

EVANGELISM AS INTERPERSONAL

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I. Objects of Evangelism (See also comments on the scope of salvation under interpersonalism essay “Salvation.”)

One important ramification of the interpersonal nature of the gospel is that it applies to every person. The only qualification for receiving it is being a person, someone with the interpersonal capacity. The gospel does not have to do with birds and animals (contra Francis of Assisi). Christianity is not an elitist religion for a particular caste or nation, for heads of state, intellectuals (as in Gnosticism), the rich, the educated, the freeman, the adult, the righteous, or the married, but for every person. *“I did not come so much to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance”* (Luke 5:32). It is for as many as have sinned, experienced alienation (lost), and stand in need of reconciliation (saved).

It is not a territorial religion with a territorial god or a particular race or national entity, as Judaism used to be, but goes into the whole world (Matthew 28:19). So, it was not for Jews *vs.* Gentiles, Samaritans, uncircumcised, or barbarians, but for all tribes and families of the earth.

II. The Beginning Place of Evangelism

Evangelism begins with the hearer’s present sense of need for love, security, meaningfulness, and innocence. All these prime needs are interpersonal matters. They provide Christ’s witnesses with points of contact. Such starting places do not depend on where people live, what century they are born in, or the level of their society.

III. The Atmosphere for Evangelism

Evangelism takes place in an atmosphere of caring instead of condemnation (John 3:16). What the gospel says was Jesus’ fundamental purpose in the incarnation must surely characterize the messengers who carry out his mission. They, the body of Christ, serve as the equivalent of his incarnation in the world. The goal of the gospel is redemptive because it is interpersonal, not condemnatory because it is legalistic (John 3:17; Romans 4:15).

Evangelism speaks the truth in love, or it does not speak truthfully. The medium—personal proclamation through a quality personality—is itself part of the message in accordance with McLuhan’s dictum *“the medium is the message.”* Proclaiming Christian love in an unloving way is self-contradictory, self-defeating, and not possible. The motive of missions is the glory of God; the motive of missions is retrieving the alienated. Condemnation comes at the end of the process by the Lord himself (John 3:18b). Salvation comes meantime by the work of people.

IV. What Evangelism Is

Evangelism consists of good news about a person—God, a personal savior, and a personal reward. It centers on how a person can come back into relationship with God. Evangelism is interpersonal in that it is a call to identify with the person Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18-21). Evangelism presents a Person in keeping with Paul’s idea of “preaching Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:5, *etc.*). Christianity does not present Jesus as a prophet who teaches but as a savior who reconciles. Anyone can teach information who happens to know it. The exclusivism of Christianity *vs.* other worldviews comes from the indivisibility of a person. Full identification with a person cannot be shared (Matthew 6:24).

Evangelism calls for identification with Christ rather than (1) joining a church, becoming part of an institution, which is impersonal. Evangelism is a call to identify with Christ more than (2) a presentation of a doctrinal understanding, an impersonal thing again. The concern here contrasts with overzealousness about issues like what personal name to call God or whether eternal life is on earth or in heaven. Evangelism is even more basically a call to commitment to Christ than (3) a call for a way of life, acting, or doing—a moral code.

The character of evangelism comes from the character of the content it delivers. It delivers a message about joining persons to persons, which implies some “elbow room” relative to correctness of conceptual understanding or success in moral behavior. Relationships do not cease because of some degree of failure in thinking or acting. By putting Jesus central, we provide motivation for calling people to live in ways compatible with Christ’s values (see also under “Morality”). By putting him central, we offer a tangible way of seeing Truth in a unified field of knowledge.

Evangelism, preaching, communication, and apologetics represent different kinds of education. Effectiveness can draw on education theory. “Readiness” relates to prioritizing “receptive peoples.” Readiness is often created by factors beyond the educator’s control: political circumstances, social drift, and the like. The educator can use other factors to foster readiness—the educator’s own character, the style of delivery, and so on. Demonstrating and modeling what someone is “selling” increases the likelihood of accepting it.

“Morality cannot be legislated,” we say. Moralizing does not work very well. Behavior must be internalized or there is conformity without conviction. Enforceability comes into the picture because we cannot see people’s heart; people can lie.

