

WHY ISN'T IT WORKING: REFLECTIONS ON CURRENT EVANGELISM THEORY & PRACTICE

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From 1997-2001 I was Director of the Christian Enquiry Agency. As part of the job, I was a member of Churches Together in England Coordinating Group for Evangelisation. As a result, I was put in touch with some of the latest thinking about the churches' evangelistic task. The purpose of this present article is to share some of that thinking and my response to it.

A Modern Definition of Evangelism

First, I want to raise some questions about a recent and influential definition of evangelism, that of William Abraham. Having been critical of evangelism defined in terms of proclamation and church growth, William Abraham states his preferred understanding in terms of initiation into the kingdom of God. He writes: "We can best improve our thinking on evangelism by conceiving it as that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time".⁴⁹

Abraham is at pains to explain that this definition is to be distinguished from Christian initiation understood in ecclesiastical or liturgical terms. He goes on to clarify his meaning by stating that the focus has shifted from what people do or have done to them in various rites and ceremonies to "a theocentric horizon where the focus is on the majestic and awesome activity of a trinitarian God".⁵⁰ He admits, however, this is something "extraordinarily difficult to capture conceptually". This is one area in which his thesis is vulnerable to criticism.

Abraham's ideas are subject to sympathetic examination in an incisive paper by Jeff Astley, a Professor of Christian Education.⁵¹ Astley emphasises that, in spite of Abraham's disclaimer that there is a distinction to be made between his definition of evangelism and the processes of Christian initiation, there is in fact an overlap between Abraham's definition and these processes. He points out that it is really much easier to get a grip on the

⁴⁹ William Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Hodder, London 1989) 95.

⁵⁰ Abraham, 98.

⁵¹ See www.evangelism.uk.net/papers.

practicalities of education and discipling than on Abraham's more nebulous concept. Astley therefore wonders if Abraham's definition has ever been instantiated. This leads him to a discussion of what it means for a person to be or become a Christian. Is it something more than can be picked up through a process of education or socialisation? Are we looking at a mere functional change in the way a person exists, or are we seeking to identify a change at a deeper, ontological level?

Without wishing to deny the validity of the case for an ontological change, Astley asks how we might know, except on authority, whether or not such a change has taken place in a person. If only God knows those who are truly his, what use is that to us practically? The only realities of which we are aware are those which are capable of empirical testing, while any ontological changes brought about by God when a person becomes a Christian are not subject to such examination. This, as Astley observes, sets a limit on the human contribution to the process of evangelisation. It seems to me, therefore, that the question to be asked of Abraham's definition of evangelism as initiation into the kingdom of God is not simply, "Has it ever been instantiated?" More than that seems to be required. We must also ask, from the side of human activity, "Is such a concept capable of being instantiated?" Christian evangelists have to work with the practicalities. They are not able to deliver or even discover the divine side of the divine-human encounter. All they can do is prepare the ground and pray for divine intervention. So it would seem that in providing an account of the nature and scope of evangelism it is not possible after all to discount the human processes of proclamation, initiation and nurture as Abraham apparently wants to do.

Reference to the overlap between evangelism and the processes of Christian education and nurture, and the question of what it means for a person to be or become a Christian and whether this is something more than what can be picked up through a process of education or socialisation brings us to a discussion of a popular, perhaps the predominant, method of evangelism in Churches of all kinds today. I refer to what is called process evangelism.

Process Evangelism

Process evangelism is what the *Alpha* course offers to the churches. *Alpha* is not the only expression of such methods. *Good*

News Down the Street was an early example. Today we also have *Emmaus*, the *Y Course*, as well as other initiatives.

Alpha appears to be relatively successful in socialising people into the Christian faith, as course participants come to feel that they are part of a community of seekers who are on a journey together. Enthusiasts for process evangelism claim that this experience proves that belonging leads to believing and not vice versa. It could be argued, however, that the socialisation process tends to downplay the need for repentance, which is as surely part of what conversion means as is turning to God. After all, once a person feels accepted as a member of a community no further change seems necessary on his or her part in order to join that community. The danger in placing belonging before believing is that the necessity for a radical reassessment of the direction of one's life is overlooked.

