

Evangelism: The Leading Partner

Samuel Hugh Moffett

The New Testament uses the word *evangelize* in what seems to be a shockingly narrow sense. A whole cluster of verbs, actually, is used to describe evangelism: "preaching the word" (Acts 8:4), "heralding the kingdom" (Luke 9:2), "proclaiming the good news" (Luke 4:18, 8:1). But in essence, what all these words describe is simply the telling of the good news (the gospel) that Jesus the Messiah is the saving King. Evangelism is the announcement of Christ's kingdom. However, it is more than an announcement—it is also an invitation to enter that kingdom, by faith and with repentance.

What Evangelism is Not

Evangelism, therefore, is not the whole of the Christian mission. It is only a part of the mission. Jesus and the disciples did many other things besides announce the kingdom and invite response. Evangelism is not worship or sacraments. "Christ did not send me to baptize but to evangelize," said Paul (1 Cor 1:17).

And it is not church growth or church planting. The planting and growth of the Church are surely goals of evangelism and its hoped-for results. But evangelism does not always produce a church or more members for it.

Neither is evangelism confined to apologetics. Paul says, "We try to persuade" (2 Cor 5:11), but insists that he was sent to tell the good news "without using the language of human wisdom" (1 Cor 1:17, 20).

Finally, evangelism in the New Testament was not confused with Christian service, or Christian action and protest against the world's injustices. A revealing and disturbing incident in the Book of Acts tells how Greek-speaking Jews among the early Christians rose as a minority group to complain of discrimination in the distribution of funds. The reply of the apostles seems almost callously narrow: "We cannot neglect the preaching of God's word to handle finances" (Acts 6:1, 2 *TEV*). Of course, they did immediately proceed to do something about the injustice. But they did not call it evangelism.

In Kingdom Context

In the context of the kingdom, however, the evangelistic proclamation was never so narrow that it became isolated from the immediate pressing needs of the poor, the imprisoned, the blind and the oppressed.



Samuel Hugh Moffett is the Henry Winters Luce Professor of Ecumenics and

Mission, Emeritus at Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey. Previously he served as a missionary to China and Korea and has written numerous articles in missions and theology. Used by permission of the author.

Here I am reminded of Korean evangelism. I asked a pastor in the Philadelphia area why his church was growing so fast. "When Koreans come in," he replied, "first I get them jobs; I teach them some English; I help them when they get in trouble with their supervisors; I invite them to church, and then I preach to them the gospel." That is putting evangelism into context.

mentum. Not an uneasy truce between faith and works, but a partnership.

Now in most practical, working partnerships, there must be a leading partner, a first among equals, or nothing gets done. Which should be the leading partner in mission: evangelism or social action?

I submit that what makes the Christian mission different from other commendable and sincere attempts to improve the human condition is this: in the

The real good news is not what we, in our benevolence, do for others, but what God has done for us all in Christ.

But if there is anything worse than taking the text out of context, it is taking the context without the text. Just as Christ's salvation is never to be isolated from the immediate, real needs of the people, neither is it to be identified with those present needs. When Jesus quoted the Old Testament about "good news to the poor" and "freedom for the oppressed," he did so on his own terms. His salvation is not Old Testament *shalom*, and his kingdom is not Israel.

There is nothing quite so crippling to both evangelism and social action as to confuse them in definition or to separate them in practice. Our evangelists sometimes seem to be calling us to accept the King without His kingdom; while our prophets, just as narrow in their own way, seem to be trying to build the kingdom without the saving King.

More Than Balance

There was a time when most Christians believed that evangelism was the only priority. They were wrong. Then the Church swung too far the other way. The only Christian priority for some has been social justice through reconstruction. That, too, is an important priority but it is not the only one. And when they made it the only clear mission of the Church, the result was a disaster. In trying to speak to the world, they almost lost the Church.

Others tried to restore the balance by pointing out that "Christ mediates God's new covenant through both salvation and service.... Christians are called to engage in both evangelism and social action." But even that is not enough. What the Church needs for the future in mission is more than balance. It needs mo-

Christian mission our vertical relationship to God comes first. Our horizontal relationship to our neighbor is "like unto it," and is just as indispensable, but it is still second. The leading partner is evangelism.

This is not to exalt the proclamation at the expense of Christian action. They belong together. But it does insist that, while without the accompanying deeds the good news is scarcely credible, without the word the news is not even comprehensible! Besides, the real good news is not what we in our benevolence do for others, but what God has done for us all in Christ. Evangelism, as has been said, is one beggar telling another where to find bread.

