



Ministers' Fraternal Study Guides

Evangelism in the Local Church

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1. Introduction

The importance of evangelism has never been in doubt within the Bible-believing church. However the principles by which it should be conducted, the role of individual Christians versus that of the church as a whole, and the relationship between evangelism and other areas of Christian/church life have all been the source of debate and, occasionally, confusion.

This briefing paper does not attempt to argue for the importance of evangelism in the local church, nor does it explore related issues of other faiths or those who haven't heard the gospel. Rather it seeks to outline the issues facing the leadership of a church in their task of teaching, encouraging and organising appropriate evangelistic activity within their church. This clearly requires a foundational understanding of the biblical teaching on this topic. It will also involve wise judgments on the best way to embody these biblical principles within any one local church setting.

2. Biblical principles of evangelism

2.1 Biblical overview

The well-spring of evangelism is, of course, the evangelistic heart of God who seeks and saves the lost. We see this heart expressed in the plans of salvation which are expressed as early as Genesis 3:15. The OT plan of salvation clearly focuses on the election and redemption of Israel but always with an eye to inclusion of the rest of the world (Genesis 12:1-3). Indeed God's methodology is that he chooses and blesses the one for the wider blessing of the many.

Hence Israel's task is that of being a holy priesthood to bear witness to God within the world (Exodus 19:3-6; Deut. 28:10) and a concern for proclamation to world is expressed (e.g. Psalm 96:1-3, 105:1-2). Ultimately, however, Israel failed in her allotted task to be a light to the nations.

Her task is fulfilled by Christ who is to be the light to the nations (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6; John 9:5) and the suffering servant who brings salvation. His role is then taken on by his people, the church (Matthew 5:14; Acts 13:47). The followers of Christ are now the holy nation and priesthood who are to declare to the world God's work and goodness (1 Peter 2:9-10, alluding to Israel's role in Isaiah 43:21). Hence we see that God is an evangelistic God who is calling a rebellious world back to himself through the work of Christ, and that he does so through his people.

2.2 The scope of evangelism

Evangelism has been defined as follows: *To evangelise is to spread the Good News that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and that, as the reigning Lord, he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gift of the Spirit to all who repent and believe* (Lausanne Covenant, 1974).

Such a definition rightly focuses on evangelism as an act of communication of the gospel (see 2

Corinthians 4:1-7). Indeed, it should be insisted that verbal proclamation (by a variety of means) is indispensable in evangelism and constitutes the heart of the task (Romans 10:14-15). However there is much that should go alongside this task in which the local church should also engage. This would include:

- (a) dependence on God expressed in prayer for the opportunity to proclaim the message (Colossians 4:3), clarity in its proclamation (Colossians 4:4) and for the work of conversion (Romans 10:1);
- (b) the necessity of godly lives that make the message of gospel attractive to people (Matthew 5:14-16; Titus 2:10);
- (c) the role of the corporate gathering of believers in which the unbeliever maybe convicted (1 Corinthians 14:24-25);
- (d) the answering of questions raised by an unbeliever (1 Peter 3:15-16);
- (e) the corporate witness of the local church in its unity and love (John 13:34-35; 17:20-23);
- (f) the witness of the loving actions of a local church to outsiders;
- (g) the financial support that should be extended by a church to those involved in full-time evangelistic ministry (Phil. 4:14-18; 1 Cor. 9:13-14, which probably refers to Luke 10:7).

Hence it can be seen that a local church's understanding of the biblical teaching on evangelism could suffer from being too narrow in that it does not contain all that should be involved, or could suffer from being too broad in making everything part of evangelism and so obscuring the true nature of the task. Therefore a primary issue for the local church is holding to the verbal proclamation of the gospel as the heart of evangelism but also seeing how this relates to allied tasks and the context in which such proclamation takes place.