What happens is that, to be enforceable, laws end up being written on a humanistic and scientific base. Laws tend to be restrictive and preventive while love is positive and proactive. Hopefully, by human government the social condition will achieve a relatively stable level, but state statutes will control only the grosser degrees and overt kinds of unacceptable behavior. So

we resign ourselves to saying that human government has a restrictive role, eliminating the worst evils and down (Romans 13:1-4); religion has a positive one, working from the least virtues and up.

The interpersonal character of Christianity leads to our not relying on a nation's legislative, executive, and judicial processes to bring about all matters of morality. Even more particularly, we do not base our outreach on how people should live. Instead, we hold up Christ, introduce people to God as a person, and draw attention to His loving attitude toward them and to his efforts at calling them back to himself for their own good. His character appears in that process, and the values of human living emerge as the person of Christ is set forth. This scenario takes a more positive approach: "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life," rather than a negative one: "*If you died tonight, would you go to hell?*" This corresponds with the approach of John 3:17: God did not so much send his Son into the world to condemn it as to save it.

The ethical-moral values of another person have more drawing power than abstract ethical-moral values. Example and influence add drawing power. Righteousness has more pull behind the outstretched hands of a smile.

V. The Means of Evangelism

Evangelism cannot be accomplished by proclamation alone, and certainly not by the military endeavors of a political kingdom, as Judaism had envisioned. Evangelism calls people to decision, not acquiescence under compulsion. It is by spirit and word interpersonalized.

Both Jesus and Paul set aside the model of liberation theology, the accomplishing Christian goals by political means. In Gethsemane Jesus tells Peter to put up his sword; those who live by it die by it (Luke 22:35-38, 49-51). They did not set civil religion aside because the church's small beginnings dictated against it. Christianity cannot remedy the world's ills from the top down to the individual, by extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation. The Christian faith works from individuals upward and outward like leaven (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:21), a metaphor for influence. It does not adopt the political approach to improving the "quality of life." If the very structure of society has evil embedded in it, the change will need to come through the interpersonal sector. The inquisition was completely foreign to anything exemplified in the New Testament. The body of Christ is not an institution, so it does not move forward by institutional means.

For these reasons, Christianity cannot depend on cultural and legal reinforcement of its values. Its people must live on a higher plane than the legal requirements around them. Christian values must be internalized, not etched on stone tablets on a mountain or printed in paper documents at a capitol building.

Evangelism cannot appropriately be accomplished by emotional manipulation as in high-pressure salesmanship. It is by persuasion, not pressure (2 Corinthians 5:11). Evangelism calls to decision rather than by stimulus-response. The gospel calls to authentic existence, meaningful existence, life. The unreasoned life is not worth living (Socrates). It brings people to choose, which requires proceeding by values (in terms of which to make choices) rather than by drives (the feeling of pain or desire). Decision-making calls for conscious living rather than unconscious routine, following lures and being impelled by drives or cultural conventions. It calls people to plan rather than eventuate, to live by their higher nature instead of their animal nature. It calls people to (a) *to transcend the flesh*, (b) *to project past the present into the future*, and (c) *to live from the other person's viewpoint as well as their own*. Likewise, the point is not to make proclamation into oratory, as Paul emphasizes in 1 Corinthians 2. It is not by rhetorical eloquence but by personal power that conversion comes (1 Corinthians 2:4-5).

Evangelism calls for belief and commitment, for faith-trust in Another. In addition, repentance covers the change of mind, feelings, and will, as well as the actions that flow from them. Repentance covers positive change so personal relationships can renew.

Evangelism cannot be accomplished by duress as in state religions past and present. Disenfranchising the unconverted, putting them under economic strain, or otherwise intimidating them creates the adverse effect. State religions like Islam and communism have demonstrated repeatedly the long-term failure of such a method. A psychological connection exists between military, legal, or physical force and duress like social and emotional pressure on others. The large crowds at Billy Graham or Luis Palau crusades are for enhancing voluntary response.

Included in this stricture on duress is not using fear tactics. The sermons in the Book of Acts do not end with threats about what happens if the audience rejects the message. There is not even a prominent appeal to guilt. People already know they are guilty; driving them deeper into it only creates resistance. People need help, not another kind of criticism. The best motivational techniques are interpersonal ones; techniques that manipulate and pressure are not interpersonal.