One possible way out of this problem might be to add "behaving" to belonging and believing so that the progression becomes belong>believe>behave. We can readily admit that repentance may be conceived as a process rather than as an event, but is this enough? Such a way of conceiving the matter might be interpreted as reducing repentance entirely to the processes of moral and spiritual growth that are admittedly so important to the ongoing life of faith.

There is also some discussion to be had concerning the point at which the topic of sin is introduced into the process of evangelisation. Traditionally, evangelicals have wished to introduce this subject sooner rather than later, but, as sin is a theological category, we could rightly question the rightness of speaking of such things to people who have no previous contact with the Christian faith. Fostering an awareness of, and proper response to, sinfulness might be more appropriate at a much later stage in the process of becoming a Christian.⁵ But this, surely, need not rule out the necessity of at least some sort of decisive "crisis moment" in which the whole process is focused and through which it is expressed.

I now turn to another matter that exercises the minds and hearts of those who have a passion to reach out to people with the good news of the gospel. It is the question of how the Church is to respond to the post-modern explosion of interest in spirituality.

Engagement with contemporary spirituality

Research has revealed that many more people believe in God and/or pray and/or report experiences of a religious or spiritual nature than ever darken the doors of a Christian church.

According to Dr David Hay, two thirds of the population believe that they have a spiritual or religious dimension to their lives, not as something they have been taught, but as something they know; not as an intellectual deduction, but as a pre-intellectual intuition.⁵² Spirituality is often eclectic and draws on sources other than the Christian tradition - Eastern religions in particular. However, this kind of spirituality has little to do with the corporate expression of religion, but rather is intensely private and individualistic. The question facing Christians is what does this mean for the evangelistic task of the church? Is such spirituality a help or a hindrance to Christian mission?

One response to this phenomenon is that evangelists must be ready to believe that God is already there in the experience of those with whom they wish to share their faith. They must recognise the potential of human beings to be religious. The assumptions must be that God the Holy Spirit communicates with everybody, even agnostics and atheists, and that religious/spiritual awareness is natural to human beings as a species. Postmodern spirituality also demands a different style of evangelism to the confrontational. The first step must be to listen. Conversation rather than challenging and questioning is the way. We must try to pick up what it is that God may be saying to these people. We can build the bridges, but must leave the crossings to the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps the New Testament model for evangelism today should be more like Acts 17 (and perhaps also Acts 14) than Acts 2. Like Paul at Athens and Lystra, but unlike Peter on the day of Pentecost, we speak into a situation where predominantly there is no background knowledge of the Judeo-Christian story. This suggests that the task Christians should be concentrating on is getting the story out there and known. Sowing rather than reaping is the order of the day, which is why initiatives like the Bible Society's *Open Book Project* and Agape's *Jesus Video Project* are so

⁵² See *The Search for Faith and the Witness of the Church* (Church House, London 1996). Also John Drane: www.evangelism.uk.net.

important because of the way they provide access to the story for those who have never heard it or who may have forgotten it.

On the other hand, the Pauline model already mentioned suggests that with post-modern spiritual searchers the way forward may not only be in terms of getting the story known, but also through an approach that takes creation theology and creation spirituality seriously. Paul's speeches at Lystra and at Athens start from the premise of God as Creator rather than God as Saviour. Individual sin and guilt are no longer the issue for this generation. Corporate sin is.⁵³ The way to evangelise today may well be to work alongside others to campaign for the cancellation of third world debt or to combat global warming and climate change. These may be the areas in which Christian witness is most effectively to be made to the majority of our contemporaries, rather than with the somewhat moralistic approach of traditional evangelistic methods.

