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Newbigin, J.E. Lesslie. "Evangelism and the Whole Mission of the Church." *The Auburn Report (Forum on Faith & Society, Australia)* 10, no. 4 (August) (1998): 7-9.

Evangelism and the whole mission of the world church

Lesslie Newbigin

A lecture by Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, given in the Practical Theology department of Aberdeen University in November 1981, was recorded in note form by one of his students. An edited version of the notes appears below.

Part One

The debate between what are roughly pigeonholed as ecumenicals and evangelicals has been vigorous in the last eighteen months because the two world conferences held last year, at Melbourne under the auspices of the WCC and at Pattaya under the auspices of the Lausanne Conference for World Evangelisation, were attended by people from both categories. Out of many issues I have selected two: the priority of evangelism within the total mission of the church, and the idea of 'universalism'.

The priority of evangelism

I use the word 'mission' to refer to the church's total mission -everything for which God has sent the church into the world. I use the plural word 'missions' for those enterprises that have the deliberate intention of creating a Christian presence. And I use 'evangelism' in the sense of communicating news, which means that words are involved, and specifically the name of Jesus.

For those of the Lausanne tradition, evangelism is fundamental. The Pattaya conference refused to go the route of the WCC and make the cultural witness (that is, total political action) either primary or equal to evangelism. Peter Wagner in an article on Pattaya referred to a move by some evangelicals to have the question of social and political witness raised to a higher level on the agenda. This was successfully fought off. The conference not only said 'no' to the WCC position of the primacy of social service but also to those evangelicals who are trying to load the word 'evangelism' with meanings it never had.

What are the theological issues involved? As I understand it no-one is saying that evangelism is the whole duty of the church. No-one is denying the duty of compassionate service to those in need. But clearly some insist on the primacy of evangelism above and before everything else.

Is this simply a matter of the relative importance of words and deeds? If so it would be a futile debate. No priorities can be assigned between them because each without the other is ultimately vain. The Word made flesh is the gospel.

The deed without the word is dumb. The word without the deed is empty. At times words are cheap and deeds costly; at times deeds are cheap and words may cost lives. It is futile to set these two against each other, and the dichotomy which opens up here in our perceptions is part of the deep-going dualism we have inherited from the pagan, classical roots of our culture and which the biblical witness has never been able to eradicate. I need not remind you that the same Hebrew word is regularly translated in our Bible as both 'word' and 'act'.

I do not find this dichotomy between word and deed in the New Testament.

In the mission charge to the Twelve, according to Matthew, authority is given for healing and exorcism. The word they are given to speak ('the kingdom of heaven is at hand') is the interpretation of the deeds; they are not two things but one. The good news is that there is healing and because there is healing there is good news. Words and deeds both point to the same reality, the active presence of the reign of God. Neither word nor deed can be subordinated in principle to the other. This is not the basic question.

I think that behind the insistence on the priority of evangelism is a real misreading of the New Testament. Since the time of William Carey, but not before that time, it has been customary to take the closing verses of Matthew's Gospel as the fundamental mandate of mission, 'the Great Commission'. In his seminal book *Pentecost and Missions* Harry Boer, of the Sudan Interior Mission who now teaches in Nigeria, shows convincingly that this way of understanding the motive of missions is never visible in the New Testament itself.

The Great Commission is nowhere cited in the New Testament as the basis for mission. No apostolic writer lays on the conscience of his readers the duty of evangelism as an act of obedience to the Lord. There is, indeed, an obligation involved, and we will come back to that. But it is never interpreted as an obedience to a command. Before returning to the Matthaean form of the Great Commission I want to look at its Lucan and Johannine forms.

Luke says that after the Resurrection the apostles asked whether the promise of the coming reign of God was now to be fulfilled. The answer of Jesus is both a warning and a promise. The warning is to remember that the reign of God is precisely God's reign, not their program. It is wholly in God's hands. It is not a matter for calculation or speculation, or techniques for reaching unreached peoples.