Since extension of the kingdom is interpersonal, the process is not accomplished by supernatural causation. Faith comes *by* hearing, not *parallel to* hearing, as with a theology that requires supernatural operation parallel to the proclamation to enable response.

The way to spread the kingdom must fit with the kind of kingdom it is and the purpose it has. If the kingdom is not of this world, it does not advance by worldly means. It is "heavenly," transcendent, spiritual, interpersonal. The method of expansion is interpersonal because the kingdom is interpersonal in kind and its purpose is to restore personal relationships vertically and horizontally. No method that depersonalizes is appropriate for accomplishing the Great Commission. The manner of extending the kingdom retains both the hearer's and speaker's integrity.

Marshall McLuhan popularized the notion that the “medium is the message,” which somewhat overstates the fact that (a) *the medium is part of the message* because the medium itself communicates something. A related fact is that (b) *the medium must be compatible with the message*. The container must be compatible with the content. You cannot carry water in a sieve. McLuhan’s claim fits strikingly well with the concern for spreading an interpersonal reality in interpersonal ways.

Missiologists talk about incarnational mission. The incarnation of Jesus from heaven into the human race, serves as an example and model of “missions” as to means, manner, and message. Hebrews 1:1-2 describes the concept eloquently. Incarnation is identification. In calling people to identify with Jesus, messengers identify with their hearers. They regard themselves as one of them rather than someone above them. They limit themselves to their frame of life, own their problems and concerns, suffer with and for them, demonstrate the power to cope, and show the difference that relationship to God can make in their situation.

In McLuhan’s terms, the Bible and propositional revelation are relatively “hot media” in that they require a lot of input from the receiver to get the point. Incarnation is a “cold” medium because everything transpires before the receiver’s eyes. In Christ-to-us or in us-to-others, incarnation has less breakdown in communication because explained example is clearer than explanation alone.

For this same reason, love is the manner and the message. Love is more than information; it surpasses knowledge (Ephesians 3:19). This fact means also that love transforms knowledge itself into personalized content.

Paul’s manner of presenting Christian truth includes a tendency toward concretizing intangible, transcendent matters. For example, he pictures transcendence as setting the mind on the ascended Christ (Colossians 3:1-4) and living the resurrected life of Jesus (Romans 6:1-14). Evangelism and teaching do not appeal just to the intellect, but to the whole person and calls for involvement with the Message. Jesus’ parables have that same tangible character.

We do not then so much teach people as influence them. The paradigm (a) *adds interpersonal factors to knowledge*, and (b) *qualifies the knowledge by interpersonal elements*; and on occasion even (c) *replaces certain aspects of knowledge with interpersonal factors by substituting ideas with affections*. Evangelist and teachers make up for informational lack by supplying attitude.

A kind of pre-evangelism must take place to foster credibility. This stage is variously called lifestyle evangelism, demonstration evangelism, presence evangelism. Peter says of this matter,

“... wives, defer to your own husbands so that, even if they do not obey the word, they may aside from the word be gained by the behavior of their wives, watching your chaste manner of life coupled with respect” (1 Peter 3:1-2).

Interpersonalism implies that the bulk of evangelism takes place through personal associations—through friends, relatives, fellow workers, neighbors. Mass media, mailings, public mass meetings help gain people’s attention, but the decisive work takes place one on one. At least the one-on-one part must be there before the motivational breakthrough, say, at mass meetings takes place.

Evangelism is done by persons, to persons, in interpersonal ways, to accomplish interpersonal results. Missions, evangelism, education, apologetics, preaching, all participate in that same interpersonal reality.

VI. The Content of Evangelism

Christianity’s crucial question is “What do you think about Messiah?” “*Do you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God*” (Matthew 16:16). Personal and interpersonal considerations take central position. The contrast between Christian and non-Christian religions lies at the level of the whole. Other religions have aspects that are correct in themselves. Christianity is not a set of ideas, beliefs, values, or behaviors. It is what and who Jesus Christ is.

