

ACTUALIZING EVANGELISM AS A LIFESTYLE

A Response to Dr. Robert C. Donahue's paper on Evangelism

by

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"Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city." Acts 8:4-8 (NIV)

Those early disciples that were scattered in Acts 8 were fleeing persecution. Times were tough, and no one wanted to end up under the strong arm of Jewish law and in the hands of someone like Saul the Persecutor. So, they ran for their lives and spread out across their world.

It is interesting to note what those early Christians did as they ran away from Jerusalem. In Acts 8:4 (NIV) we read that the scattered disciples "preached (*'euangelizómenoí'*) wherever they went." Strong's Concordance notes that the root word here (*'euangelizo'*) means simply, "to announce good news ("evangelize") especially the gospel."¹ Thayer adds that the meaning of *'euangelizo'* is "to bring good news, to announce glad tidings:

- a) used in the Old Testament of any kind of good news, of the joyful tidings of God's kindness, in particular, of the Messianic blessings
- b) in the New Testament used especially of the glad tidings of the coming kingdom of God, and of the salvation to be obtained in it through Christ, and of what relates to this salvation
- c) glad tidings are brought to one, one has glad tidings proclaimed to him
- d) to proclaim glad tidings, to instruct (people) concerning the things that pertain to salvation."²

So, what does all this mean to us who are gathered together for a theology conference? Permit me to add some of my thoughts to those of Dr. Donahue.

First of all, evangelism is "*good news*." It is something about which we can rejoice! It has a message that causes the heart to leap and a smile to come on one's face. It is the message of I Corinthians 15:3-4 that focuses on the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, but it is also the message of John 10:10. Christ has not only come to do His mighty work in the defeat of sin, death and hell, but He has come that we "might have life, and have it to the full" (NIV). And this, indeed, is very *good news*!

Second, it is not grounded only in education or knowledge. This *good news* is not just the subject of a university lecture where one must earn a passing grade. This biblical term may also be researched in lexicons and commentaries, but those are only words written objectively and without the passion of life. While we can rejoice that the Christ-event did occur in history and that lives have been changed because of His coming to earth, yet this is not the essence of *good news* for us.

For this '*euangelion*' to be news for us that is truly "good," we must also be able to "*experience*" it. This is what John was writing about in his first letter,

"That which was from the beginning, which we have *heard*, which we have *seen* with our eyes, which we have *looked at* and our hands have *touched*—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have *seen* it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have *seen* and *heard*, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our *joy* complete." (1 John 1:1-4, NIV, *italics* added for emphasis.)

For it to be *good news*, it must make a difference in our lives and in our world. Thus, when the message of 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 becomes *good news* for *us*, then our lives will experience the John 10:10 kind of "abundance" and "fulfillment" that Jesus came to give His disciples.

Third, evangelism is to be "*spread*." It is to be *shared* and *proclaimed* and *taught* and *preached* to others. It is not to be kept to oneself but is to be "lived out" in society. And often the hard circumstances of life (such as the persecution experienced by the young Church) are the very circumstances that become the occasions for the most effective "proclamation." As an old farmer would say, "The hard soil has to feel the sharp edge of the plow blade before one can effectively plant the seed." Or, as one of the classic definitions of evangelism describes it, "Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread (or, rice, as the case may be in our part of the world)!" If it is *good news*, we cannot keep it to ourselves.

But note, fourth, that the "*spread-ers*" in Acts 8 were not the apostles who had been trained by Jesus for three years and had graduate degrees in evangelism. The Word indicates that those who preached the *good news* were the laity of the Jerusalem church who were fleeing persecution. The preaching of the *good news* was being done by the "common folk" of Jerusalem First Church.

