

*Reclaiming the “E” Word*¹

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Shortly after I began teaching at Boston University School of Theology, a colleague placed into my hands a brochure introducing *The Women’s Interfaith Action Group*. The brochure described the group as “a weekly gathering of women from all faiths, as well as those who feel drawn to the spiritual, but who do not claim a particular religion.” The group plays an important role on campus in providing a forum for sharing and discussing religious and spiritual histories, commonalities, and differences. As my colleague pointed out, what was especially interesting about the brochure was the following sentence and, in particular, its use of the word ‘evangelization’:

An environment of mutual respect is maintained in which members may freely share beliefs and differences without fear of disparagement or evangelization.

To ‘evangelize’ means literally to offer ‘good news’ or a ‘welcome message’. Clearly it does not always mean that today. Isaiah 52:7 records, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns’.”² But the feet of the evangelist are not so beautiful today. For many people in our world, both Christian and non-Christian, evangelism is neither welcomed nor warranted. This is especially true in the context of interfaith dialogue, as the aforementioned brochure makes clear, where evangelism is perceived as something to be feared, as a barrier to mutual respect, careful listening, open sharing, and cooperation. But it is also the case in the wider context of an increasingly pluralistic culture where the very notion of evangelizing is automatically connected to an attitude of intolerance and superiority toward others – a belligerent and one-sided attempt to convert others to *our* way of seeing things, an activity that necessarily implies that those who do not believe as we do are therefore lost or in error. For some, the word calls to mind a shameful history of forced conversions, inquisitions, fraudulent television preachers, religious wars, crusades, genocide, colonization, and the ruthless expansion of Western power throughout the world. The ‘E’ word has become a dirty word – an embarrassment to the Christian and an affront to the non-Christian.

Is it possible nonetheless to reclaim the ‘E’ word as expressing something positive, vital, and beautiful about the Christian life? Might evangelism be a practice that calls forth the highest in the creative energies, intellect, and imagination of Christians rather than a crass exercise in marketing the church to consumers within a world of abundant and competing options? I think so. But given the weighty cultural, historical, and theological baggage attached to evangelism and given the church’s temptation to acquiesce to the world’s demand that the gospel be good news on the world’s own terms, any such reconstruction of evangelism will not be simple or easy.

Rethinking and reconstructing evangelism is a task that must be taken up in every era and in every part of the world where the church takes seriously its calling to “announce peace” and to bear faithful, public, and embodied witness to God’s reign in its own unique context. But

¹ This chapter is adapted from *Evangelism After Christendom* (Brazos, 2008).

² All scripture quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible unless otherwise noted (Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1989).

evangelism is especially problematic today for those of us who find ourselves in societies where Christianity has historically been tied to the center of political, economic, and cultural power, but in which the old ‘Christendom’ model has for some time now been crumbling. The church that once was at the center of Western civilization and could presume for itself a privileged voice has increasingly found that center unraveling and itself in something more like a situation of diaspora at the margins (though in a de-centered and fragmented civilization, one might question the adequacy of the language of ‘center’ and ‘margins’ altogether).³ The church can no longer assume as it once did that the surrounding culture will assist in the task of producing Christians. The home base from which Christians thought to Christianize the rest of the world feels less and less like ‘home’, despite the desperate attempts by some to keep it that way. A growing number of theological voices are helping us to ask the question of whether Christians should have ever yielded to the temptation of making ourselves at home in the first place.

Ironically, it may be that it is precisely from such a position of marginality that the church is best able to announce peace and to bear witness to God’s peaceable reign in such a way as to invite others to take the subversive implications of that reign seriously. It may be that, through humility, repentance, and disavowal of its former advantages (so that those things that were once ‘gains’ to the church now come to be regarded as ‘loss’, Phil. 3:7), a church at the periphery of the world may yet be a church *for* the world. If so, then I take as fundamentally misguided the efforts by some to claw our way back as a church to the center of culture with renewed Constantinian vigor, whether through hostile takeover or whimpering accommodation. I likewise consider it folly to continue down one of the two now standard paths evangelism has taken within modernity. The first is preoccupied with establishing the intellectual respectability of the gospel in terms of purportedly wider or more universal criteria for what counts as truth and plausibility. The second busies itself with demonstrating the practical *value* and *usefulness* of Christian faith for persons who live in a society in which *value* is determined by the logic of the marketplace and in which *usefulness* is measured largely by service to the nation, to the economy, or to the private well-being of individual egos. On the contrary, it is from the margins – epistemologically, culturally, politically, economically, and spiritually – that a fragmented, post-Christendom culture will have to be evangelized.

