

An Evangelistic Lifestyle In the Church

– Howard Snyder –

The church cannot fully speak the good news unless it is good news - a reconciled and reconciling body of believers.

"Here's Life, America" was a multimillion-dollar evangelistic effort sponsored by Campus Crusade for Christ, localized in 253 U.S. metropolitan areas. It involved over 14,500 local churches, and three-fourths of all Americans were said to have been exposed to the campaign's catchy "I Found It" slogan during the campaign.

Probably all of us have been aware of the "Here's Life" campaign, and some of our churches may have participated. It seems to me that the unprecedented "Here's Life" effort may represent a significant turning point for North American evangelical churches. This effort, in retrospect, may mark the point, not where North American churches took a quantum leap forward in evangelism, but where they finally learned that evangelism will fail if it does not grow out of the integrity and spiritual vitality of the local congregation.

All indications are that "Here's Life" was a great media success and a drastic evangelistic failure. Millions of Americans "heard" the message and were "influenced" by it. These campaigns may even have produced some good in the form of pre-evangelism. But all empirical studies so far yield the same result: thousands of "decisions" but only the tiniest trickle of new church members. And the evidence suggests that most "converts" represent Christian rededications and transfers from one church to another.

As studies by Win Arn and others have shown, "Here's Life" has had virtually no measurable impact on church membership in the United States. We may hope that it has had some significant, less tangible results, and that it may have contributed in some way to a broadbased spiritual awakening in America. But all indications are that its impact will have been primarily on some of the individual Christians and local churches which participated, not on the mass of North American pagans "Here's Life" was supposed to have reached.

In fact, "Here's Life" is going the way of "Key '73," "Evangelism in Depth," and similar efforts before it. George Peters (in *Saturation Evangelism*) and Peter Wagner (in *Frontiers in Missionary Strategy*) have shown that Evangelism in Depth had little real impact in terms of church growth, and that the major reason was that the effort

did not grow naturally out of the normal life of local congregations. This fact suggests that an ecclesiological issue is at stake.

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

The major justification for such intensive evangelistic campaigns as Evangelism in Depth and "Here's Life" is, of course, that the local churches "aren't getting the job done." Churches are failing in their evangelism. Therefore a large-scale, broad-based, intensive effort sponsored by some outside or overarching entity is needed to do the job, bring in the harvest, and give churches a much needed shot of adrenaline.

But the neglected issue here is the question of the nature of the church itself. The failure of "Here's Life" and similar efforts is not, fundamentally, a technical or programming failure. The problem goes deeper than the question of methods. It is time to stop talking about programming mistakes or faulty techniques and face up to a fundamental theological error concerning the nature of the church and therefore the nature of salvation itself.

The truth is that no one can be joined to Christ the head without being joined to Christ's body, and the error is to think, first, that a person can become a Christian without being born into God's family in a visible way, and secondly, that evangelism can be authentic while ignoring this dynamic relationship of head and body.

COMMUNITY OF GOD'S PEOPLE

We need to recover the classical doctrine that "outside the church there is no salvation" - but understood biblically. Augustine was right to emphasize the close, inseparable relationship of head and body in the church. He was right to say the history of the church parallels the history of Christ, the head. The problem with the classical view of "no salvation outside the church" is that this came to be understood institutionally and sacramentally rather than in terms of vital, visible participation in the community of God's people where intimate fellowship with God is joined with intimate fellowship with the brothers and sisters who make up Christ's body.

Many reasons may be cited for our failures in evangelism, and all these should be examined. But my argument here is that evangelistic effectiveness begins with proper attention to the life and integrity of the congregation. This, then will be the focus of the following observations.

I would like to suggest six propositions which, it seems to me, are important in developing an evangelistic lifestyle for the congregation. These are based on the assumption that evangelism is a

proper priority for the congregation, but that this priority fits integrally into a web of intertwined priorities to be controlled by the fundamental calling of the church to glorify God and participate in his mission.

THE REIGN OF GOD

1. The Church's first concern in evangelism is to participate in the mission of God - to do the works of Christ and work for the progressive manifestation of his reign.

Jesus came to do the work of the Father. He accomplished the work given him to do while physically present on earth. With his death and resurrection comes a new phase of his work. Before his resurrection, Jesus was limited by space and time. The body of Christ was a physical, space-time body like yours and mine. But that body was broken on the cross so that salvation could be manifested and the church could be born. Just as the bread was broken and multiplied in the feeding of the thousands, so Christ's body broken on the cross provides for his new body, the church, which by his Spirit is "multiplied" into the whole world as the community of God's people.

