
Mission Part I: Back to Basics

a Reminder of the Nature of Mission

Robert Rodgers

In his *Politica Ecclesiastica* Voetius stated the three-fold aim of Christian missions as the Conversion of the Heathen; the Establishment of the Church; the Glorification and Manifestation of Divine Grace.¹

That this statement is valid for the contemporary Evangelical may be seen in the fact that Professor R.B. Kuiper employs the same outline in a chapter entitled **God and the Aim of Evangelism**.² Kuiper also makes the point, important to the Evangelical, that the aim is singular though understood in a three-fold manner. In other words, the ultimate aim is the glory of God to which the conversion of the heathen and the establishment of the Church contribute. None of these elements may be divorced from the others without damage to the overall aim. There is a progression of thought though a practical division is impossible. As the Evangelical sees it, the salvation of individual souls leads to the establishment of the Church and together these issue in the glory of God.³

Professor J.H. Bavinck also borrows the outline from Voetius and adds:

It must be emphasised, however, that these three purposes are not distinct and separate but they are in fact three aspects of a single purpose of God: the Coming and Extension of the Kingdom of God.⁴

The Conversion of the Heathen

The Evangelical believes that man is a fallen being. He regards the third chapter of Genesis as historical and as accounting, therefore, for the fact of sin.⁵ Since Adam was not only the natural head of the human race but also the representative head of all his descendants,

the guilt of his sin was naturally imputed to all those he represented; and as the result of this they are all born in a corrupt state.⁶

A situation exists, therefore, where man needs to be saved and it is only against this background that the significance of the Gospel can be understood. The Gospel, as its name implies, is the “good news” that, in Christ Jesus, God has dealt radically and finally with sin. Professor P.E. Hughes has written:

Through the grateful appropriation by faith of Christ’s atoning work, what was forfeited by the Fall is restored to man: his true and intended dignity is recovered, the purpose of life recaptured, the image of God restored and the way into the paradise of intimate communion with God reopened.⁷

In speaking of “appropriation by faith”, Hughes is emphasising a major evangelical doctrine. This good news of the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ who is the only Saviour of men, demands a response and a confession of faith on the part of those who believe.⁸

The Bible is replete with references to the saving activity of God so that Canon Michael Green can say, “ ‘God’ and ‘Saviour’ are synonymous throughout the whole of the Old Testament” whilst J.R.W. Stott draws attention to the fact that, in the New Testament, God is described repeatedly as “God our Saviour”.⁹

Evangelical exegetes often stress the meaning of ‘Jesus’ (Saviour) which is the equivalent of the Old Testament ‘Joshua’. For them, the name describes the mission since the Angel, reassuring Joseph about the birth of Mary’s child, says, “... and thou shalt call His name Jesus: for He shall save His people from their sins”.¹⁰

Emphasis is also given to the fact that the individual responds to the preaching of the Gospel with repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Repentance and faith are seen as the two elements which comprise conversion and as the result of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.¹¹

Repentance may be defined as a change of mind which issues in a change of conduct. Professor Louis Berkhof quotes Walden who concluded that the term ‘*metanoia*’ means “a general change of mind which becomes in its fullest development an intellectual and moral regeneration”.¹²

The second element in conversion is **faith** (*pistis*) or *fiducia* (trust) and this is of great importance. Professor J.I. Packer has underlined the fact that faith is not merely *fides* but *fiducia*, personal trust and confidence in God’s mercy through Christ.¹³

The call to repentance and faith is addressed to men by means of preaching. “Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God”.¹⁴ Men hear the good news because others have been sent by God to preach.¹⁵ For this reason the Evangelical feels very keenly the force of the Lord’s command conveyed in the words of the Great Commission.¹⁶ He notes the order and progression in the command in that the risen Christ specifies first of all the making of disciples, then their baptism and, finally, their being taught.¹⁷ Thus, **The Frankfurt Declaration**, after asserting that “it is the goal of mission to make known to all people in all walks of life the gift of His (Christ’s) salvation”, says:

We therefore challenge all non-Christians who belong to God on the basis of creation, to believe in Him and to be baptised in His name, for in Him alone is eternal salvation promised to them.¹⁸

This is not to assert that Mission has taken place only when preaching has resulted in conversions. The reality of Mission, according to the Evangelical, is not to be gauged by numerical success but by the faithful proclamation of the Gospel.¹⁹ By ‘proclamation’ is meant quite literally the preaching of the Word though evangelical missions have usually employed medicine, education and other social measures in their evangelistic activities.²⁰ The precise status of these ‘extra-kerygmatic’ functions has been keenly debated between Evangelicals and ecumenists, the former describing them as subordinate to preaching and the latter, in many instances, seeing them as having replaced proclamation.

