

56 Who needs evangelists?!

In the mid 80s, we had a PCC meeting about evangelism. We talked about different types of evangelistic campaigns, but at one point I said, ‘You know, if we really **believed** what we say we believe, and if we put it into **practice**, we wouldn’t need campaigns; people would come to us and ask why we were so different!’ The response was, ‘Thank you, Paul. What other ideas have people got, please?’

I think that was around the time that some of the homegroups did Colin Urquhart’s course, ‘How to love and be loved’ which, coming from a dysfunctional family, really set me alight. I went into the local bank one day and the cashier said, ‘My word, you’re looking very happy today!’ and my response was, quite spontaneously, ‘Yes, I’ve just come to realise that God actually loves me!’ and then I added, ‘Oh, and he loves you too, of course!’

So, what about evangelism/evangelists? Do we need it/them? What does the Bible teach?

Remember that on my journeying I’ve come to believe that (as I said in article 54) (a) the whole of the Christian faith is about **relationships** (not just a mechanism for personal salvation) and (b) the gospel is the **narrative** of the saving purposes of God, from end to end (not just a mechanism for personal salvation). I’m finding that this perspective is transforming my reading of the scriptures, so I applied it to evangelism.

Surprisingly, in my NIV, ‘evangelism’ is non-existent, and ‘evangelist’ occurs only three times, the first of which tells us nothing useful: *Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven.* Acts 21:8. (Remember Philip? He was the chap that God told to go and run beside the chariot of the Ethiopian official.)

The other two references are:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers (Eph 4:11)

But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. (2 Tim 4:5)

How ever did we get from that to the dictionary definition of ‘*a person who seeks to convert others to the Christian faith, especially by public preaching*’?!

Are there any church historians and/or NT Greek scholars who are reading this? I’d love to know when and how our current conception of evangelism/evangelist came to be accepted as ‘what we’ve always been taught’, when it doesn’t seem to be what the Bible actually teaches!

All I can offer you is that the root of ‘evangelist’ as ‘evangel’ = ‘gospel’ = ‘good news’ – the story of Jesus. So maybe an evangelist in the original biblical sense is just a story-teller – someone good at remembering and telling the story of Jesus, and few people could read and write in those days, of course.

(I’m hoping that there’s more than one OTB presenter who is reading this. By this definition, you’re actually an evangelist – telling the story of Jesus to people who have never heard it!)

Philip is the only person I could find (apart from Timothy, and he wasn't **just** an evangelist), so I've looked up all the references to him. The only thing that stood out to me was the link between telling the story and healings and divine guidance (as per Acts 8).

I've always had a strong urge to tell people about Jesus, but there are a couple of negatives I've always felt about evangelism.

First, there have been times when people have either rejoiced that someone has become a Christian, or have deliberately tried to reach people, because 'they are people of influence' – celebrities or secular leaders. That has always made me cringe – but the core of the idea is seeing evangelism as persuading people to believe.

And the other thing I cringe at is the idea of deliberately trying to form relationships with people with the specific aim of 'reaching them for Christ'. So if they prove resistant to the gospel (mind you, which 'gospel' are they resistant to?!?) do we then stop trying to maintain that relationship?

If evangelism to me was once about persuading people to believe (what I believe), then I am now changing to see it being more about listening – in two ways.

First, we need to be listening to people, to hear where they are really at, what they believe, what they don't believe, who they are, what hurts them. And then maybe we can apply some aspects of the gospel narrative to their situation?

Secondly, we need to be listening to God, as Philip did in his evangelism. How does God want to speak into people's situations.

So, what is the **core** of the evangelism in your church? Is it trying to get people to give assent to a particular belief system? Or are you trying to introduce people to a person? Are showing them a relationship – better, are you modelling that relationship?

So was Jesus an evangelist? Did he preach the gospel? Did he tell the good news of the kingdom? How did he evangelise? Clearly there was some content to what he taught people (mainly using narrative, of course), but that content wasn't delivered from a pulpit or via a TV or satellite link – no one-way communication for Jesus! In his life, and supremely in the cross, Jesus identified with the suffering of humankind, and did something about it. The two are inseparable in his ministry.

And if Jesus identified with the suffering of humankind, and did all he could to alleviate it – how can we do any less??!

Lord, preaching as a one-way communication is much easier than incarnating the gospel, but I guess if you did it, we need to get stuck in and get alongside people who are hurting. But thank you that we don't do it alone – we do it together with fellow believers, and you're already in there before we even get near. Please help us to listen to you and to other people.

Lord, let it be so!