The supreme task of the Church, then, now and for the future, is evangelism. It was the supreme task for the Church of the New Testament. It is also the supreme challenge facing the Church today.

Half the World Unreached

The determining factor in developing evangelistic strategies, I believe, is that evangelism moves always in the direction of the unreached. "It must focus on those without the gospel." More than one-half of the world's people are still without the simplest knowledge of the good news of God's saving love in Jesus Christ. There is no greater challenge to evangelism in mission than that.

Christians are rightly concerned about the grievous unbalances of wealth and food and freedom in the world. What about the most devastating unbalance of all: the unequal distribution of the light of the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ?



I am not overly addicted to statistics. But what does it say about a "six continent approach to evangelism," for example, to find that most of our church mission funds still go to ourselves on the sixth continent, which is between 70 percent and 80 percent at least nominally Christian? Africa, however, is perhaps 40 percent Christian by the same rough and imprecise standards. And Asia, which holds more than one-half of all the people in the world, is only three percent to four percent even nominally Christian.

In the next ten years, the number of non-Christians which will be added to the population of Asia will be greater than the entire present population of the United States multiplied almost three times (650 million, compared to 220 million). Treating all six continents as equals for strategical purposes is a selfish distortion of the evangelistic realities of the world.

One last thought. There is an unexpected bonus to keeping the definition of evange-

lism simple. It means that anyone can get into the act. One of the happiest lessons I ever learned about evangelism came not from a professional evangelist, but from a watermelon vendor.

It was in a Korean village, and my wife came up to ask him how much a watermelon cost. He was so surprised at finding a long-nosed foreigner who spoke Korean that at first he was struck dumb. He even forgot to tell her the price. There was something more important he wanted to say. He asked, "Are you a Christian?" And when she replied, "Yes," he smiled all over. "Oh, I'm so glad," he said, "because if you weren't I was going to tell you how much you are missing."

If more of us were so happy about what we have found in the Lord Jesus Christ that we couldn't wait to tell those who have not found him how much they are missing, we would need to worry no longer about the future of evangelism.

Study Questions

1. In what ways does Moffett suggest that evangelism is to be the "leading partner" in Christian ministry among the poor? Do you agree or disagree?
 2. What relationship exists between the imbalance of the distribution of wealth and food and the distribution of the light of Jesus? What is the primary reason cited by the author for the imbalance of the distribution of basic needs and the good news?
-

PERSPECTIVES

ON THE WORLD CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT

A Reader Third Edition

Editors:

Ralph D. Winter

Founder

U.S. Center for World Mission

Steven C. Hawthorne

Curriculum Development

Institute of International Studies

Associate Editors:

Darrell R. Dorr

D. Bruce Graham

Bruce A. Koch



William Carey Library

P.O. Box 40129

Pasadena, California 91114



paternoster
publishing

European Distributor

Paternoster Press

Carlisle, United Kingdom

© 1981, 1992, 1999 by the Institute of International Studies

All Rights Reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Because most of the material in this reader is used by permission, William Carey Library is unable to grant translation, reprint or reproduction permission on all articles. Please note the source as shown on the first page of each article and write the original publisher. If you do not have the address, you may write:

Rights and Permissions
William Carey Library
P.O. Box 40129
Pasadena, California 91114

Published by
William Carey Library
1705 N. Sierra Bonita Ave.
Pasadena, California 91104
Phone (626) 798-0819
ISBN 0-87808-289-1

European distribution by
Paternoster Press
P.O. Box 300
Kingstown Broadway
Carlisle, Cumbria, UK CA3 0QS
E-mail: postmaster@paternoster-publishing.com
ISBN 0-85364-999-5

Cover Design: Chad M. Upham
Cover photos courtesy of Caleb Project

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Main entry under title:
Perspectives on the world Christian movement : reader / edited by
Ralph D. Winter, Steven C. Hawthorne. – 3rd ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-87808-289-1 (alk. paper)

1. Missions. 2. Evangelistic works. I. Winter, Ralph D. II. Hawthorne, Steven C., 1953-

BV2070.P46 1999

266--dc21

ISBN 0-85364-999-5 (UK)

98-51494

CIP

11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2
08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01 00 99

Third Edition, Second Printing - July 99

Printed in the United States of America

Foreword

Introduction

Acknowledgements

The Bible

1. The Bible

2. Israel

3. Ever

4. The Bible

5. The Bible

6. The Bible

7. Let the

8. On the

9. With

Two

10. The

D-D

11. God

12. Bey

13. Jesu

14. The

15. A M

AV

