

Matters arising (I) – Evangelists/evangelism

I've had responses from a couple of friends about what I said in articles 56 and 57, and I think it might be helpful to discuss the issues raised.

The first friend made the point that I shouldn't 'completely dismiss the role of the evangelist', while admitting that the day of mass meetings might be over, being gradually being replaced by 'friendship evangelism', of which Alpha is the main example.

I'm going to continue my mission to challenge 'what I've always been taught', and I'll assume that we want to base things on what the Bible teaches. So what do we mean by the word 'evangelist' and/or 'evangelism'. Remember that the latter doesn't occur in the Bible at all and, although the former does (three times), there's nothing directly to say what Paul meant by 'do the work of an evangelist' or 'it was he [Christ] who gave some ... to be evangelists'.

Words are slippery things, so let's create two neologisms, 'BGvangelist' (as my friend mentioned Billy Graham) and 'NTvangelist', the latter representing the Bible-word.

And we're going to need to talk about 'preaching the gospel', so again let's create two neologisms for that. First, I've come to believe (and no-one has yet challenged me – please do, if you think I'm leading people astray here) that 'the gospel', as referred to in the Bible – i.e. as preached by Jesus and the early church – was simply the story of Jesus, as the fulfilment of the OT prophecies.

And I think I'm right that, for Billy Graham, to 'preach the gospel' would essentially have meant explaining how Jesus died on the cross, taking the punishment that I deserve for my sins. But I have now come to see this as explaining one of the Bible's several salvation metaphors, often referred to as 'penal substitution'. So I'll distinguish the two as 'NTgospel' and 'PSgospel'.

So what does a BGvangelist do? Traditionally, he (do you know any lady BGvangelists?) explains the PSgospel and asks people to decide to 'give their lives to Christ'. Then they pray a prayer of confession, repentance and acceptance. Then, as my friend rightly points out, 'it was good the way that people were guided into churches straightaway so that they would quickly build relationships with other Christians and have a place to belong.' So after conversion, they are led on to discipleship.

What did an NTvangelist do? Based on my recent reading of the Bible, I have to admit that I don't know! And was 'doing the work of an evangelist' any different from 'preaching the NTgospel'? I don't know! So if any of you can point us to any biblical evidence, I'd really appreciate that, thanks.

Now, as I am wont to do (I can't stop myself, in fact!), let's discuss this issue in terms of relationships. Where is the relationship in BGvangelism – relationship with God, I mean? People are told the message of salvation (penal substitution), asked to make a decision, and then if they say 'yes', they are 'discipled' – they are told that, to develop their new-found friendship, they have to read the Bible, pray and of course 'evangelise'. The last was important, knowing that if they don't evangelise their friends soon, the fire will die, and their opportunity to win some more souls for Christ would dwindle (though there may be many different reasons for that).

This is sounding a bit cynical, sorry; I'm not meaning to totally dismiss a movement that has brought many people to Christ, but I'm trying to question 'what I've always been taught', so let's get back to the relationships. Is it overstating things to say that BGvangelism is a bit like taking someone out on a blind date and asking them at the end of the evening if they would like to get married? The prayer is then a sort of 'I do', and someone says they 'now pronounce you man and wife' and then the local Christians try to help them to learn to live together in love?

There has been some research, I think, about how many of those who made decisions at a Billy Graham campaign are still, some years later, 'happily married' to use my analogy.

What about friendship evangelism? What about Alpha? There's no denying Alpha's success in bringing people to Christ, and it's definitely a step in the right direction – it's certainly relationship-based; initially, of course, it's human-relationship-based. And the Alpha course I've just been involved in was definitely more relationship-based than the first Alpha course I helped to run in 1995 – encouraging! And discipleship is less of a problem – our two Alpha groups on Tuesdays and Thursdays, have turned into follow-up groups, which is brilliant.

My main reservation with Alpha, as with BGvangelism, is that it only uses one of the Bible's salvation metaphors, penal substitution – which is not the most helpful metaphor for some people and some cultures. What's more, in order to help people understand the penal substitution metaphor, we have to use a metaphor: the Nazis want to kill some prisoners, and a Catholic priest offers to let the Nazis kill him instead of a chap who has a wife and children at home – he offers to die in his place 'as Jesus did for us'. Is this **really** a good way to explain God's amazing love for us?! (There was a 90+ year-old Dutch lady on one of our courses and, not surprisingly, she found it very upsetting, having been teenager in Holland at the time.)

Oh dear! I think that the second 'matters arising' will have to wait, as I've run out of time and space, but I hope this has been thought-provoking, and I hope that you don't think I'm being unnecessarily critical; I totally have the heart of an evangelist (whatever one of those is!) and my aim is simply to help us to do evangelism in a more New Testament way.

Well, no, we need to do evangelism in a way that is culturally sensitive, and we need to base it on the **principles** of the New Testament. I just think that penal substitution is **not** a helpful metaphor to use for many people these days, especially when we have to use a metaphor to explain the metaphor!

Discuss. :-)

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