Evangelizers often fear the margins because they worry that the church may go unnoticed. It is the center from which it is thought the entire world may be reached and it is at the center, or so we are tempted to believe, that firm foundations can be secured, the better to defend and propagate the gospel and to insure the inevitability of faith. We are embarrassed by a gospel that isn’t immediately ‘relevant’ to prevailing needs and desires or that has no self-evident truths or irresistible power to convince and convert any and all whom it touches. The gospel needs our help, and the support of the center.

On one level, as John Howard Yoder has argued, the error here is in assuming that the center is actually the more universal and rational world (the ‘wider public’) that we dream it to be, rather than just one more form of particularity like the margins, and frequently narrower than the margins in terms of the range of reality it takes into account (1992). On another level, however, this evangelistic refusal of vulnerability, of particularity, of marginality, is finally a refusal of the way of the cross, a way that foregoes the privileges and security allied with winning and opts instead for costly obedience, incarnation, and gospel nonconformity. What the gospel needs most

³ See especially Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, & Liminality* (1997: 5ff).

is not intellectual brokers or cultural diplomats but rather saints who have taken up the way of the cross and in whose lives the gospel is visible, palpable, and true. It needs disciples for whom Jesus is to be followed, with or without the support of their culture and for whom the power of the gospel is demonstrated not through winning but through obedience. Evangelism from the margins, then, requires no prior foundations either in human experience or reason that would somehow shore up the relevance, truth, power, or beauty of its gospel. It does, however, require a *people* that has been made into the temple of God in which the Spirit dwells, built upon the church's only secure foundation, Jesus Christ (Cor. 3:10-17).

Christian evangelism is *pacifist* in every way. The good news is, as Isaiah said, the good news of "peace." But this peace is not only the content and substance of evangelism; it is its very form. Christian evangelism refuses every violent means of converting others to that peace, whether that violence is cultural, military, political, spiritual, or intellectual. Evangelism instead requires only the peaceable simplicity of an offer and an invitation to "come and see" (Jn 1:46).

This does not mean that there is no *apologetic* dimension to evangelism – no room for making a case publicly, intellectually, or culturally for Christian faith. The character of Christian evangelism is not only invitation but summons (cf. Webb: 27). It does mean, however, that a Christian apologetics must refuse to consider unbelievers as either barbarian or irrational. It also means that a Christian apologetics may very well rest more upon an aesthetics than an epistemology or a metaphysics, since, in declining every 'secure' foundation for belief other than Jesus Christ, evangelism relies from first to last on the beauty of holiness made real in the church by the operation of the Holy Spirit. The very possibility of Christian evangelism, then, is premised wholly upon the faithfulness of the Spirit's witness in our lives rather than our own ability to calculate and predict how our obedience might translate into effectiveness.

Jesus talked about the reign of God as a radically new order that comes to put an end to age-old patterns of wealth and poverty, domination and subordination, insider and outsider that are deeply ingrained in the way we relate to one another on this planet. But in order for that new order to become a serious option *for* the world, it must be visibly and imaginatively embodied *in* the world. And if scripture is a faithful witness, the purpose of God throughout history is the creation and formation of a new people whose mission is to do just that. The fact that the old Christendom arrangements have been shattering, therefore, may prove to be liberating for the church and for the practice of evangelism. But then evangelism will have to be understood not as an adventure in "winning friends and influencing people,"⁴ but as a fundamentally subversive activity, born out of a posture of eccentricity (living "off-center" or "outside the center," at the margins) and out of the cultivation of such deviant practices as sharing bread with the poor, loving enemies, refusing violence, forgiving sins, and telling the truth.

For there are indeed creative reconstructions of evangelism being attempted today, and they succeed in expanding the church by adapting it to new generations who are put off by boring liturgies, irrelevant preaching, and stuffy pipe-organ music. But while these reconstructions have triumphed in making the church more relevant to the tastes, expectations, preferences, and quest for self-fulfillment of both the un-churched and the de-churched, they have utterly failed to challenge the racism, individualism, violence, and affluence of western culture. They in no way subvert an existing unjust order, but rather mimic and sustain it. Our greatest challenge is to find

⁴ I am here referencing the old self-help classic by Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), the philosophy of which surfaces as a goal toward which evangelizing Christians should be aimed in George Hunter's *How to Reach Secular People* (1992: 35).

ways of practicing evangelism in a post-Christendom culture without, at the same time, playing by the rules of that culture. But how to move forward is the question. One thing is certain; those who have long been marginalized, colonized, or made minorities by Christendom, and who therefore never had a stake in its survival in the first place, will have much to teach the rest of us.