We may summarise this section of the discussion by saying that the Evangelical, under the sovereignty of God and in obedience to the Lord's command, believes it to be incumbent upon the Church to send forth 'heralds' to preach the good news of God's saving activity in Jesus Christ. He believes it to be a matter of urgency to call men to repentance and faith and thus to salvation.²¹

The Establishment of the Church

The second point of emphasis for the Evangelical is the establishment of the Church since he believes that the work of the Holy Spirit does not stop with the individual but bears a direct relationship to the whole body of believers. After writing of the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the individual, Professor Edwin H. Palmer goes on to say:

The Bible goes beyond this atomistic approach, however. It also reveals a corporate work of the Spirit, that is, a work that relates to believers considered collectively. It tells us what the Spirit does, not only in the believer as an individual, but in the Church as a whole.²²

All those who exercise saving faith in Christ become members of Christ's Body, the Church.

Since he lays such stress on the written Word of God, the Evangelical will point to the fact that, after the formation of local churches following the Day of Pentecost, the New Testament knows nothing of a believer who has not been added to a local assembly.²³ That same written Word employs various pictures to represent the idea of the incorporation of the individual into the Church invisible. That Church is a "holy temple" in which the believer has been set as a "stone" and a "body" of which the individual is a member.²⁴

The relationship between the individual and the Church is well articulated by the **Frankfurt Declaration** which speaks of "the primary visible task of Mission" being "to call out the messianic, saved community from among all people" and adds:

Missionary proclamation should lead everywhere to the establishment of the Church of Jesus Christ, which exhibits a new, defined reality as salt and light in its social environment.²⁵

As far as the Christian is concerned, it is within the Church that he finds spiritual nourishment through the Word of God and the sacraments and it is in fellowship with other believers that he seeks to witness to non-Christians. In other words, the believer is to be concerned not only with his individual witness but with the corporate testimony of the Church. Thus the **Frankfurt Declaration** seeks to underline the work of the Holy Spirit in the congregation:

Through the Gospel and the Sacraments, the Holy Spirit gives the members of the congregation a new life and an eternal, spiritual fellowship with each other and with God Who is real and present with them. It is the task of the congregation through its witness to move the lost, especially those who live outside its community to a saving membership in the Body of Christ. Only by being this new kind of fellowship does the Church present the Gospel convincingly.²⁶

The Glory of God

For the Evangelical, major emphasis is placed on the glory of God. He subscribes to the belief that “man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever”.²⁷

The main areas through which God is glorified are the salvation of individual souls and their incorporation in the Church. In Christ’s high-priestly prayer recorded in John 17 there is repeated reference to the glory of the Father. This enables Professor Kuiper to say, “It is evident that the Saviour regarded the salvation of men as a means to the end of the glorification of God”.²⁸ In the writings of the apostle Paul the direct relationship between the preaching of the Gospel, personal salvation and the glory of God is seen to good effect. Writing of those who in times past have not believed in God but yet have obtained mercy, Paul marvels at the depths both of the wisdom and knowledge of God and concludes the doctrinal section of his epistle to the Romans in doxology — “For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things: to whom be glory forever, Amen”.²⁹ Likewise, the practical section of the epistle ends with praise. For Paul, as for contemporary evangelicalism, the establishment of believers in the faith and the preaching of Jesus Christ redounds to God’s glory — “To God only wise be glory through Jesus Christ forever”.³⁰

It is absolutely vital that Mission should incorporate the three features outlined above. Walter Freytag has said that “nothing can be called Mission in the biblical sense which is not ... directed toward conversion and baptism”³¹ and it is this basic conviction which inspires the evangelical response to the ecumenical view of mission.

