

Evangelism: The Hallmark of Evangelical Faith

Evangelism is the proclamation in word, deed and Christian character of the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross and through the resurrection. Evangelism lies at the core of the identity of being evangelical. We affirm that it is not possible to be truly evangelical without a radical commitment to world evangelisation; indeed, such a commitment is inherent to Christian identity itself. Evangelism is one of the three central characteristics of evangelicalism, based on the understanding that Jesus Christ is the unique Saviour of humanity and Lord of all creation and that the Scriptures are the ultimate authority in all matters of faith and conduct.

The WEA calls on all evangelicals and Christians worldwide to renew their commitment to holistic evangelism. By this we emphasize the connection between proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ in word and practicing it in our actions: both are necessary for the integrity of the gospel. Furthermore, personal conversion must result in the growth of Christian character and witness.

As with all Christian traditions, there have been times when mistakes have been made and evangelicals have struggled to link the proclamation of the gospel with acts of justice and peace. Yet in our history there have been many strong voices and lives that exemplify the holistic nature of evangelism. People such as Wesley, Wilberforce, Shaftesbury, Lester, Bediako, Kitamori, Adeyemo, Stott, Escobar and Padilla have all shown deep personal commitment to social action and individual transformation.

For evangelicals the search continues for precise theological terminology to unite the proclamation and the social implications of the Gospel. The biblical narratives in Mark 5 offer us a way forwards, a lens through which we can overcome the unhelpful dichotomy between proclamation and action, and a way to call us all back to holistic evangelism and to the word of God.

Mark presents the reader with three snapshots of Jesus' ministry. The author takes some care to record the context in which the different stories occur, what Jesus did and, in particular, the impact Jesus had and the people's reaction to him. We can draw some inferences from these three narratives about the nature and the breadth of the Gospel. In the first snapshot Jesus encounters a demon-possessed man in the region of Gerasene and delivers him from this affliction, resulting in the man being found 'clothed and in his right mind' (Mark 5:15). The following two stories are intertwined: Jesus is on his way to the house of Jairus, a local religious leader, when he encounters a woman who had suffered from a long illness. While Jesus is busy healing the woman, Jairus' daughter dies. The final snapshot is of Jesus restoring her back to life.

Two themes emerge from this chapter: (1) the authority and the power of Jesus and (2) the breadth of the gospel. First we see that Jesus has power over evil; he has power over disease and illness, and he has power over death itself, hinting towards his own forthcoming resurrection. The early church recognised the importance of acknowledging Jesus' power and authority in the first Christian creed: *Jesus is Lord!* It is an assertion that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, holds ultimate power and authority over all things. It is also a call to all Jesus' followers to accept the Gospel as the ultimate narrative on which to base doctrine, theology and practise. Secondly, the text shows that the Gospel extends to all of creation: it is for men and women caught up in evil, for people who are suffering from illness and disease, and for children and their parents. The breadth of the gospel is for those excluded from

the community (the demon-possessed man), for those within who are also outcasts (the woman), and also for those in positions of power and influence (Jairus). No one is exempt from the need of God's free and saving grace. Transformation is for all.

Mark's writing has an immediacy about it that tends to be subtler in the other Gospel writers. It is relatively easy to imagine the cries of the demon possessed man, the rattle of chains, the squeals of 2000 pigs, and the mourning cries over a dead child. But Mark gives us also details about the response of the people to Jesus. Some are fearful, others angry, some are amazed, others cannot but help tell their stories of what Jesus has done, some laugh and mock. The question posed to all whom Jesus encounters is: how will you respond? The question for evangelicals – and all who claim the name of Christ – is: what will you do, personally and corporately, to further the cause of worldwide holistic evangelism?

A church that is not evangelistic is failing in its response to Jesus.

The Holy Spirit is a missionary Spirit; thus evangelism should arise spontaneously from a Spirit-filled church. A church that is not a missionary church is contradicting itself and quenching the Spirit. Worldwide evangelization will become a realistic possibility only when the Spirit renews the Church in truth and wisdom, faith, holiness, love and power. We therefore call upon all Christians to pray for such a visitation of the sovereign Spirit of God that all his fruit may appear in all his people and that all his gifts may enrich the body of Christ. Only then will the whole church become a fit instrument in his hands, that the whole earth may hear his voice.

The Lausanne Covenant, §14

As we celebrate the evangelistic example of Jesus himself and seek to learn from it, we remember again that all who claim to be followers of Jesus must proclaim both his authority – Jesus is Lord! - and the breadth of his grace and reach. This is the fullness of mission, this is holistic evangelisation and we must prioritise it as Jesus did. "The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father."¹

We evangelicals are learning how to do evangelism in the way of Jesus – how to proclaim that salvation comes from our God and the implications of this proclamation for the transformation of society. We are also learning that truly biblical evangelism demands that the divisions amongst Christians be overcome. As Jesus states in his prayer in John 17, the witness of the disciples is hindered if they are not one in heart and mind. The joint document of the Roman Catholic Church, the World Evangelical Alliance and the World Council of Churches, *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct*, is a wonderful reminder of the importance and the mandate for evangelism. It is a deeply significant document that begins and ends with the word "mission."

"Christian Witness" calls us all to ensure that we practice our evangelisation within the boundaries of the values of the reign of God, with integrity and love, as we care for men, women, children, and all creation, knowing that as we come to Jesus and plead with him for aid, as did Jairus, God willingly and freely gives it.

Like Jesus in chapter 5 of Mark's gospel, we are called to bring the good news to all: outcasts, women, men, children, the sick and needy, and the religious leaders. Not only are we called, but we are also enabled by the Father and the Son, through the Spirit, to carry out God's mission, such that a core characteristic of evangelicals is – and must always be – to let the whole earth hear the whole Gospel in word, deed and character.

¹ *Ad Gentes*, 1.