In re-thinking evangelism for a post-Christendom, post-modern era, we do well to begin with a caution. Christendom, like the Constantinian imagination that produced it, has proved to be “a hard habit to break” (Hauerwas, 1991: 18). One of the recurring claims in the popular literature on evangelism is that in order to practice a post-Christendom evangelism, the church must discard its “stained glass culture” so that it can better reach unchurched, secular people in a pluralistic world. Christendom is thus identified with high-steepled church buildings, ancient liturgies, and stodgy hymns, and the elimination of these obstacles is presented as the way forward in becoming more post-Christendom and less ‘ecclesiocentric’. Where evangelism in the past has been too imposing, inflexible, and intolerant, contemporary evangelism must now become an exercise in reassuring the world that it has nothing to fear from us. Walt Kallestad, pastor of the large and fast-growing Community of Joy church in Arizona puts the matter this way in his book, *Entertainment Evangelism*, “Effective churches are invitational, not confrontational” (82). In fact, “the Christian Church needs to be even friendlier than Disneyland” (81). Apparently, if the gospel is to reach our contemporaries, it must not offend. It cannot make – or at least it cannot begin with – demands. It is the strangeness of the church and its worship and the offensive nature of its gospel that must be mitigated or abolished if evangelism is to be reconstructed and made effective in a post-Christendom world. “Tolerance,” as R. R. Reno has suggested, “is the executive virtue of our time” (100).

This habit of mind is, of course, not a uniquely twenty-first century phenomenon, as testified to by Kierkegaard who attacked it (rather than pipe organs) as the very heart of Christendom. Almost two centuries ago, he described the modern clergyman as:

A nimble, adroit, lively man, who in pretty language, with the utmost ease, with graceful manners . . . knows how to introduce a little Christianity, but as easily, as easily as possible. In the New Testament, Christianity is the profoundest wound that can be inflicted upon a man, calculated on the most dreadful scale to collide with everything – and now the clergyman has perfected himself in introducing Christianity in such a way as it signifies nothing, and when he is able to do so this to perfection he is regarded as a paragon. But this is nauseating! Oh, if a barber has perfected himself in removing the beard so easily that one hardly notices it, that’s well enough; but in relation to that which is precisely calculated to wound, to perfect oneself so as to introduce it in such a way that if possible it is not noticed at all – that is nauseating (1956: 258).

Christian evangelism, while invitational, is a subversive practice. The church that is called to reach and engage the world should not be surprised to find itself also living in contradiction to that world. Contrary to prevailing opinions, I do not believe that our most daunting challenge as a church is whether or not we can reach unchurched, secular people, but rather *how* we reach them. We kid ourselves if we think we have moved beyond Christendom simply because we are able to reach more people by getting rid of our stained glass and stuffy sermons and providing instead a ‘product’ that is more user-friendly. Neither large-scale revivals that boast thousands of converts nor fast-growing mega-churches that have dropped from the sky into suburban parking lots as of

late are in any way an indication of the proximity of God's reign, nor is their winsomeness and friendliness to be equated with Isaiah's "peace." In fact, the failure of evangelism in our time is implied as much by the vigorous 'success' of some churches in North America as by the steady decline of others.

On the contrary, our greatest challenge is that in reaching secular people we will fail to offer them anything specifiably Christian. And though we may end up recovering the 'E'-word, the offensive and scandalous dimensions of the gospel will have been softened, disguised, forgotten, or placed on the back burner. We may reach more people, but the gospel with which we reach them will have become a version of 'Christendom lite', a pale reflection of consumer preferences and a market-driven accommodation to felt needs. The subversive nature of the gospel will then have become itself subverted and that which is unprecedented and radical about the church will have become compromised in favor of mere ratings.

I want to suggest that the most evangelistic thing the church can do today is to be the church – to be formed imaginatively by the Holy Spirit through core practices such as worship, forgiveness, hospitality, and economic sharing into a distinctive people in the world, a new social option, the body of Christ. It is the very shape and character of the church as the Spirit's "new creation" that is the witness to God's reign in the world and so both the source and aim of Christian evangelism. On this understanding, the *missio dei* is neither the individual, private, or interior salvation of individuals nor the Christianization of entire cultures and social orders. It is rather the creation of a people who in every culture are both "pulpit and paradigm" of a new humanity (Yoder, 1997: 41). Insofar as evangelism is the heart of this mission,⁵ it is this very people that constitutes both the public invitation as well as that to which the invitation points. That is why all Christian evangelism is fundamentally rooted in ecclesiology. It can even be said that the church does not really need an evangelistic strategy. The church *is* the evangelistic strategy.⁶