2.3 The Biblical principles of evangelism

The manner and means of our presentation of the gospel is shaped by the nature of that gospel and the God from whom it comes:

- The gospel speaks of Christ serving us, and hence we are to see ourselves as servants of those to whom we speak. This influences both our motives and methods in evangelism: we do not proclaim ourselves and we do so out of love and in humility and not for our own gain (2 Cor. 4:5; 1 Thess. 2:3-6).
- The gospel speaks of God graciously opening blind eyes to the truth of our sin and the work of Christ (John 16:8-11; 1 Cor. 2:9-16; 2 Cor. 4:5-6). As a result our human task is that of presenting the message clearly while the divine task is that of convincing people of the truth of that message. This leads to the principle of confidence in the message and dependence on God's work in people's hearts.
- God is a God of truth and so calls us to present his gospel in all its truth. We must beware temptations to change or twist the message, and beware any deceptive methods (2 Cor. 4:1-3).
- God is a God of grace and love and so our manner in speaking his message must be gracious and loving. We always speak the truth but do so in a manner worthy of God and his gospel so that our conscience is clear before him and before people (Acts 24:16; 1 Thess. 2:8; Col. 4:6; 1 Peter 3:15-16).

All of this means that the biblical definition of successful evangelism focuses on a loving and faithful presentation of the gospel. Success is certainly not measured in terms of the response seen or the image created.

3. Key issues in evangelism for the local church

3.1 The role of individual Christians

In leading a local church in evangelism there must be a clear understanding as to the role each Christian has in this task. Without this, members of a church may either be under an unnecessary burden of expectation or not realise the responsibility that is theirs. Understanding of this issue is foundational both to the strategy of evangelism undertaken by the church and any training in evangelism.

We must take into account that the gift of evangelist and the work of an evangelist are described as distinct roles (Acts 21:7; Ephesians 4:11; 2 Timothy 4:5). This distinction may be seen in Colossians 4:3-5 where Paul requests prayer for his role in proclaiming the gospel and then gives his readers advice in their relationships with outsiders. This passage and 1 Peter 3:14-16 are crucial in deciding the role of each Christian.

The most common answer to this issue is that each Christian should promote the gospel through their life and words and should be prepared to both answer questions and speak the message of the gospel. However there is also a key role for those with the gift of evangelism. This has significant implications for training in evangelism and in developing an evangelistic strategy that combines the role of individuals and evangelists.

3.2 The corporate witness of the church

The relationship between Christians is also seen to be an important part of witness to the world. Jesus says our love for each other (modelled on his love for us) is what will tell the world we are his (John 13:34-35), and that our unity (brought about by him) is part of what will convince the world he was sent by the Father (John 17:22-23; c.f. Eph. 3:6-10). Similarly the function of being the light of the world is fulfilled as a community, not just as individuals (Matthew 5:14-16).

This suggests that we should see the quality of relationships between Christians as a prime factor in evangelism and hence consider how non-Christians may be exposed to such relationships.

3.3 The witness of godly lives of a church

A clear connection is made between the lives lived by Christians before the world and their evangelistic impact. Passages making this point include Titus 2:10, 1 Peter 2:12, and, in the marriage context, 1 Peter 3:1-2. These indicate the need for a local church to consider the witness of its lifestyle as well as its words.

3.4 The witness of the loving actions of a church

Allied to the previous point, but much more debated, is whether a church should also engage in social action – that is, loving actions to the world that extend beyond the individual godly lives of Christians. Social action is a term that covers a breadth of activities ranging from expressions of care, such as relief of poverty, to promoting social justice, such as political lobbying. Some evangelicals have argued strongly for such involvement, stating that while such loving actions is not the means of building the kingdom, it is the appropriate stance from which we speak the saving message of the gospel.

3.5 The willingness for personal sacrifice

Paul speaks of his immense flexibility in working for the salvation of others (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). He says that in doing so he is simply following the example of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:33-11:1). This principle of personal sacrifice for the sake of others needs to be taught in a local church such that people embody it in their lives. This principle also needs to inform the organisation of the church's life such that evangelism is seen to be something that sacrifices will be made over.

3.6 Motivations in evangelism

As God is concerned with our hearts as well as our heads, we want to lead churches that do the right thing for the right reasons. As a result our churches should have a Biblical understanding of the right motivations for evangelism as well as the principles of evangelism. This is especially an issue given the common feelings of guilt over evangelism.