Syncretism poses a common danger when the gospel confronts other religions. The impulse is to integrate the new message into the old beliefs. But new wine cannot be put into old wineskins, and Yahweh cannot be represented by a golden calf Exodus 32:1-4). Christianity forms a whole exclusive of all other parallel possibilities. New information can often integrate into old information to form a larger whole. But a person is a whole, an identity; Christ cannot become partially someone else; identification with him cannot combine with something else. Jesus could not become parallel to other aeons, for instance, in the larger fullness of the Gnostic pleroma (Colossians 1-2) without ceasing to be who he was and without his “system” (interpersonalism) ceasing to be what it was. Jesus is not simply a prophet dispensing knowledge; he is the whole message personalized and incarnated.

Christianity adopts interpersonalism as its highest frame of reference. Other religions tend to put ideas or law or kind of substance in ultimate position. What syncretism often tries to do is find something more to supersede Christ by adding some supposedly greater benefit than the restoration of relationship by removing guilt. Sun Myung Moon afforded an example by claiming that Jesus had failed to provide salvation, which God called Reverend Moon to secure.

VII. The Agents of Evangelism

Evangelism involves the character of the proclaimer involved in the proclaiming. Agents of ministry cannot become professional in a way that makes their life quality irrelevant. Ministry cannot devolve to methods, procedures, and skills of ministers. There is the pre-evangelism noted above before there is proclamation and persuasion.

Modeling accompanies explaining because we are proclaiming a way of life that brings abundance by relationship to a holy, loving God. Practicing one thing while preaching another does not harmonize with the interpersonal message and its promises. We first win the right to speak to people about the ultimate issues of life.

Proclaimers need to remove detractors in their character (Matthew 5:21-37) and to resist the temptation to “hit back” (Matthew 5:38-40). The goal is to make enemies ashamed because they have “*nothing to accuse you of*” (Titus 2:8; 1 Timothy 4:12; Romans 12:18).

Evangelism through influence calls for doing good for people in times of change and need. People are more receptive to stabilizing influence at unstable times like losing a job, moving, kids’ leaving home, marriage failure, and the like. Influence returns good for evil (Matthew 5:40-42, 46-47; Romans 12:1) rather than retaliating or avoiding. It wins people by godly living (1 Peter 3:1-2; Acts 2:46-47; 5:13-14a).

In stressing the character of proclaimers, we do not want to undervalue proclamation. Presence evangelism wins the right to proclaim, but it does not explain why we live as we do. When righteousness creates readiness, proclamation can take over. Then believers can testify what Christ means to them. They can describe the Christian message and add persuasion to presence and proclamation. All these factors need to work together as parts of one endeavor.

Our frequent timidity about speaking for Christ often comes from fear of rejection. We hesitate in part because we and our listeners do not share a common basis of authority for life choices. Some things can help. If we embody the life we call others to experience, we can temporarily substitute our own credibility for the Bible’s credibility. The second verse of the hymn “Make Me a Blessing” says, “*Others will trust him if only you prove true every moment you live.*” Furthermore, the gospel has built-in credibility that corresponds with hearers’ real and felt needs. In that way its self-authenticating revelation aids the witness. Common human experience can test the practical aspects of what we proclaim.

Neither the administration of “sacraments” nor the proclamation of good news requires authorized personnel (“clergy”). Evangelism goes forward by a royal priesthood of all believers, not by specialists. After Stephen’s martyrdom, those persecuted in Jerusalem and Judaea went everywhere preaching the gospel (Acts 8:1, 4ff.). The record gives no indication that they were sent or specially endowed.

As an indication of this natural procedure, Wyn Arn, in studies connected with church growth, discovered that 75-90% of the converts in a typical congregation are introduced to Christ by friends and relatives rather than by Christian professionals.

Hearers will not so easily misread a word for Christ spoken by lay people; they are not just “doing a job.” Encounter *vs.* methodology means personal process *vs.* structured program, and it is as ongoing as personal characteristics are. Lay evangelism accentuates lifestyle as the visible embodiment of Christian concern.

In summary, as to method, evangelism is not by coercing the other. As to manner and means, it is by persuasion, which involves the character of the proclaimer. As to the object, it requires a decision by the hearer.

VIII. The Consequences of Evangelism

For an article that makes notes these principles relative to missions, see Rondal B. Smith and Ed Buell’s chapter 9, “Using and Applying Interpersonal Skills,” in *Discovering the Missionary Hidden in Your Church*.