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A THEOLOGY OF EVANGELISM

By Robert E. Coleman

Toward the close of World War II, I was at an ROTC summer training camp near Mineral Wells, Texas. One gloomy day a newspaper courier came through our company area and cried out: "Good news! We're winning the war."¹ Before long the whole camp was alive with excited conversation about the news. Tidings of victory cannot be greeted with indifference, nor the message self-contained. How much more thrilling is the joyous sound of the gospel of Christ—the good news of His victory over the power of death and hell—"the astounding declaration"² that God himself has personally intervened in human history through the mighty

¹ Interestingly, euaggelion, meaning good news or gospel, was a word in the Greek world to announce victory or to express gratitude for victory, though the term had wider applications denoting glad tidings. In Michael Green, *Evangelism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 56.

² Edwin Lewis uses this description of the gospel because it is good news so utterly without comparison to any news heard before, *Theology and Evangelism* (Nashville: Tidings, 1952), 12-13.

conquest of Jesus Christ (see John 3:16). Making this fact known is evangelism.

The Revealed Word

What makes the announcement so compelling is its divine source. Contrary to the notions of popular humanism, the gospel does not originate as a human deduction, the valiant groping of humanity after a higher life. It comes as a message sent from heaven, the revelation of God's quest for His people, ever seeking to save the lost.³ To persons perishing with no sense of direction or certainty, that is good news indeed. Where we begin in theology largely determines where we end. If we begin with human speculation, we will end with frustration and failure, for humanity's darkened intelligence and perverted will can never attain to the incorruptible nature of divine truth. Until God speaks, human beings are utterly adrift on a sea of self-deception.

The written deposit of this heavenly teaching is the canon of inspired Scripture.⁴ The Bible speaks "without error in all that it affirms, the only infallible rule of faith and practice."⁵ Herein is the objective authority for all Christian theology. "It is impossible," as Calvin observed, "for man to obtain even the minutest portion

³ John Stott, *Basic Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 9.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Henry Beveridge, I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 66.

⁵ *The Lausanne Covenant*, Section 2.

of light and sound doctrine without being a disciple of this Book.”⁶ Not surprisingly, then, systems of thought that circumvent or compromise scriptural verities do not produce strong evangelistic concern.⁷

That God has spoken redemptively to humankind anchors evangelism in the very nature of revelation. At the same time, the saving magnitude of the Word carries an urgency that it be told to every creature. From this mandate issues a theology immediately related to the propagation of the gospel. It draws upon the whole scope of Scripture and “the total meaning of the Christian faith.”⁸ It focuses the purpose of all that God has revealed. In this case, evangelism is the measure by which any Christian doctrine must be validated.

The Sovereignty of God

Most of us tend to impose upon God our own human limitations, thereby belittling His gospel. The Word proclaimed is but the reflection of the God who has spoken. He is utterly unlimited and infinite in himself. God is everywhere in all His works, yet contained by none. The past and the future are always present in Him. Never changing, with full knowledge of

⁶ John Calvin, *op. cit.*, 66.

⁷ A good case in point is the modern ecumenical movement contained within the World Council of Churches. For a documented study of this evolution, see Arthur P. Johnston, *World Evangelism and the Word of God* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974).

⁸ T.A. Kantonen, *The Theology of Evangelism* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1954), 4.

all things and able to do whatever He pleases, the Lord God omnipotent reigns forever. Yet it is impossible for God to act otherwise than in accordance with absolute integrity. He can never be untruthful, unjust, unholy, or unloving. Whatever God does is perfect.

Best of all, God is personally concerned for His creation. An overwhelming sense of confidence and hope is created in the heart of those who accept this truth, for it means that He is our Father. He understands. He cares. He delights to make himself known. He gives us His hand, not the hand of cold doctrine and abstract truth, but the hand of a real person. The One who took upon himself the form of our flesh and walked among us in the person of Jesus now continues to minister to us in the Holy Spirit.

Though the Trinity, as any mystery, cannot be fully explained, it affords a means by which the structure of God's perfection can be interpreted. God might be seen as the Father in administration, as the Son in revelation, and as the Spirit in operation. Or building on the concept of His self-disclosure, God is the Revealer or cause in the Father; He is the Revelation or act in the Son; and He is the Revealedness or effect in the Spirit.⁹ However inadequate may be our formulations of God's triune nature, evangelism is the expression of the Trinity in action.¹⁰

Recognition of divine sovereignty is implicit in salvation theology. If God is, then everything that exists

⁹ T.A. Kantonen, *op. cit.*, 25. This analysis based on Barth's statement on the Trinity, "God reveals himself as the Lord."

