

"He Gave Some... Evangelists"

1. THE BIBLE SPEAKS...

The New Testament is clear about the importance of preaching. In fact, the word preach and its derivatives are used 145 times in the Bible.

Preaching is the primary method God uses to bring His Word to the lost. As 1 Corinthians 1:21 states, "it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." It is true that much of this "preaching" is done by ordinary Christians conversing with their neighbors and fellow-workers. But the New Testament also shows us, both in pattern and in teaching, the importance of a planned approach to evangelism.

The New Testament uses the term evangelist three times. Philip evidently spent so much time in spreading the gospel that he became known as an evangelist rather than a deacon (see Acts 21:8). Timothy spent many years on Paul's missionary team, and before Paul died he challenged Timothy to continue with his work as an evangelist (see 2 Timothy 4:5). And in Ephesians 4:11, Paul listed an evangelist as one of the gifts of God—an office in the church.

2. HISTORY SPEAKS...

Evangelism was a very important part of the work of the early church. Christians went everywhere telling the good news. But as we read Acts and the epistles we can see that, as the structure of the church crystallized, the work of evangelism gradually changed. It was true—and always will be—that every true Christian was an unofficial evangelist; talking about Jesus to those they worked with, and those they met in the marketplaces. But the church also recognized that if the whole world was to be evangelized for Christ, something more was needed.

Interestingly enough, this revelation came first to the church at Antioch, perhaps because the members of this congregation were almost all gentile converts who knew where they would be if someone had not brought the gospel to them. It was a direct revelation from the Holy Spirit that Paul and Barnabas were to be the first official evangelists of the early church; sent on a missionary journey with the specific purpose of calling people to Christ. Earlier efforts, such as the conversion of the Samaritans had come about almost by accident, but now it was time for the gospel to go beyond Jerusalem, Judah, and Samaria. If this was to happen someone would need to be appointed to do it—someone who would leave home specifically to call people to follow Jesus.

It is true—as one reviewer of this article noted—that Paul and Barnabas followed Jesus' teaching and went first to "the lost sheep in the house of Israel." They went from city to city, inviting the Jewish Old Testament remnant into the New Covenant. But their commission went far beyond that, to the Gentiles steeped in the sins of the most nefarious cities in the Roman Empire.

Paul and Barnabas were the first, but not the last, evangelists called by the church to do this work. The evangelist was an important facet in the work of the apostolic church. Silas, Timothy, and Titus soon joined Paul's team. Luke was part of it at times, along with others who are mentioned in Paul's letters. Later, John rebuked Diotrophes for rejecting traveling brethren who were on a journey through his area, and praised Gaius for receiving them and helping them—apparently a reference to such evangelists.

Every successful Christian group in history which survived for any length of time followed this example. The apostolic church, the Waldensians, the Moravians, the Albigenses, the Anabaptists, the Hutterites, and the Mennonites all had a vision for evangelism in their time. When that vision faded, the evangelists stayed home, and the church began to lose its way.

3. EVANGELISM BY COLONIZATION...

When our forefathers left the apostatizing conferences to start their own congregations, they were rightly concerned about evangelism. However, they made a decision which has molded our methods ever since—they decided to promote evangelization by colonization. They did this because the apostate congregations they came from had promoted the Protestant ideal of professional missionaries and evangelization by institutions. Our forefathers saw the dangers of this, and they decided to center their efforts around congregations rather than institutions.

This was a good move in some ways, and the Lord has blessed it. But one thing is lacking in it—the traditional role of the evangelist. The apostolic church, and the other groups listed above, did not normally combine the work of an evangelist with the work of a pastor, as we do. Rather, they viewed the evangelist as a full time missionary. The pastor looked after the local congregation, while the evangelists used their time and talents to establish new congregations.

There is another important difference. The evangelists of the groups we mentioned above spent their time largely in working on the highways and byways, bringing in the lost. We center our yearly evangelistic efforts on the local church. Normally these are revival meetings, not evangelistic meetings. They are aimed mostly at our own people, even though we try to invite others from the community.

