterian background.)

It is puzzling and sad to know that some of the evangelists (perhaps many) of the age were not really sure of their own salvation. Neither the objective Word, their subjective experience, nor a conscious decision worked that assurance in them. Asahel Nettleton, for example, said: "The most that I have ventured to say respecting myself is that I think it possible I may get to heaven."

The fruits of the Awakening in Germany in the early years of the 19th century have, humanly speaking, something to do with our being here for this convocation during these days. This is true with regard to the ancestry of some of us. But it is also true with regard to our spiritual forebears. One of the artisans who received practical training for evangelical ministry at the Pilgermission in Basel was Johannes Muehlhaeuser. His first assignment was to evangelize in Austria, where he supported himself as a market stall helper and children's nurse while he organized three conventicles, and where he was jailed in 1831 for "agitation." At the University

of Halle, in the generally rationalistic faculty, labored the devout Professor Tholuck. He held twice-weekly devotional meetings for his students in his home, devoted vacation periods to them, counseled and prayed with them, and took them along on his daily walks. One of the students who frequently accompanied Tholuck on those walks was the son of a Brandenburger military officer, Adolf Hoenecke. At Hermannsburg the pious Ludwig Harms, with the support of Free Church Lutherans and other evangelical Christians, trained men to preach the Gospel in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and America. One of them was the father of our Professor John P. Meyer.

There are heart-warming stories of lay evangelism and God's blessings upon it in Asia, Africa, and Latin America during the 19th century. In East Java, Japan, and Uganda Christian communities grew up. They were not originated by full-time and/or ordained missionaries but by the witness of ordinary men and women. First European traders and civil servants, then native Christians evangelized those around them. Sometimes there was an evangelism strategy; sometimes there was spontaneous witness; but the Lord gave the increase.

In Korea the missionary to China, John L. Nevius, visited and prescribed a strategy which helped the Church there grow strong. Every Christian was to be an evangelist. Every evangelist was to be self-supporting. Every paid pastor or teacher was to be supported by his countrymen and not by foreign Christians. Every building was to be constructed by the Korean Christians themselves.

In Latin America, Catholic laymen called for evangelical missionaries. Often, a Bible in the hands of a layman resulted in the growth of congregations. It is still true in Latin America today that churches grow in proportion to the degree to which all members are involved in evangelism work.

Whether or not our own time will be remembered as the "age of lay evangelism" it is too early to say. But the emphasis on the personal witness of the lay Christian must be one of the more wholesome developments of our century. In an age of specialization and of ecumenism, it is not startling to know that this list is only fractional: Yokefellows, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Youth for Christ, Christian Businessmen's Committee International, Campus Crusade, Navigators, Laymen's Leadership Institute, Intersociety Fellowship. Unionistic and synergistic, but having the Gospel and sharing it. The history of evangelism, like the history of the Church, shows that the Holy Ghost calls by the Gospel even when people are not entirely faithful to all the teachings of God's Word and all the implications of the Gospel. The Means of Grace are effective even when those who employ them do not believe that they are really means and do not understand perfectly what God's grace is.

In 1914 Elmer T. Clark published "The New Evangelism," in which he reported on a lay program of the Church Federation of St. Louis. A church census of the whole city was taken, visitors were trained, visits were systematically undertaken, people were invited to pledge that they would join one of the participating churches, and pastors followed up these visits with letters or personal calls. Features of "The New Evangelism" have been adopted and adapted by everyone at this convocation, I suppose, even if we didn't know that's what we were doing.

The International Missionary Council's Willingen conference in 1952 called for "an increasing flow of Christian lay men and women who go out across the world in business, industry, and government; and who do so with deep conviction that God calls them to witness for him in all of life." The World Council of Churches, meeting at Evanston in 1954, addressed itself to the proposition that "the true twentieth-century evangelist is the instructed and witnessing layman." The use of the word "witness" in these two pronouncements is interesting to those who remember the discussions and tensions surrounding the production of the "...To Be A Witness" series by our own Commission on Evangelism in 1962. From the time the Commission was mandated in 1957 until the series was produced, a great deal of effort went into defining what evangelism is not and trying to justify the use of the term in our synodical vocabulary. The antipathy to the term evangelism with its connotations of revivalism, methodism, and triumphalism helped the Commission in its decision to use the word the Savior uses in Acts 1:8. The simple expression "Talk about the Savior" is probably an even happier choice.