The second part of Jesus' answer is the promise of the Spirit. What is promised is the foretaste, the pledge of the coming Kingdom, namely the presence of the Spirit which assures that the promise will be fulfilled. The apostles immediately became witnesses, but not that they forthwith embarked on a preaching campaign. There was nothing of the kind. Their being witnesses was not an action or decision of theirs. They became witnesses by something which God did, because that something caused questions to be asked. The crowd came running to ask what was happening and the first Christian preaching was an answer to that question. This was not a program initiated by the apostles but by God. He acted and they became witnesses of his action. This is in line with the biblical testimony as a whole, for you remember that when in the Old Testament the Lord says to Israel, 'You are my witnesses', the reference is not to anything which Israel is going to do or can do. It is what the sovereign Lord of Israel is going to do for his people, blind and deaf as they are. It is not a summons for them to undertake a campaign.

This Lucan interpretation is abundantly supported elsewhere in the New Testament. Mark records the promise that when the church is under attack for its faithfulness to Jesus, at that point the Spirit will speak, and so they are not to be anxious. How many times in Israel and in the church, and in my own experience, the promise has been fulfilled. Exactly at the moment when the church is weak and helpless, with its back to the wall, unable to speak let alone launch a campaign, at that moment the mighty Word of the Spirit acts as only the Spirit can.

In the Johannine discourses the promise is that precisely when the church is rejected by the world, the Spirit will bear witness bOth as the Advocate who speaks for the church and as the Prosecutor who goes before the church and convicts the world in respect of its fundamental notions of sin, righteousness and judgment.

We should not corrupt these texts to our own understanding. We are not told that when the disciples go and preach the Spirit will help them to do so. Not at all. It is the Spirit who will go with them. The Johannine version of the Great Commission is at John 20:19-33. Here the sending of disciples is linked to the imparting of the Spirit. Only as bearers of his own Spirit can the disciples continue Jesus' work of releasing men and women from the grip of sin. This account of their sending in the power of the Spirit is preceded by the words 'He showed them his hands and his side', by which action the disciples recognised the risen Lord and were glad. The Lord then says 'As the Father sent me ...' What does this 'as' contain? In what manner did the Father send the Son to be the bearer of his kingly rule? Not as the kings of the Gentiles who exercise mastery over others but as a Servant who gives his life a ransom for many. The scars of the Passion are therefore the visible marks by which the church will be recognisable as the bearer of God's words and of God's gift of reconciliation and forgiveness of sins. Mission must go the way of the cross.

What is the way of the cross? Here we must contend against a long tradition inherited from mediaeval Catholic piety, which sees the cross as passive submission to evil. The drooping, pain-drenched, defeated figure of the mediaeval crucifix does not truly represent the Passion portrayed in the New Testament and the early Christian writings.

D.S.Cairns insists in *The Faith that Rebels* that Passion was not passive. It was a mighty victory in which the prince of this world was cast down from his usurped domination. Jesus' way to the cross was an uncompromising challenge to the world's dominion, whether manifested in sickness of body and mind, demon possession, in the loveless self-righteousness of the godly, the hypocrisy of ecclesiastics or the brutality and injustice of political rulers. It was a challenge in deed and word. It is tragic that in the most often-used creed of the Western world those mighty works of deliverance are completely omitted.

It is impossible here to set the deed and the words against each other or to assign priority to either. As I said earlier, the words interpret the deeds and the deeds validate the words. But the point is, it is this active and uncompromising challenge to the dominion of evil that takes Jesus to the cross and when the Risen Lord commissions his disciples to go on the same mission as he received from the Father, and shows them the scars of his passion, he reminds them of the way the mission must take.

It is only as the church goes that way, not submitting to or compromising with or evading the conflict with the powers that disable people, but actively challenging them in deed and in word, and paying the price of that challenge, that it will be in truth the bearer of Christ's mission in the power of the Spirit. The presence of the Spirit, the active witness, is promised to the church which goes the way of the cross.