And finally, most of our outreach efforts are aimed at Christians. We start churches where there are families looking for fellowship—families who want a better church life than they presently have. But when was the last time that we sent an evangelistic team into a city or town, and helped some sinners find the Lord, and then started a congregation for them?

None of what we are doing is wrong, and we should not be stopping our efforts. Colonization is important. Revival is important. Helping lonely Christian families is important. But I feel that if we are going to retain God's blessing on our congregations, we need to take the great commission a step further. We need evangelists—brethren who are willing to walk the streets of the large cities and preach the gospel like Paul did in Corinth. We need to carry the gospel to sinners rather than just looking for Christian families wanting a "better" church. We need to stop waiting for sinners to come to us, as we often do, and start reaching out to them.

4. A SCRIPTURAL PRECEDENT...

If we are going to do this successfully, we need to use the Scriptural precedents. And the Scriptural precedent is to call evangelists—men who are willing to go out two by two and face an unfriendly world with the gospel. Men who, like the early Hutterite evangelists, are ready to accept a one-way ticket to a martyr's grave, if necessary. When the Waldensians, the Moravians, and the Hutterites called men to be evangelists, they knew they were probably giving them a death sentence. We have it much easier. Why are we not following their example?

I know from past experience that a proposition like this makes people uneasy. We can find many reasons for pushing it aside. For this reason, we have never done this kind of work in North America. Our missionaries in foreign lands are more apt to do this, but cannot really carry it out completely because of a lack of resources. We send them to look after a mission station—colonization again—and they can only spare so much time for going further. So we are uneasy because the idea is unusual. But it has Scriptural precedent behind it, so why should we be uneasy?

This kind of program has difficulties, certainly. The Lord's work always does. One of the first questions that usually surfaces is that of follow-up work. What if someone, or several people, would accept the Lord and the closest Mennonite congregation is ten or fifteen hours away? Then we would be obligated, and we aren't ready for another outreach right now. We need at least three years—time to ordain some ministers and let them get some experience. Time to get people ready to move. Time to get enough money together. It looks so big. And so we stay home. And John and Mary, and their friends, never find the Lord. Or perhaps the Mormons get there first, and they are swallowed up and lost.

How should we go about starting a such a program? Acts 13:1 – 3 gives us a pattern. The church at Antioch was on fire for the Lord. They had a group of concerned and spiritual leaders. The congregation was involved in spiritual activities such as prayer and fasting. They had a love for lost souls—the congregation existed because of this. Suddenly, in the middle of all this, God spoke.

Are we following the Scriptural precedent? Are we ordaining leaders so that we have them ready when God calls? Are we meeting for prayer? Do we really care about lost souls? Most of all, are we open to the Spirit's voice?

Congregations like Antioch will find themselves in the middle of evangelism without even trying. They cannot help it, because of what they are. In fact, if a congregation goes on for any great length of time without this, it is a serious danger sign. Genuine Christians will speak of the things they have seen and heard. In our time of gospel hardness the results will not be as dramatic as the results were in Acts, but things will happen.

5. IN CONCLUSION...

We should expect that God will call us to evangelism. The Russian unregistered Baptist churches, for instance, get together every year and decide which areas of the country each congregation will be

responsible to evangelize that year. Then they send out an evangelist and his wife. They send out follow-up teams. They set up tents and have evangelistic campaigns. Perhaps we can find fault with some of the things they do, but nevertheless they are doing what we only dream of doing. Perhaps if we realized the realities of the great commission and took steps like theirs, we would find ourselves doing similar things.

I am sure that God has given us evangelists. He says so, in Ephesians 4:11. Why are we not calling them to their duties? Is the Holy Spirit calling us to a greater fervor? How many souls are out there, just waiting for us? We may not find the large crowds Paul did. We are, after all, in the end times. But the Lord is still calling. Will we heed, and help?

~Lester Bauman

*"Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.
How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed?
and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?
and how shall they hear without a preacher?
And how shall they preach, except they be sent?"
(Romans 10:13 – 15)*