So Jesus tells his disciples, in effect: "It is for your good that I am going away. Now I am limited by my physical existence. But in going, I will send the Spirit. I will be with you now in a new dimension. Now you will be my physical body, spread throughout the earth, indwelt by my very Spirit. You will do the works I have done - and even greater, for through you my presence and my operation will be spread and multiplied to the whole world. You are my witnesses! You are now my body, empowered by the Holy Spirit."

An implication of the fact that we are called to participate in the mission of God is that mission covers all needs of all persons in all places. *This mission of God is the kingdom of God.* It is inevitably political, social, and economic, even though (and precisely because) it is fundamentally spiritual. Therefore evangelism includes witnessing to God's truth and justice in all areas of life and society.

In our evangelistic lifestyle, we need a holistic witness that gives both depth and credibility to our proclamation and evangelism.

VITALITY OF THE CONGREGATION

2. Evangelism is sharing life, and the church cannot share what it does not possess.

A major problem with any form of evangelism that relies heavily on the mass media, is that the gospel becomes largely disembodied. The truth frequently becomes removed from reality. The gospel is separated from the context of demonstrated Christian community, which is a step toward individualism, abstraction, and neglect of the horizontal dimension in the reconciliation God gives. This creates the danger that becoming a Christian will be perceived as being unrelated to the whole web of relationships in one's life; that one can be joined to the head without being joined to the body. This runs counter to scriptures which say the Christian has been born into the family of God.

My concern here is not merely, however, that evangelism be tied in more directly with the local church. The more basic question is the authenticity and vitality of the local congregation itself. The fact is that many churches simply have nothing to share with unbelievers.

This is true even of doctrinally orthodox churches. We may argue that as long as it has the Bible and correct doctrine, a church has the gospel to share. But the fact is that gospel truths divorced from experience generally fail to communicate the intended message. The message may be *received*, but it is not *comprehended* as really being the gospel. Truth is not clothed in life, and therefore lacks the ring of authenticity.

The practical implications of this argument are that the authenticity and vitality of the congregation are themselves matters of evangelistic priority, and that the gospel must be presented on the basis of personal relationships. The gospel is not primarily abstract truth but primarily personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This will be best comprehended as we present the gospel on the basis of personal relationships and through personal relationships.

BEING GOOD NEWS

3. Spiritual life depends upon and is deepened by a vital experience of Christian community. Genuine Christian community itself is evangelistic, and a church which is weak in community will be weak in evangelism - even though it may show "results."

Both scripture and experience teach us the importance of Christian community for personal spiritual life and growth. Much of the dynamism of the early Christian church in Jerusalem was due to the fact that believers "devoted themselves ... to the fellowship," "were together," and "broke bread in their homes and ate together" (Acts 2:42, 44, 46). They were discovering Christian community, and in the process

discovering more deeply the meaning of the reconciliation they had received from God.

Soon the Jewish believers were to learn a deeper lesson in community and reconciliation: Gentile believers were also to be fully part of the church. Later Paul was to say that this was "the mystery" of the gospel - both Jew and Gentile are reconciled in one body (Eph. 2 and 3). Paul then went on to teach that God's plan is for the whole body of Christ - the whole Christian community - to grow together and grow up into Jesus Christ, the head (Eph. 4). Spiritual growth is described in terms of community, unity, and the mutuality of service and gifts.

This is why the New Testament need say very little about evangelism. It puts the emphasis on authentic Christian community - the reconciled life together that comes from being mutually joined to Christ and mutually growing up into him. The implication is clear: If the church is genuinely a reconciled and reconciling community, the Lord will add daily to its number those who are being saved.

The point is that the church must *be* good news in order to *proclaim* good news. It is good news if in the congregation ordinary men and women are growing in their relationships with God and with each other, if in the church they are discovering new resources for everyday life, new direction and motivation for ministry, and deeper dimensions of what it means to share life and faith deeply with Christian sisters and brothers.

I emphasize this point because most churches today are woefully weak at the point of genuine *koinonia*. We have allowed a superficial form of fellowship to substitute for the deep sharing that is so essential to an authentic experience of the church. In many churches, genuine community is such a lost dimension that few even perceive its lack.