¹⁰ John Bunyan, *The World To Come, or Visions of Heaven and Hell*, included in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Philadelphia: W.A. Leary, n.d.), 240.

or happens must acknowledge His lordship. Only God is great, and before Him every knee must bow. "Look unto me," He declares, "and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else" (Isaiah 45:22).

Failure to see our lives within this context makes the gospel meaningless. This is the basic fallacy of theological liberalism and all other schemes of human self-sufficiency that begin with the premise: Know thyself. Human beings must know themselves, but unless they first recognize their Creator and Lord, they are in no position to evaluate themselves or their neighbors. Only as persons behold their image in their God and Savior can they know who they are and what they are destined to be.

The Predicament of Humanity

When the gospel brings people to see themselves "in the light of God's law and holiness," they realize how short they have fallen from His glory.¹¹ They have turned to their own ways and rejected the absolute claims of God upon their lives. In doing so, they have followed the same course as Satan and his demons.

This assertion of independence lies at the heart of sin. A sinner "sets himself up in God's place,"¹² presumptuously acting as if he can do as he pleases.

Such an attitude is nothing short of idolatry, the worship of humanity as a false god. Its ultimate

¹¹ J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1961), 59.

¹² T.A. Kantonen, *op. cit.*, 2

expression is seen in the defiant rejection of God's only begotten Son (see John 1:11; 3:19,36).

The contagion of this blasphemy has pervaded humanity, alienating affections, darkening the intellect, perverting the will. Human nature is at utter enmity against God. This moral disease has spread throughout the human race, bringing degradation and strife to all society.

Sin cannot be ignored by a just God, since it is an affront to His holiness. His wrath upon iniquity cannot be annulled as long as the cause of evil remains. Since life is continuous, all the spiritual consequences of sin continue on forever in hell. Those who object to this teaching, on the ground that it diminishes God's nature of love, fail to comprehend the undivided nature of His being. If God's judgment did not fall upon that which would destroy His beloved, His sovereign love itself would be called into question. "It is not because God's love is limited but because it is unlimited that hell as well as heaven is made necessary."¹³

Evangelism strikes the heart of sin. A theology that does not come to grips with this cause of all human woe is irrelevant to the world's need. Though the disclosure of human rebellion, and its consequence, may be bad news, still the gospel shines through it all, for God judges that He might save.

The Incarnate Savior

The redeeming work of the Trinity assumes incarnate form in His Son (see John 1:14). Jesus is not

¹³ Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology, II* (New York:Harper & Row, 1979), 224-25.

God apart from the human, nor the human apart from God; but He is God and human united in one personality. In this perfect union of eternal consciousness, Christ becomes the reconciling center of the gospel. All that took place in salvation before His coming was in anticipation of Him. All that has taken place since His coming has been accomplished in His name (see Acts 4:12).

Any system of doctrine that does not affirm the deity and humanity of Christ has no evangelical substance. In fact, "if the gospel records about Him are not entirely true, and if Christ is not really what He claimed to be, then there is nothing left of Christianity."¹⁴ To say that His claims were invented by His followers is to discredit both Christ and His disciples and to make the New Testament a travesty.

God's essential message in Christ centers in documented facts-the kind of news that can be proven in "real history."¹⁵ That Jesus lived and died and rose again is a matter of public record. The gospel is no theological abstraction but a living, visible person who stands before us and says, "Follow me.... I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 1:43; 14:6).

His redemptive mission reaches its culmination at Calvary. Jesus bore our sins in His own body on the cross, suffering in our stead, "the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18). Though no theory of the Atonement can adequately explain what

¹⁴ Sapher Philip Athyal, "The Uniqueness and Universality of Christ," *The New Face of Evangelicalism*, 63.

¹⁵ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1968), 92.

transpired when Christ died, it is clear that something happened in the heart of God, entirely changing His relationship with sinful humanity. Christ, by the offering of himself, made a full, perfect, and complete satisfaction for the sins of the world. God loved us and gave himself for us. This is God's grace. Nothing deserved. Nothing earned. God simply moves in and does for us what we could not do for ourselves. The bodily resurrection of Christ and His subsequent ascension into heaven brings the Cross forcibly to human attention. For when One dies who has the power to rise from the grave, in all honesty we must ask why He ever died in the first place. To this penetrating question, the gospel answers unequivocally: He "was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification" (Romans 4:25).