If now we return to the Matthaean form of the Great Commission we see on the one hand that it is wrong to read it in isolation from the others and on the other hand that Luke and John alert us to notes in the Matthaean text which we might otherwise have missed. It is indeed a command to be obeyed. But like the Law as a whole it is misunderstood if it is read simply as Law without its basis in Gospel. The first sentence 'All authority in heaven and on earth is given unto me' is a great shout of good news. Jesus reigns. Death is overthrown and it is because he reigns that he can and does send forth the gifts of the Spirit. This is what makes possible the discipling of the nations, previously and rightly understood as the action of God himself in the last days as the Old Testament has so constantly forecast. Those last days have come, and God himself is doing what the Old Testament promised he would do. God himself, the Holy Spirit, is drawing the nations together, and the church as the appointed witness of God's action (not the actor, but the witness) will be the place and instrument of that gathering. This discipling will lead believers into the baptism of Jesus, begun on Jordan and completed at Calvary, and so to the following of Jesus as he went the way of the cross.

As we reflect on these three forms of the Great Commission I am led to the following conclusions, and I have four points.

1. There is an inescapable element of constraint, of obligation in any true understanding of missionary work, and yet Paul is never to be found, in any of his letters, laying the duty of evangelism on his readers. The obligation arises from the gospel itself and must never be turned into a law. Evangelism is an overflow of Pentecost, an overspill. It is not law but gospel. Evangelism conducted in obedience to the Law is not usually perceived as good news by the recipients! While acts of deliberate sending have a place, many of the greatest triumphs of the gospel have been the result of informal contacts of which we know nothing. Two of the greatest early Christian communities, of Alexandria and Rome, came into existence through the witness of persons of whom we know nothing. I have found the same to be true. The ways in which people are brought to faith in Christ are many, various and infinitely mysterious. When you ask a person what brought him or her to faith, in many cases it was a vision. Even the best organised missionary society in the world has not yet learned how to organise visions.

Whatever the details of the story you always find at its heart the contagion of joy which could not be contained, the overspill of a gift which had to be shared rather than the consciousness of a duty which had to be discharged.

2. In the communication of the gospel word and act belong together. The word is essential because the Name of Jesus cannot be replaced by anything else. But the deed is equally essential because it proclaims the good news, the active presence of the reign of God made manifest in a world which has fallen under the usurped dominion of other powers. A preaching of the Name of Jesus which does not challenge the usurped dominion, which does not arise from the common life of the Body of the risen Lord, is false. Where the church is making this challenge and bearing wounds suffered in the Name and the power of Jesus it becomes a place where men and women can recognise the presence and power of the reign of God.

But where on the other hand the church invites men and women to take refuge in the Name of Jesus without this challenge to the dominion of evil, it becomes a counter-sign, and the more successful it is the more it becomes a sign against the sovereignty of God. An evangelism which seeks to evade this challenge and conflict (which welcomes a brutal tyranny because it allows the entry of foreign missionaries rather than a more humane regime which puts difficulties in their way) is a sign against the gospel of Jesus.

3. Word and Deed are related through the shared life in the Body of Christ. Every member must be ready with the word when called on to give an account of his hope (1 Peter 3:15). And all must be ready to do the compassionate deed, even when Jesus is not recognised or named, as the parable of sheep and goats reminds us. Not every deed must have a word attached to it, nor every word a deed.

4. When we look at the history of mission in recent days we are struck by the number of times Christian bodies have announced publicly that they are going to dispense with secondary things (social service and all that) to concentrate purely on evangelism. And in the course of years they have found themselves steadily drawn by an inescapable pressure into teaching and social service. For example, World Vision began as a body committed to evangelism, and is now deeply involved in compassionate social action.

Part Two

Let us now consider the dichotomy between a message addressed to persons calling them to conversion, baptism and church membership, and — on the other hand — a message to societies calling for structural change towards justice and freedom. Much has been made of the phrase 'holistic evangelism' or 'holistic mission'. I prefer the word 'evangelism' in the strict sense as verbal communication of the Name of Jesus.

The term 'holistic evangelism' tempts its users to bypass important theological questions. The human person is of course to be understood holistically. Nowhere in the world has the attempt to understand the human person in purely spiritual terms been pursued more relentlessly than in India. The Hindu scriptures try to find the real human person by stripping away all the sheaths that constitute the visible contingencies of our historical being as part of the ever-circling wheel of Nature.