CONVERSION AND CHANGE

Whenever real community has been lost in the church, renewal movements have sprung up which have majored on the neglected area. Historically this was true in monasticism, Anabaptism, and other movements. Today the same thing is seen in literally hundreds of new intentional communities which have sprung up within the past ten years or so. Over the past three years I have come into contact with a number of such communities, and have been impressed both with the diversity and the vitality of such groups. One thing they all have in common: the excitement of discovering the freedom and joy of intimately sharing lives together in common purpose and in allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Both for its own authenticity and for its evangelistic fruitfulness, the church must learn ways to recover the dynamic of genuine Christian community. Churches can

learn this from contact with the new forms of community which are springing up and through studying what the Bible itself says about the community of God's people. They, will discover, however, that the recovery of community is in part a structural problem. That is, real community will not develop in the church unless there are normative structures to nourish it.

As hinted above, I am not arguing that a church weak in community will be "unsuccessful" in evangelism. It may, in fact, show impressive numerical results evangelistically. It may see many people converted and added to the church rolls. But without genuine community there will be little discipleship. New converts will come to church and claim allegiance to Christ, but little will change in their lifestyles. Their patterns of use of time, money, and other resources will change very little. Their lives will present no real challenge to the built-in evils of oppression, prejudice, and exploitation in society.

Where community is weak, successful evangelism will do little more than hasten the church's accommodation to surrounding society. Evangelism without community and discipleship may simply speed the process of bringing the world into the church, rather than bringing the gospel to the world. This was true when the Roman population was nominally Christianized after Constantine and will always be true when evangelism is put ahead of the authenticity of the Christian fellowship itself.

THE ECOLOGY OF THE CHURCH

4. Evangelism will be most effective when there is a healthy balance of worship, community, and witness in the local congregation. Therefore, worship itself is a priority for evangelistic effectiveness.

Worship, witness, and community together form the balanced ecology of a congregation. The church must first of all be oriented toward God in worship. This is the fundamental purpose and priority of the church - to live "to the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1: 14). "To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 3:21). On this basis, then, the church is joined together mutually in the community of the body of Christ, and then turned toward the world in witness. Worship, community, and witness together make up the life of the balanced and growing church. (Note the use of the terms *leitourgia*, *koinonia*, *marturia*, and related terms in the New Testament.)

We do not always think of worship as an element of the evangelistic lifestyle of the congregation, but it may in fact be the most important aspect. If nothing happens in worship, not much will happen in the church's witness. It is clear that much of the dynamism of the charismatic renewal derives from the joy and power experienced by believers in the context of the celebration of worship.

I am not advocating that the church plan a "dynamic" or "exciting" worship service so that people will feel good and visitors will want to come back and eventually join the church. This smacks too much of promotion and manipulation. I am pointing to the priority of worship in its own right, as the first purpose of the church itself.

ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

Worship is oriented first of all toward God, and worship must bring us to encounter God - who he is, what he demands, and what he offers; what the conditions of his covenant with us are. Worship is crucial for evangelism not primarily as a way of attracting nonbelievers to God (although genuine worship will do this), but because it is in worship that believers come to see the world from God's perspective and come to share the divine impulse for doing the works of Christ. It is this kind of worship that both impels believers outward in witness and, by God's Holy Spirit, empowers that witness to be effective in the world (see Acts 1:8).

By and large, people in North America today have only the vaguest notion (if any) of who God really is. To most Americans he is either a cosmic Teddy Bear, an old-fashioned Granddaddy, or an oblong blur. To many Christians God is decidedly less than "the High and Holy One who inhabits eternity" and the "God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." It is our lack of real encounter with God in worship which puts the punch in the statement that if God were suddenly to vanish from the universe, in time even the church would suffer.

The church that is serious about participating in the mission of God and doing the works of Christ will take seriously the priority of worship. We can accomplish the work begun by Jesus only if we have the same consciousness of God's presence and reality that Jesus had.

THE GIFT OF EVANGELIST

5. God gifts some people for evangelism and evangelistic leadership. Therefore effective evangelism depends on identifying, recognizing, and using these gifts.

Here the basic text is, of course, Ephesians 4:11-13 - God "gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers; to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God."