Our Commission and our synodical constituency are not the only 20th century Christians who have struggled with the problem of developing methods that are theologically sound. Even some of those whose

doctrine of conversion is synergistic have been aware of the need to effect a happy marriage of theology and method. The German evangelist Paulus Scharpff (cf. bibliography) wrote: "It was ... inevitable that as the church made an effort to communicate the Gospel to ever-enlarging groups, methods would be developed. The development was natural and often uncritical. The church members who were occupied with methods in their business simply transferred these to their church. Much of this has been valid and helpful. However, there have been cases where individuals tried to find too close a parallel between giving a witness for Jesus Christ and selling some piece of merchandise. As a result the person was made secondary to the 'sale' and the response of faith which the Gospel of Christ calls for has been oversimplified. (At the other extreme there have been those who have so deplored the use of any method of doing anything in the church that the impression is given that there is inherent evil in techniques.) ... Among teachers of evangelism, pastors, and denominational leaders there is the feeling that biblical theology and the techniques by which the church proclaims her message should be brought together."

Let it not be that we talk the subject to death and never do what we could be doing to improve evangelism consciousness, theology, and methods in our Synod. It may be more true of us in our time than of the church at any time that our most extensive and most intimate contacts with the unbelieving world are through the lay people. In any case, it is true. At their places of work and study and service, in family relationships, volunteer work, and recreation they are meeting many more heathen than their pastors do. We must not teach them to shrink from such contacts, to develop a ghetto or fortress mentality. They and we are not in this world to live in isolation but we citizens of heaven are left on earth to be a light and a city set on a hill.

We already share many characteristics of the evangelistic churches. The sin and grace orientation of our preaching, teaching, counseling, and witness is the *sine qua non* of true evangelism. The confidence in the authority of God's Word, the classes with large and small groups for the study of the Word, the publishing of helps for private study by lay persons are going to help Christians grow. We are not averse to tract and Bible distribution, although we probably ought to do more of it. Devotional life is not lacking, although members are sometimes attracted by the depth and warmth of devotional practices in other churches. We, as a Synod, are involved in a broad spectrum of charitable work and special ministries. We have all learned to acknowledge that the results of our labors will come in God's good time, and understand that we may never see them in this life.

If we and/or our people still lack a tactful aggressiveness in evangelism, it may be that we have failed in one area where many Evangelistic churches have excelled: training. The tools and methods are available in the materials offered by our Commission on Evangelism. One can do with them what one does with homiletical, catechetical, and other helps. Adapt, adopt, use judiciously, improve with experience, freshen, discard.

A feature of the Evangelistic churches and movements of the past two centuries that we do not want to emulate is their non-confessional stance. Some of the roots of our Synod reach back into the *Deutsche Christentumsgesellschaft* and similar unionistic groups. But this is not our identity today and we cannot return thither. We cannot speak the truth in love to anyone unless we speak the truth. We are not trammled by the Lutheran Confession or hobbled by loyalty to what we believe on the basis of God's Word. It is what God has given us to say in this world. It is our witness but it hinders not at all.

The other negative feature which has appeared in so much of the evangelistic preaching, witnessing, and literature since the first Great Awakening has been the emphasis on experience and/or the demand for decision. This subjective and synergistic element is not something fussy professors imagine. It is what the evangelistic literature of Protestantism regards as a strong point and urges as a necessity. This aspect of German Pietism, English Evangelicalism and American Fundamentalism is really a subtle return to the man-centered religion of the Medieval Church. Two of our pastors who have worked in the southern United States have commented to me, on separate occasions, that the Southern Baptists are "the Roman Catholics of the South." The characterization not only refers to a religious illiteracy. It refers more particularly to a subtle work-righteousness and synergism that negates the grace of God by stressing commitment, decision, and experience.

We must be careful whom we admire and from whom we borrow. If we will continue to live in and under the Word as hungry beggars and eager disciples we can, God helping us by his grace, conform more

closely to the pattern of all great evangelists and anonymous evangelizers since the Day of Pentecost. They loved the Savior and those for whom he died. They were willing to become all things to all men. They addressed the felt needs of people or awakened an awareness of those needs (forgiveness, reconciliation, assurance). They preached Christ crucified and risen. Their preaching was accompanied by works of love and mercy. To this help us, dear Father in heaven.

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