Motivations for evangelism may include: that God is the one true God and is worthy of praise (Psalm 96); compassion for the lost (Rom 10:1); and allegiance to Christ (Luke 12:8-9; 1 Peter 3:14-15). We must also beware the potential for sinful motives in evangelism (Phil. 1:15).

4. Strategy of evangelism

The Biblical principles of evangelism can be put into practice in a great variety of ways. In considering a strategy for any one church the following issues should be considered. It should also be borne in mind that any strategy for a local church should be coherent – that is, the different elements should link together rather than being isolated entities.

4.1 Modelling

The leadership of a church must set the pace in evangelism and model whatever their evangelistic strategy is to be.

4.2 Teaching / Training / Encouragement

Individuals within churches must understand their role in evangelism and how it relates to the overall evangelistic strategy of the church. Most people feel ill-equipped to explain the gospel to their non-Christian friends or to answer their questions. Hence the local church must consider how to meet this need. They must consider how ongoing encouragement in evangelism will take place (e.g. the profile evangelism has within small groups, prayer meetings etc).

In addition they must promote an evangelistic mindset and heart that reflects the evangelistic heart of God – without this, programmes of events are useless.

4.3 Evangelistic contacts

A church must consider where its contacts with the world exist or will be fostered. Three broad areas can be identified:

- (a) the *relational* networks of contacts church members have (friends, family, colleagues, etc)
- (b) the *organisational* network of contacts a church may have through its activities (e.g. through children/youth work, links with a local school etc)
- (c) the *geographical* network of contacts in the local area. These areas may have overlap between them, but a church should consider whether anyone of these is primary and the subsequent impact on their evangelistic strategy.

4.4 Evangelistic events/meetings

Events organised by churches can be divided broadly into relationship building events and gospel content events. The former allow people to see and experience the quality of relationships within the church community; the later have some element of presentation of the gospel.

Gospel content events can vary greatly in substance and style from a craft evening that includes a testimony, to a discussion evening on an apologetic question, to a traditional mission meeting or a church service. The limit here is only our imagination. Leaders should consider the groupings they are attempting to reach in deciding what type and style of events they should organise.

4.5 Evangelistic courses

Numerous evangelistic courses now exist which present the truth of the gospel over a number of Weeks, usually in small group context. These give the opportunity for questions and discussion as well as building closer relationships with those considering the gospel.

5. Further reading

Chapman, J., *Know and Tell the Gospel: Help for the reluctant evangelist*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1981
Chester T., *Good News to the Poor: Sharing the gospel through social involvement*, IVP, Leicester, 2004

Dickson, J., *Promoting the Gospel: A practical guide to the Biblical art of sharing your faith*, Blue Bottle Books, Sydney, 2005
Green M., *Evangelism through the local Church*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1990
Kuiper, A., *God Centred Evangelism*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1961
Mittelberg M., *Building a Contagious Church: Revolutionizing the way we view and do evangelism*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2000
Stott, J., *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, Falcon, London, 1975
Stott, J., *Our Guilty Silence: The church, the gospel and the world*, IVP, Leicester 1967

6. Suggested questions for discussion

Foundational issues

- What are the prime biblical principles that should guide our evangelism? Which of these if any do we overlook?
- How would our church define 'successful' evangelism? How would I?
- Is there an irreducible Gospel content and if so, what is it? Does our church understand this?
- What does a good evangelistic example in a minister look like?
- Is there false guilt in some church members about personal evangelism? If so, where does it come from and how can we help?
- Is 'evangelist' a continuing distinct office and, if so, why have we so neglected it? How can we correct this?

Strategy

- What are the main sources of contact with non-Christians that we expect our church to have and develop?
- What are appropriate events or activities that can foster these relationships and allow presentation of the gospel?
- What training/teaching is needed for our church in its understanding of evangelism, skills to undertake evangelism and heart for evangelism?
- How can evangelism be appropriately encouraged within the normal life of the church? How can this be done without creating false guilt?
- What allied areas to evangelism might we be lacking in? Which might our church not rightly appreciate?
- Is the evangelistic strategy of my local church coherent?