Allow me to radicalize this a bit further. My point is not that the church, by behaving rightly in public, is capable of being truly evangelistic because, to the extent it avoids hypocrisy, it is better able thereby to attract the world to the gospel. While there may be some truth in this, it still tends to instrumentalize and externalize the church relative to the gospel and relative to Christian salvation. My point, rather, is that Christian salvation *is* ecclesial; that its very shape in the world *is* a participation in Christ through the worship, shared practices, disciplines, loyalties, and social patterns of his body, the church. To construe the message of the gospel in such a way as to hide or diminish that unique social creation of the Spirit that the first Christians called *ecclesia* is to miss the point of what God is up to in history – the calling forth and creation of a people. The most evangelistic thing the church can do, therefore, is to be the church not merely *in* public, but *as* a new and alternative public; not merely *in* society, but *as* a new and distinct society, a new and unprecedented social existence. On this view, any evangelism for which the church is irrelevant, an afterthought, or instrumental cannot be Christian evangelism. "Social holiness," to use John Wesley's phrase, is both the aim and the intrinsic logic of evangelism. The practices of the church that embody this social holiness *are* the very witness that becomes evangelism in the hands of the Spirit.

⁵ Cf. Dana Robert, *Evangelism as the Heart of Mission* (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, 1997).

⁶ Here I am simply mimicking Stanley Hauerwas' dictum (hopefully to good use): "The church doesn't *have* a social strategy, the church *is* a social strategy" (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989: 43).

In contrast to this, the ecclesiology that currently underwrites the contemporary practice of evangelism – at least that which predominates in North America – is at best an ecclesiology where the church is either instrumentalized in the service of ‘reaching’ or ‘winning’ non-Christians, or a reduction of the church to a mere aggregate of autonomous believers, the group terminus of individual Christian converts. Such an ecclesiology derives in part from a social imagination made possible by Constantinian assumptions about the relationship of church and world. But it is most evidently derived from a social imagination made possible by modern, post-Enlightenment assumptions about history, society, and the nature of the self and its agency in the world. Within this imagination, the human person is an essentially free, autonomous, individual self that exists over against other free, autonomous, individual selves. The interrelationships possible among these selves, though essentially conflictual, can at best be contractual, and arising from this are modern conceptions of ownership, property, and rights as well as an understanding of the ‘common good’ as fundamentally procedural and empty rather than participatory and substantive.

For the social imagination formed by the story of modernity, the church becomes a disembodied, mystical reality because there is no longer the space for its communally and visibly embodied social patterns and relationships. The church becomes a whole that is actually less than the sum of its isolated, autonomous parts, each of which is busy pursuing its own private self-interests (including ‘getting saved’). All that is required is that the private subject not exercise its will in a way that violates the free exercise of other private wills. One may certainly (and ideally) yoke these wills together for united purpose and witness, but the subversively peaceful sociality named by the word *ecclesia* is inconceivable as constitutive of personhood, much less salvation.

It is within such a social imagination that salvation is able finally to be construed as a ‘personal relationship with Jesus’ and thus something that takes place outside, alongside, or as a substitute for the church. Under the conditions of modernity – and perhaps even more so under the conditions of what is sometimes labeled ‘postmodernity’ (what has been referred to as “modernity coming of age” (Smart: 116)) the church is secondary, if it matters at all, because there is little or no imaginative room for a genuine social body in which what it means to be a person is to be ‘for’ others (and so to have one’s identity derived from and dependent upon those others). One of the enormous challenges of Christian evangelism today is that in order to learn once again to bear faithful and embodied witness to the Spirit’s creative ‘social work’, it may have to reject as heretical the pervasive characterization of salvation as ‘a personal relationship with Jesus’.

One of the greatest challenges for re-imagining the practice of evangelism is the task of grounding that practice in confession, testimony, presence, and peaceful witness – and to do so from within an ecclesial social imagination (and, thus, a soteriology) that runs counter to the social, political, and economic patterns narrated by modernity and enshrined in such ‘imaginaries’ as the individual, the nation-state, and the market. The challenge for the contemporary practice of evangelism is not, therefore, about how to be more effective or to get better results. It is a challenge at the more fundamental level of imagination.

That imagination must be theologically informed, of course; but the resistance to or avoidance of thinking theologically about evangelism is powerful. Those who think theologically rarely think about evangelism. And those who think about evangelism rarely take the discipline of theology very seriously. For one thing, very little in the present reward system of most churches supports thinking theologically about evangelism. Excellence in evangelism is almost

wholly governed by numerical measures of success, and pastors are rewarded primarily insofar as they attain those measures. The literature on evangelism – especially that which concentrates on those models that are widely touted as successful in the North American context – are particularly reluctant to think critically about the theology presupposed in their practice. Their focus instead is on finding new and creative ways to express Christian beliefs and practices in forms that are more indigenous, user-friendly, and ‘relevant’ to the experience of contemporary human beings, or more successful in making converts in an already crowded market of competitors.