The Social Implications of the Gospel

Throughout the history of evangelical protestant missions from the 17th century to the end of the 19th century the importance of the social implications of the Gospel was recognised. Evangelicals have had a fine record as far as their duty towards their fellow-man’s physical and mental welfare was concerned and were in the forefront of social activity. Reflecting on the history of evangelical social concern, Millard Erickson felt able to say:

For all the liberal’s concern for alleviating social needs, it was the fundamentalist, not the liberal, who, on the foreign mission field, led the way not only in direct evangelism but in medical work, literature and education.³²

Sadly, the impetus with regard to evangelical social concern has not been maintained so that some of their leaders are now emphasising the need for a rediscovery of the social relevance of the Gospel.³³ Today, there is an increasing awareness among Evangelicals that they have failed signally to maintain a truly biblical emphasis with regard to the proper areas in which their faith operates. Thus, Harold Lindsell wrote:

The orthodox have not always tried, and have often failed, to relate their theology to the world in which we live. There has been some degree of introversion involving a self-centredness and an other-worldly piousness

that has been unbiblical. There have been efforts to delimit the sphere in which Christianity operates, to the extent that the faith has been working in a vacuum without relevancy to the world in which the believer must live and for which he does live that the world may receive benefits.³⁴

Such has been the introversion and isolation demonstrated by Evangelicals that Professor Dr. Walter Künneht of Erlangen University has said:

The Church is not called to flee and despise the world; not forced into a narrow-minded isolation, not condemned to a ghetto-existence; just the reverse is true: The Church is called to be a display before the world ... The Church has become the beginning of a new creation.³⁵

Inasmuch as Evangelicals have failed to recognise today the importance of social concern, they have been untrue to their history.

Pietism has a richly deserved reputation for social involvement. So deeply concerned were the Pietists in service to their fellow-man that one historian regarded them as “aggressive not contemplative; practical rather than theological”.³⁶ Pietism regarded all true theology as issuing in practical and ethical concerns. “A concern for social amelioration, Francke insisted, is the indispensable fruit of conversion”.³⁷ The multiplicity of good works initiated by Spener and Francke gave tangible evidence of the latter’s conviction that “conversion and regeneration should lead men into service on behalf of the social betterment of the world”.³⁸

Spener and Francke set the pattern for all subsequent pietistic social concerns so that Professor John Howard Yoder, the Mennonite scholar, could write:

It is certainly not the case that pietism, whether we think now of the 18th century movement or of its more recent spiritual heirs, was uninterested in social or political ethics. Few movements in Church history and few schools of theological conviction have been, in proportion to population, so productive of institutional inventiveness and cultural creativity as have been the Moravians, the Methodists and their counterparts within the larger churches.³⁹

John Wesley worked for the abolition of slaves and instituted clinics and credit-unions. He complained about the uneven distribution of members of parliament and the increase of personal wealth. His pamphlet entitled **Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions** displays quite advanced social views.⁴⁰

William Carey, together with his colleagues Marshman and Ward, founded Serampore University College in 1818 to which they admitted both Christian and non-Christian students. Charity schools were also founded and in his translation of the entire Bible into the language of the people, Carey laid the foundations of modern Bengali.⁴¹

“The Clapham Sect” was a “group of distinguished Evangelicals”, to use Dr. Alec Vidler’s description, consecrated to good works, noble causes and to the abolition of the slave trade. The King (George III) looked upon them as dangerous revolutionaries but Vidler makes clear that they were nothing of the sort.

They were indeed full of benevolence and philanthropy towards the poor ... they interested themselves a good deal in the social as well as in the moral and religious needs of the industrial poor, for example in the provision of hospitals and education. They denounced the barbarity of the criminal law and the state of prisons and they were ahead of their time in being willing to allow state interference in order to improve factory conditions.⁴²

David Livingstone also worked for the medical and social betterment of the people to whom he had gone with the Gospel. In fact, one historian of missions divides Livingstone's time in Africa into two distinct periods, 1841-1852 during which time he regards Livingstone as a missionary pure and simple and 1852-1873 when he was a missionary-explorer.