The Transformation of the Spirit

It is the Holy Spirit who makes the Word of God come alive. He effects in us what Christ has accomplished for us. Since the beginning of time, the Spirit has been at work unfolding God's redemptive purpose, and His ministry focuses supremely on the Son whom He always exalts.

As Christ is lifted up, and we see ourselves in the light of the Cross, the Spirit moves us to repent and accept the gift of salvation. The gospel call is to turn from sin unto God, casting ourselves upon Him in childlike trust. Unless there is such a conversion, no one can enter the Kingdom. The responsibility to respond to

His Word clearly rests upon the person, though the enabling power is through God's grace.¹⁶

Through faith in Christ the believer is introduced to a life of forgiveness and righteousness (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). The transforming grace of the Spirit indwelling the heart is so real that it is likened to being "born again" (John 3:3). There is an actual impartation of the divine nature so that the regenerated person begins to live in the Savior.

While the guilt of sin is remitted in justification, the Christian still must strive against the effects of sin. This is described in the ongoing work of sanctification, whereby the believer is progressively conformed to the character of the Lord. As Bloesch puts it: "Justification is the narrow gate, while sanctification is the straight way."¹⁷ Both aspects of the gospel are essential.

The way holiness of life is interpreted varies widely among theologians. Generally, the attainment of complete sanctification is viewed as being only partial in this life, but nothing less should be our goal. Regardless of what has been experienced thus far, there is more beyond. The Christian life is always growing "unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

To the degree the Spirit of God fills the believer, life takes on the character of Christ. It is this inward dynamic that makes Christianity a savoring force for

¹⁶ A good discussion of this issue is in J.I. Packer, *op. cit.*, 11-36; cf., Robert E. Coleman, *The Mind of the Master* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell, 1977), 80-84.

¹⁷ Donald G. Bloesch, *op. cit.*, 43.

holiness in the world. Out of it flows compassionate deeds of mercy and bold evangelistic outreach.

The Fellowship of the Gospel

The faithful evangelistic ministry of the Word calls forth the Church, the fellowship of the redeemed. All who live by faith in the Son of God become part of "this communion of the saints." There are no isolated Christians. Despite its human shortcomings, this community is "the agent of the kingdom of God,"¹⁸ the means by which His reign comes and His will is done on earth as it is in heaven. It is a ministering body, like that of Christ in the flesh, continuing now in its life the work of the Lord. Each member of the Body has a vital part in the mission. There are diversities of gifts and offices, but every believer is a servant in the priesthood of Christ. Whether one is considered clergy or laity makes no difference. When this is forgotten, the potential workforce of the Church flounders in inertia. Our theology must lay more stress upon Christ's Great Commission to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19,20).¹⁹ The command is not to make converts but to make disciples—persons who will learn of Christ. It is a summons to follow Him, to seek His kingdom above all else, to deny self, and to take up His cross. By placing the emphasis on becoming like Him, Christ assures that His church will grow in His character and become active participants in His mission.

¹⁸ Howard A. Snyder, *The Community of the King* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977), 12.

¹⁹ See my note on this in *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell, 1964), 108, 109.

As disciples make disciples, Jesus knew that ultimately the whole world would be reached with the gospel. His faithful witnesses would storm the gates of hell and shatter the principalities of Satan. Victory is certain; the celebration has already begun. In His Word you can hear them singing and shouting around the throne of God (see Revelation 5:9; 7:9) "saying, The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15; see 5:9-14; 7:10-12; 12:10; 15:3,4; 19:1-7). Evangelism, as the heartbeat of all Christian theology, directs our energy toward that inevitable goal to which history is moving, when the completed Church, the blood-washed bride of Christ, will be presented "faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy" (Jude 24). This is more than a doctrine of hope. It is the ringing affirmation that Jesus Christ is victorious over all.

Someday the trumpet will sound, and, with all His hosts, the Son of Man shall descend from heaven in trailing clouds of splendor. Such a theology puts a spring in the step and a song in the heart. For whatever may come in our present experience, however agonizing the sufferings of the world, we know that God is working through every circumstance to accomplish His purpose. So rather than be distracted by the struggle, let us fix our attention upon the victory. The King is coming. While it does not yet appear what we shall be, "we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). With this vision ever before us, let us go forth to proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom. The Lord God Almighty reigns, and in Him we too are more than conquerors.

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