Cell Church

I now turn to an approach to the church's missionary task that has become known as Cell Church. It has been pointed out many times that people's experience of church has to be at a number of different levels. Put succinctly and briefly, these levels exist as Cell, Congregation and Cathedral. The suggestion now is that we should move towards a multi-layered church with less investment in the congregation as the dominant model. This might already appear to undermine, or at least devalue, a traditional emphasis on the local congregation.

On this scenario, Cathedral (for example, Spring Harvest and the Keswick Convention) is where vision and inspiration and wider belonging are experienced. Cell is where most will experience worship, pastoral care, teaching and nurture in the faith and opportunities for witness and service through the exercise of spiritual gifts.

The theory of Cell Church is attractive. Superficially it seems to offer a solution to the drawbacks of home groups, which have an almost exclusively teaching focus and which can also become inward-looking and introspective and thus fail to provide adequate pastoral care or opportunities for witness. But Cell Church is vulnerable to at least one criticism that is theological or

⁵³ Witness the demonstrations at the G8 Summit in Genoa, Italy, in July 2001.

ecclesiological in its nature. This criticism has to do with the receiving and passing on of the Christian tradition and the connection of the cell with the wider fellowship of the church. The development of cells makes the congregation appear to be of less importance, but it is the congregation that, in practice, is often the link between the individual Christian and the wider church, not the smaller unit - or even the larger one. The danger of the Cell-Congregation-Cathedral model is that the middle term, Congregation, will become redundant. I know that this is not the intention of those who promote this idea, but I do wonder what might happen in practice as the concept is developed.

The other popular concept about which I want to make some comments is the one known as the Purpose-Driven Church.

The Purpose Driven Church

There is a significant emphasis in the concept of the purpose-driven church on a movement of people from the periphery towards the centre. However, my own personal theological formation took place in the 1960s when much new missiological thinking was in the air.⁵⁴ There was an affirmation that the correct sequence for mission was not God>Church>World, but rather God>World>Church. There was also much talk about the appropriateness of “Go-structures” as opposed to “Come-structures”. A dominant theological influence was that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer whose ideas about God as “the beyond in the midst” and about religionless Christianity were extremely influential. Above all, there was Bonhoeffer’s conviction that the movement in and of God is from the centre towards the periphery, that “God allows himself to be edged out of the world on to the cross”.⁵⁵

Now, if the authentically Christian movement is indeed one from the centre to the periphery, what is to be said of ideas that place an emphasis on a movement in precisely the opposite direction? Is the purpose-driven church a come-structure reborn? However, it is not hard to identify churches and ministries today where the movement is indeed towards the periphery and the people who exist there. They may not be as celebrated as some large and well-

⁵⁴ See Colin W. Williams, *Where in the World? & What in the World?* (Epworth 1965).

⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison* (Collins/Fontana, London, 1959) 122.

known congregations in our midst, but they may demonstrate a more authentically Christ-like pattern of church life and witness.

Conclusion

The danger inherent in the contemporary ferment of ideas concerning the church's evangelistic task is that enthusiasts might come to promote their preference as being the answer to the church's calling to preach the gospel. I have been in ministry long enough to see many band-wagons come and go. Over-enthusiasm, on one hand, for a particular evangelistic method and, on the other, over-caution and scepticism about them all need alike to be avoided. Pragmatism would seem to be the order of the day. If it works in a given context, fine. If it doesn't work, don't be too disappointed. Try something else.

Finally, trans-cultural mission seems to be the name of the game today, even within our own country. Our nation has become a foreign land to many people in our churches, and our churches a foreign land to those outside them. However, this is not the first time in Christian history that the Church has faced the challenge of a fragmenting culture and a plurality of spiritualities. There are lessons from the past from which 21st century Christians may profit.⁵⁶ What has not changed is the enduring command of the Lord to "go into all the world and make disciples of all nations." That task begins at our own doorstep, but it takes imagination as well as obedience and commitment to put it into effect.

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CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT...

John Simpson

Leadership is about:

- presence not power;
- stature not status;
- character not charm.

⁵⁶ See Curtis Change, *Engaging Unbelief* (Apollos, Leicester 2000).