It was to a large extent Livingstone's horror of slavery as he saw it in South Africa that turned him into an explorer. The ambition which he formed was to open up central Africa in order that by the establishment of proper trade-routes and by the discovery of satisfactory outlets to the sea, the slave-trade might be rendered unnecessary and eventually be suppressed.⁴³

The Salvation Army, since its inception in 1865, has followed a vigorous policy of social involvement whilst individuals such as George Whitefield, Charles Haddon Spurgeon and George Müller founded orphanages and other benevolent institutions. In the realm of labour relations, too, Evangelicals played their part and the trade union movement owes its existence to men of that persuasion.⁴⁴ Thus, the Evangelicals exemplified the saying of William Penn: "True godliness does not turn men out of the world but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavours to mend it".⁴⁵

In seeking an explanation for the reversal in evangelical theory and practice regarding social involvement two phenomena need to be considered. Firstly, the rise of Plymouth Brethrenism in the latter half of the 19th century, with its emphasis upon the dispensational theory of prophetic interpretation, greatly influenced evangelicalism generally and contributed to the decline of social action.⁴⁶ Secondly, and the two are not unconnected, the increasing influence of liberal theology which gave rise to the "Social Gospel" produced such an evangelical backlash that the Fundamentalist/Liberal controversy was born. The two camps were so divided the one from the other that an individual must decide whether or not he belonged to those who preached the Gospel or to those who sought the amelioration of human need. It seemed impossible at that time that one could both preach the Word and be socially involved.⁴⁷

The Evangelicals were also characterised at this point in their history by an anti-intellectualism which repelled many and yet Reinhold Niebuhr could argue that it was not the incredibility of faith so much as its social impotence that rendered it suspect to the intellectuals.⁴⁸

Happily, there has been a determined effort over the past 35 years to rectify this imbalance between an emphasis on the **devotional** life and the neglect of the *diakonia* (service).⁴⁹

The point to be underlined here, however, is simply that even at the height of its social involvement evangelicalism was assured that all commitment in this sphere was subservient to the preaching of the Word of God.

Once again we must emphasise the primacy of the preaching of the Word of God. Whatever form of service may be undertaken with the kerygmatic element, it must never be permitted to oust preaching from its principal position. In defining 'evangelism' some authorities would render their definition solely in terms of 'proclamation' whilst others would include a reference to extra-kerygmatic activity. Nonetheless, Evangelicals have always given the priority to preaching.⁵⁰

This 'order of mission' was one of the major areas of debate between Evangelicals and ecumenists in the decade prior to Uppsala 1968 and, if anything, the tension has heightened since then. The call to Evangelicals must be, however, to return to basics and to remember the New Testament priority of the indicative of grace over the imperative of the new obedience.

References

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2. R.B. Kuiper, GOD CENTRED EVANGELISM, Chapter 9.
3. Loc.cit. Cf. E.H. Palmer, THE HOLY SPIRIT, pp.77-86; 141-151.
4. J.H. Bavinck, op.cit., p.155. Cf. article 'Philosophy of History' by E.E. Cairns in C.F.H. Henry, CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICAL THOUGHT, p.211 where he says: "The Glory of God in the present by the life of the Christian and at the end of history by the triumph of Christ is paramount".
5. Cf. E.J. Young, INTRODUCTION TO THE OLD TESTAMENT, p.51 and E.J. Young, GENESIS 3, passim.
6. Louis Berkhof, SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY, pp.237ff.
7. P.E. Hughes, article 'Fall' in J.D. Douglas (Ed) NEW BIBLE DICTIONARY, p.414.
8. MATTHEW 1:18-25; I CORINTHIANS 15:1ff; ROMANS 10:9.
9. J.R.W. Stott, CHRISTIAN MISSION IN THE MODERN WORLD, p.82.
10. MATTHEW 1:21. Cf. H.D. McDonald, JESUS HUMAN AND DIVINE, pp.125ff.
11. Louis Berkhof, SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY, pp.480ff.
12. Berkhof, op.cit., p.481 quoting Walden, THE GREAT MEANING OF METANOIA, p.107.
13. J.I. Packer, article 'Faith' in BAKER'S DICTIONARY OF THEOLOGY, p.211.
14. ROMANS 10:17.
15. ROMANS 10:14.
16. MATTHEW 28:19-20.
17. Cf. E.F. Harrison, article 'The Great Commission' in BAKER'S DICTIONARY OF THEOLOGY, p.131.
18. THE FRANKFURT DECLARATION, paragraph 3.
19. Cf. Gordon Fyles, article 'The Life of James Haldane' in the BANNER OF TRUTH, August-September 1979, pp.12-28, and Stephen Neill, SALVATION TOMORROW, p.1.
20. C.H. Dodd, THE APOSTOLIC PREACHING AND ITS DEVELOPMENTS, p.7.
21. 'Herald' (Kerysso) is the most characteristic word in the New Testament for preaching and occurs more than 60 times.
22. E.H. Palmer, THE HOLY SPIRIT, p.141.
23. ACTS 2:41-47. Cf. Johannes Schneider, BAPTISM AND CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, pp.45ff.
24. Cf. William Hendriksen, EPHESIANS, pp.141-146.
25. THE FRANKFURT DECLARATION, paragraph 5.
26. Loc.cit.
27. WESTMINSTER SHORTER CATECHISM, Question and Answer 1.
28. R.B. Kuiper, GOD CENTRED EVANGELISM, p.116.
29. ROMANS 11:30,33,36. Cf. Peter Beyerhaus, SHAKEN FOUNDATIONS, p.41.
30. ROMANS 16:25-27; I THESSALONIANS 2:13; II THESSALONIANS 2:13; EPHESIANS 3:14-21; PHILIPPIANS 4:19-20.