One result of this theological neglect is that little attention has been given to what sort of practice evangelism is or of the relationship between the practice itself and its proper *telos*, or end. Is evangelism a *productive* activity, governed by the aims of *reaching*, *conversion*, or *initiation*, and thus the *making* of converts? If so, the skilled evangelist might employ whatever creative means will ‘work’ to achieve that end. The practice of evangelism is then evaluated by an instrumental logic whereby the means and the end of the practice are *external* to one another. If, however, the logic of evangelism is not primarily the logic of *production*, but instead the logic of bearing witness, we find ourselves talking about evangelism differently. Now the ‘end’ of evangelism is internal to its practice (as a quality of character and performance) rather than externalized in its ‘product’. Martyrs might now become our evangelistic exemplars rather than the pastors of mega-churches, and the ‘excellence’ of evangelistic practice will be impossible to measure by numbers, but rather by obedience to a crucified God. How we think about evangelism and how we judge it, the standards of excellence and the models we hold forth as exemplifying that excellence, the particular dispositions of character and the contexts of formation that prepare and enable us for its practice – the answers to all of these questions depend entirely on whether or not they are taken up as theological questions. Or, to put it another way, they depend entirely on whether or not they are taken up within a theological understanding of the church as the creation of the Holy Spirit rather than within non-theological understandings of the church that understand it primarily in accordance with the alien logics of secular managerial or behavioral sciences.⁷

There can be no substitute for serious theological inquiry about evangelism *as* a practice. In fact, theological inquiry is itself an intrinsic part of that practice. We cannot proceed by merely trotting out a handful of ‘successful’ pastors of fast-growing congregations to tell us what ‘works’. For it is the very question of what we are working toward, what is deemed valuable and beautiful, what we are seeking, that in our time must be reexamined, and that too often goes unchallenged altogether. Many of the current proposals for evangelism claim to offer a way of doing evangelism in a post-Christendom world. My sense, however, is that far too many of these proposals fail to re-imagine evangelism in a way that responds to post-Christendom realities with something other than the very assumptions that gave birth to Christendom. Their failure, then, is not due to a miscalculation in tactic or strategy, to a misallocation of skill or energy, or to a missing level of commitment and creativity. To the extent that the problem with evangelism today is due other than to our own frailty or sinfulness, it is at bottom a theological failure. When the Church ceases to think critically and anew about its own existence before God, it remains stagnant and stale or it reduces its criteria for success to mere relevance.

⁷ This does not preclude managerial or behavioral sciences, when positioned theologically, from making an indispensable contribution to the life and ministry of the church.

The challenge of reconstructing evangelism will not be an easy task. For the gospel to which evangelism invites persons is, by the standards of the Enlightenment, incredible; according to the logic of the market, it is cost-ineffective; measured by modern, liberal notions of the social, it is uncivil; by the standards of an aesthetics formed by the capitalist discipline of desire, it is repulsive; and by the chaplaincy standards of Christendom, it may prove to be neither useful nor helpful. The conversion for which evangelism hopes may not necessarily make us better citizens, more productive workers, or more loyal family members; neither is it always likely to make us more well-adjusted psychologically.

The practice of evangelism is, I believe, inescapably a practice that counters and disarms the world's powerful practices by unmasking the narratives that sustain them and by offering a story and a people that are peaceful and beautiful. The gospel can, therefore, be good news again in our world. But only if in Christ something new in the world has been made possible and by the Holy Spirit, present – something both disturbing and inviting, a salvation in the form of a new story, a “new humanity,” a new peoplehood. Conversion, on this view, is not primarily a matter of deciding in favor of certain beliefs or having certain experiences. It is rather a change of worlds, participation in a new worship, and a journeying toward a new city. The practice of evangelism always hopes for such a conversion and seeks actively to nourish it. But where the evangelist is tempted to become impatient with the inefficiency of obedience and worship when more ‘efficient’ means are readily available such as manipulation, accommodation, and imposition, we are reminded that evangelism is ultimately an activity of the Holy Spirit, and not subject to our own calculus of effectiveness and ‘return on investment’. Evangelism, then is not primarily a matter of translating our beliefs about the world into categories that others will find acceptable. It is a matter of being present in the world in a distinctive way such that the alluring and ‘useless’ beauty of holiness can be touched, tasted, and tried.

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