But in the sharpest possible contrast to this attempt the Bible always sees the human person as a living body-soul whose existence cannot be understood apart from the relationships which bind him. For the biblical writers continued existence as a disembodied soul is something not to be desired but to be feared and loathed. The New Testament is true to its Old Testament basis when it speaks of salvation not as disembodied survival but as the resurrection of the body, a new creation, a heavenly state. This vision of the heavenly 'polis' forbids us to exclude politics from the understanding of salvation.

On the other hand the only politics of which we have any knowledge deals with structures which are as doomed to decay and dissolution, like the physical frame which for practical purposes is called by my name. How can our ultimate concern be with either of these, perishable as they are? The patients whom we treat in our mission hospitals will all die. The programs for social and political justice in which we invest our energies will all perish and be forgotten. Is it surprising that we are tempted by the simplicity and rationality of the Hindu way, tempted as many evangelical Christians are, to take as our ultimate concern the salvation of a soul that shall endure when all the visible forms of this world have perished. To speak of 'holistic' evangelism' does not enable us to escape from the dilemma unless we have a firm grasp of New Testament eschatology.

The original gospel is that 'the reign of God is at hand'. After the cross and resurrection the apostolic writers translated it as 'the Lord is at hand', because it is in the Lord Jesus Christ that the reign of God is actually present, and not otherwise. But what does 'at hand' imply? It is constantly said the early church was wrong in expecting the immediate coming of the Lord, and we have now learned to correct this mistake and to live without this expectation. I believe that is profoundly mistaken.. It is the essence of the rising of Christ, whether in the first century or the twentieth, that we do live at the end of the times, in other words in the immediate presence of the immanent reign of God, and that this immediate

presence is the horizon of all our being — not something in the future about which we ask the futurologists.

But this immanence means judgment and grace, not just for our souls but in all aspects of our existence : spiritual, intellectual, physical, cultural, political. The new creation promised in Christ, pledged in his resurrection, present in foretaste through the Spirit, concerns this whole existence, not just part of it. Therefore both grace and judgment apply across the whole of our existence. The reality of God's reign is the immediate horizon of our life and it is both promise and judgment.

It follows then that when we try to withdraw the spiritual dimension of our being and offer salvation to this world, apart from the 'polis' of God, we depart from the message of the gospel. The preached gospel means judgment and promise for the whole of human existence. To peel away the social and political implications of the gospel is to denature it, and this happens when compassionate action in society is in principle subordinated to the preaching of salvation and the gathering of individuals into the church.

Two attitudes to universalism

The other important issue dividing conservative evangelicals and ecumenicals is universalism.

Ecumenicals in their eagerness to promote friendly dialogue and cooperation in social action with those of other faiths have been charged with an easy-going universalism which blunts the cutting edge of the gospel, and it is said that the missionary motive is weakened or destroyed if it is suggested that salvation is somehow possible without explicit faith in Jesus Christ. Evangelicals point to God's universal love for the world (John 3:16) and warn that he who does not believe is condemned.

For many evangelical Christians this is a crucial issue, and I have to say that as a missionary on furlough from India I have sometimes been made aware that my hearers were less anxious to hear about the growth of the church in India than to be assured that I believed that Hindus and Muslims who had not accepted the gospel were destined for perdition.

There is a kind of universalism which robs human life of its ultimate seriousness and paradoxically also robs life of its ultimate hopefulness. There is also a rationalistic universalism which argues that because God is almighty and all-loving there can be no possibility of eternal loss. That is incompatible with the message of the cross.

There is also a romanticism from which contemporary ecumenical Christianity is by no means free, which turns a blind eye to traditional Christian teaching about original sin, invests human nature with hopes it cannot fulfil and is thereby constantly tormented by ineffective anger against the actual sins which frustrate these hopes. When the hope of a new creation is replaced by the hope of an earthly Utopia the fear of hell is quickly replaced by the fear of an earthly holocaust. But to make the fear of hell the ultimate motivation for faith in Christ is a terrible caricature of evangelism. I still feel shame when I think of evangelistic addresses which appeal to the lowest elements of human nature — selfishness and fear. One could only respect the tough-minded majority of listeners who rejected them. I dare to claim that I have the great apostle on my side when he pleads passionately with the Galatians to recognise that in God's economy it is the promise of the gospel and not the threatening of the Law which constrains them. The covenant which God made with the whole human race in Noah, which he made with Abraham for the sake of all the nations and which he renewed and sealed for ever in the sacrifice of Jesus is a covenant of free, unconditioned grace. This and not the Law is primary.