At first glance the role of evangelist here appears unclear and not directly related to bringing unbelievers to a knowledge of Jesus Christ. But note carefully what Paul is

saying. First, it is in the harmonious functioning of *all* leadership gifts (apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, teacher) that God's people are prepared for ministry and the body of Christ reaches maturity. So the gift of evangelist functions in conjunction with other gifts.

Secondly, the evangelist is not merely one who wins people to Christ. He or she is one who leads the people of God in evangelism. The evangelist is that person specially, charismatically gifted by God to bring others to a knowledge of Jesus Christ and to lead others in doing the same.

As this happens, God's people are equipped for ministry and the body of Christ is built up. Thus "the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Eph. 4:16). Here is growth coming from the proper functioning of each member and each spiritual gift.

The church functions on a fundamentally different basis than does a religious or a secular organization. It is designed to function on the basis of spiritual gifts. The charismatic nature of the church is nothing more than an extension of the fact of salvation by grace alone to the areas of the church's ministry and witness.

The congregation concerned to develop an evangelistic lifestyle will therefore give attention to the matter of spiritual gifts. It will be concerned to identify those with the gift of evangelism so that the evangelistic witness of the church can be extended. And it will be concerned with the exercise of other gifts as well, understanding that it is the proper functioning of all the gifts together which allows the church to become the growing, functioning body described in 1 Corinthians 12-14, Romans 12:6-8, and Ephesians 4:11-16.

STIRRING UP THE GIFT

How can the congregation round out this dimension of its evangelistic lifestyle? Here are some suggestions:

- The church should understand what the Bible teaches concerning the gifts of the Spirit. Therefore solid biblical teaching in this area is important.
- Expect God to awaken various gifts in the congregation, and watch for these. Look for sparks of interest or initiative which may indicate spiritual gifts.
- Those who appear to have evangelistic gifts should be encouraged and trained to use their gifts effectively. This will include helping such persons to understand

their gift, giving them training and freeing them from other responsibilities so they can concentrate on the gift-ministry God has given them.

- The congregation should be alert to providing partial or full-time economic support for people with demonstrated gift ministries. If the congregation employs anyone full-time or part-time, it should be those whose ministries have become so crucial to the life and witness of the congregation that the church decides to provide for the full-time exercise of these ministries. Such forms of service may be pastoral, evangelistic, missionary, social, or of other varieties, depending on the life and needs of the particular congregation. The point is that the church should put its resources behind the ministries which are most crucial to its life.

THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST

6. Conversion begins a lifelong process of spiritual growth, discipleship, and sanctification toward the restoration of the image of God in the believer.

Biblically based evangelism does not focus exclusively on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Rather, it sets these crucial events in the context of Jesus' earthly life and of his present reign. As Paul says in Colossians, God "has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom (or reign) of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins ... For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col. 1: 13-14, 19-20).

In this passage, Paul goes on to say that God wills "to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation" (Col. 1: 22). So he says, "We proclaim him [Christ], admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ" (Col. 1:28). As "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form," so "you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority" (Col. 2:9).

Focusing on Jesus' life and reign, as well as his death and resurrection, we see that God's concern is not only to rescue us from hell or redeem us for heaven. Rather, it is to recreate within us, and in the life of the congregation, "the fullness of Christ." It is to restore the image of God in our lives and in our relationships. Bringing all creation to harmony and order under the headship of Christ begins through bringing all believers to harmony and Christlikeness through the discipling and sanctifying work of the Spirit of Christ in the church.

EVANGELISM IS A BEGINNING

The lifestyle implication for the congregation here is that evangelism is never an end only, but always a beginning. Or rather, it is part of a continuing cycle of life and growth in the body of Christ. Therefore the congregation must be as concerned with those processes and structures in the body which bring spiritual growth and maturity as it is with the work of evangelism itself.

We see something of a three-step process here. Individual persons must be brought to the lordship of Christ, so *that* the church can grow up into Christ, experience his fullness, and acknowledge his reign, so *that* the whole creation can be freed from its bondage to decay and be set free in joyful subservience to the God of the universe. So we keep our eyes on the larger goal, and we join evangelism to the larger work of acknowledging Christ's lordship in every area of society and culture.

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At the time of publication Dr. Howard Snyder was president of Light and Life Men International and is the author of The Community of the King (InterVarsity).

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⁴See James Engel, *Making Disciples in All Nations* (manuscript copy)

⁵See David Jackson, *Coming Together* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1978)

⁶See Snyder, *The Community of the King*, pp. 121ff