This does not mean that effective evangelism does not happen and cannot be done through anointed preaching, scholarly debates, structured programs or plans. (Dr. Donahue mentions quite a list of evangelism programs and categories throughout his paper.) However, at the root of it all, true evangelism is accomplished as "Spirit-transformed lives" impact "world-enslaved lives" in the context of the daily chores of making a living, raising a family, going to school and shopping at the local market

together. Dr. Donahue makes an insightful comment when he writes, “It is the simplicity which puts the work of evangelism into the hands of the great general membership of the church, and keeps it from becoming the exclusive domain of the professionals.”³

Finally, the fruit of evangelism is based upon two conditions – the work of God’s Spirit and the obedience of those who proclaim this *good news*. There is no “perfect” or “best” method to “win the world for Christ.” Cultures are so varied, people are so different, and situations and responses are so unpredictable that there is no “one way” to do evangelism that will always produce the desired result, namely, a life transformed by the Spirit.

Yet there is a “constant” in every genuine effort that is made. And that is the promise that Jesus gave to His disciples in Matthew 28:20, “...And surely I will be with you always...” (NIV). It is *God at work* in bringing *good news* to those who need to hear and experience life-transformation. It is God Who was praised when Luke wrote, “... And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:47, NIV). The Spirit is at work today, deepening a hunger in the hearts of those who will hear *good news* from us, as He was at work in the life of the Ethiopian eunuch that shared a chariot ride with Philip in Acts 8.

That event on the desert road brings us to the other necessary component to fruitful evangelism – *our personal obedience*. Just as Philip had to obey the prompting of the Spirit to avoid missing the Ethiopian eunuch, so we also are called upon to work in partnership with the Spirit in the spreading of the *good news*. Again, this is not just a matter of “memorizing a method” or “working a plan.” It is a matter of living out an *obedient lifestyle* of sharing the *good news*.

Dr. Donahue notes the influence and ultimate effect of the Moravian passengers on the life of John Wesley during their storm-filled voyage together across the Atlantic. Wesley could not ignore their joy and faith in the midst of a storm that he felt would certainly result in his death on the open sea. Yet, just the Moravians living out their lives for Jesus in the middle of a treacherous ocean voyage made an eternal impact on the great Methodist evangelist.

One of the most effective methods of proclamation of the *good news* is that of simply “working our web.” That “web” is our *web of influence* in the lives of those around us. We have four main contact points in our lives that give us opportunity to share the *good news* with others. These four areas of influence are – (1) our family members, (2) our friends, (3) those with whom we work, shop or go to school, and (4) those in our neighborhood. These are the people who observe us often and look for the difference that the Spirit of Jesus makes in our lives. As we live consistently and obediently for Christ, we reflect our authentic Christ-enlivened lives to those in our web of influence. Then, the Spirit creates opportunities for us to share with them.

As referenced by Dr. Donahue from Matthew 4:19 and Mark 1:17, Jesus called those early disciples to become “fishers of men.” As any net-fisherman will attest, the fish do not just swim into the net while the fisherman relaxes on the shore. It usually

takes considerable work to haul in a profitable catch of fish each day. Yet, there are two accounts in Scripture where the Lord caused the fish to be in the right place at the right time for those nets that the disciples lowered into the water. Those were unique opportunities, provided by the Lord and obediently accepted by the disciples.

In conclusion, permit me to add one more thought. The spreading of the *good news* is far more a *community effort* than a single-person event. The Spirit often uses a number of people to touch the lives of one individual before there is a life change in that person. As Paul describes it, there is both a time of “planting” and a time of “watering” before God “makes it grow.” (1 Corinthians 3:6, NIV). As we work in partnership with the Spirit and with each other, we can all share in the “joy” when lives are changed by the *good news* of our Lord Jesus!

¹Biblesoft's New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary. Copyright (c) 1994, Biblesoft and International Bible Translators, Inc.

²The Online Bible Thayer's Greek Lexicon and Brown Driver & Briggs Hebrew Lexicon, Copyright (c)1993, Woodside Bible Fellowship, Ontario, Canada. Licensed from the Institute for Creation Research.

³Robert C. Donahue, “Evangelism,” p. 5.