31. Walter Freytag, quoted in Beyerhaus, MISSIONS: WHICH WAY? p.18.
32. Millard Erickson, THE NEW EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY, p.30.
33. Cf. Donald Bloesch, THE EVANGELICAL RENAISSANCE, pp.128, 167 and Bloesch, THE REFORM OF THE CHURCH, p.168.
34. Harold Lindsell, AN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY OF MISSIONS, p.151.
35. Walter Kunneth quoted in C.F.H. Henry, EVANGELICALS AT THE BRINK OF CRISIS, p.53.
36. John F. Hurst, HISTORY OF RATIONALISM, p.86.
37. D.G. Bloesch, THE EVANGELICAL RENAISSANCE, p.122. Cf. pp.150f.
38. Erich Beyreuther, AUGUST HERMANN FRANCKE, p.181.
39. J.H. Yoder, THE CHRISTIAN WITNESS TO THE STATE, p.85.
40. Cf. Bloesch, RENAISSANCE, p.125 and Kathleen Heasman, EVANGELICALS IN ACTION, p.19.
41. Carey also translated the Bible into Sanskrit and Marathi. Cf. S. Neill, A HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS, pp.261-266.
42. Alec. R. Vidler, THE CHURCH IN AN AGE OF REVOLUTION, p.37. Cf. K. Heasman, op.cit., p.20.
43. C.H. Robinson, HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS, p.318. Cf. Iain Murray, THE PURITAN HOPE, p.181.
44. See K. Heasman, op.cit., pp.64-68; Victor Feather, THE ESSENCE OF TRADE UNIONISM, p.16; Robert Moore, PIT-MEN, PREACHERS AND POLITICS, passim.
45. Cited in W.J. Whalen, THE QUAKERS, p.29. See also E.E. Cairns, SAINTS AND SOCIETY; B. Wyatt Brown, LEWIS TAPPAN AND THE EVANGELICAL WAR AGAINST SLAVERY; T.L. Smith, REVIVALISM AND SOCIAL REFORM; N.A. Magnuson, SALVATION IN THE SLUMS; EVANGELICAL SOCIAL WORK 1865-1920; R.W. Moore, THE FURTHERANCE OF THE GOSPEL; Robert Sandall, THE HISTORY OF THE SALVATION ARMY.
46. H.H. Rowdon, THE ORIGINS OF THE BRETHERN, pp.301-306. On p.301 he says: "Their study of prophecy was a powerful factor in determining the attitude of the Brethren towards life in the world. Since they were convinced that the world, as well as the professing Church, was ripe for God's judgment, they deemed it necessary to steer their course as far clear of it as possible".
47. See C.F.H. Henry, EVANGELICALS AT THE BRINK OF CRISIS, p.54 and N.B. Stonehouse, VALIANT FOR TRUTH, passim.
48. Reinhold Niebuhr quoted by D.G. Bloesch, THE REFORM OF THE CHURCH, p.167.
49. Cf. Bloesch, op.cit., p.167 and D.O. Moberg, THE GREAT REVERSAL, p.161.
50. Cf. WHAT IS EVANGELISM? A Symposium of views collected by John R. Mott and published in EVANGELISM, Vol.3, The Tambaram Series, pp.48ff.