The Law has a secondary role in God's dealing with us. The free gift of grace is primary. To reverse that order is fatal, as the whole Galatians letter testifies. Only in the light of the grace of God in Jesus Christ do we know the terrible risk of darkness into which we must fall if we put our trust anywhere but in that grace. Therefore it is to those who have received the gracious promises of God that the warnings of scripture are addressed. Only in the light of the cross is the doctrine of the radical sinfulness of human nature possible. If we try to reverse the order, by convincing men and women of their lost condition before they have come to know their Saviour, we make ourselves judges of our fellow human beings and our judgment is rejected because our authority to judge is denied. Only when I know Jesus as my Saviour can I know that mine was the sin that brought him to the cross. Only in the light of the gospel can I acknowledge the darkness of unredeemed human nature. It follows that the grave warnings in the New Testament about the possibility of eternal loss are directed to those who are confident that they are among the saved. The branches of the vine, not the surrounding brambles, are threatened with burning. Those with invitation cards to the wedding banquet will find themselves outside, while the riffraff of the streets and lanes will sit at table.

There is of course a plausible logic about the argument from the Christian experience of redemption through the cross of Christ to the conclusion that those outside that experience are lost. I know I am lost apart from the mercy of God in Jesus Christ. Must I not therefore say that those who do not know that mercy are lost? I can only answer that while this argument seems plausible I am not permitted to say this, for the simple reason that my place in the whole plan of action is not that of the judge but of a witness. We are always tempted to put ourselves on the judgment seat. Thus, contemporary theology is full of judgments about adherents of other faiths, or of those who claim no faith, who will be saved through their sincere following of the light they have. (I am thinking of Kung and Rahner and those who follow them. The odd point is that it is the sincere and not the sinners who are saved!)

But the New Testament, which warns not to judge before the time, seems to prohibit this, and equally prohibited are those judgments which evangelicals find themselves compelled to make between those who are real Christians (and are assured of ultimate salvation) and nominal Christians who must be warned of perdition. Every attempt to define, from the place where we stand, the limits of God's saving grace involves those who make it in the kind of 'judging before the time' which is forbidden. There is one who is the Judge, and we are not in his seat. We are in the witness box.

The Christian is called to be a witness. He may not presume to speak as the judge. If he does so he cannot complain if his judgment is thrown back at him by a world mightily hardened in its unbelief by his presumption, for he has been warned by his Master to judge not, that he be not judged.

I find that the New Testament calls the Christian disciple simultaneously to a godly confidence and a godly fear, both springing out of the knowledge that the final judgment is in the hands of God and that we are not permitted to anticipate it. The Judge is the Lord who died for us, whose grace is infinite, and therefore we can have a godly confidence that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. And yet that confidence can easily degenerate into an ungodly complacency, which is why Paul, like an athlete in training, subjects himself to a relentless self-discipline 'lest after preaching to others I myself should be a castaway'.

Yet the same Paul can write of the day when the fullness of the Gentiles shall be gathered in and all Israel shall be saved. The terrible possibility of eternal loss is a reality in his mind, but it is present for him as a believer. For unbelievers, even for his obdurately unbelieving fellow-Israelites, Paul is willing

to be convinced that they will all be saved; That is the true logic of grace as it is known by those who have been made one with him who was made sin for our transgression.

That, incidentally, is the logic which underlies the ecumenical movement. It is the logical outworking of the faith that Jesus Christ alone is the centre of the realm of redemption and that therefore those who confess him as Lord and Saviour, however much they may have to accuse one another of error and sin, can never refuse one another fellowship, because to do so is to dishonour the Name of Christ.