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EVANGELISM – Part 1

By David Phillips

When the Apostle Paul and his fellow workers arrived in Thessalonica they embarked on a brief but remarkably successful evangelistic enterprise. They began by approaching the Jews. In Philippi, which they had just left, there were insufficient Jewish men to establish a synagogue and they had found a small group meeting on the Sabbath outside the city by the river as was the custom. But in Thessalonica there was a synagogue and it was here that they began their work. Luke describes what happens in Acts chapter 17 but Paul also alludes to it in chapter 2 of his first letter to the church there. These two passages together give a fairly detailed picture of how they set about preaching the gospel.

What is evangelism?

It is true that our lives should be a testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ – “let your light so shine before men” (Mtt 5.16) and that this can itself convict people and lead them to glorify God on the day He visits them with salvation (1 Pt 2.12). Yet, we are called to preach the gospel and this is precisely what Paul and his friends did in Thessalonica – “we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God” (1 Th 2.2).

In Acts Luke explains more fully what exactly they were doing, that is to say what it means to speak the gospel. He writes, “they reasoned from the Scriptures” (Acts 17.2). The word used here is interesting, the Greek is *dialegomai* from which we get our word dialogue and at its simplest it means to say thoroughly. Many of us are distrustful of dialogue because in some circles, such as inter-faith dialogue, it seems to be associated with compromising the truths we believe. But in general use *dialegomai* leant much more towards argument, exhortation and dispute. It can be passionate and heated, it is not about sharing ideas, but seeking to change a person’s mind and life by reasoning and exhortation.

In the next verse Luke goes on to say that they dialogued by “explaining and demonstrating”, that is to say they were taking the Scriptures and seeking to prove their case from them. This was not simply standing up and shouting out a message at people, though no doubt that can have its place, but it was reasoned argument. Of course, it raises the question whether it is really possible to do when seeking to evangelise people who do not accept the truth and authority of the Bible. Such a situation was more like that which Paul encountered in Athens where his evangelism began much more in their own spiritual experience but then moved quickly to asserting the truth of the gospel, even though his audience ridiculed what he was saying.

Paul describes what he did in Thessalonica as exhortation (1 Th 2.3). This is another interesting word because the Greek is *paraklesis* which you may recognise as being related to the name given by Jesus to the Holy Spirit – the *paraklete*. We tend to translate the latter as comforter. But exhortation is the sense of the word in 1 Thessalonians and some Bibles translate it as ‘appeal’. Evangelism means setting before people the truth of the gospel but also exhorting them to accept its truth and to believe and trust in Christ.

So, evangelism involves speaking, reasoning, explaining, demonstrating, exhorting. But what is it that we are conveying, what were they proclaiming in Thessalonica.

What is the evangel?

We can well imagine that if Paul and his friends spent three Sabbath days in the synagogue

speaking and explaining they had more than a bit to say and that Luke's description of what they said is only a summary, but it is a very informative summary.

Remembering again that they were speaking to devout Jews we notice that the heart of their message had two aspects to it.

The first was that the Messiah "had to suffer and rise again from the dead" (Acts 17.3). The words "had to" can be translated "it was necessary". Behind these brief words there lies a great deal. The Jews believed that Messiah would come, they accepted what the Old Testament teaches and they had no doubt about this, but they had not grasped that the Messiah must suffer and die, nor indeed that he would rise again. It is hard for us to grasp this fact. Yet we also see that the disciples did not grasp it at first. In Mark chapter 8 we find Peter affirming that Jesus is the Messiah. Immediately Jesus went on to say that he must suffer, but Peter could not accept it and rebuked Jesus, to which Jesus responded "get behind me Satan". We should not be surprised therefore if this fact of the suffering of Messiah, the message of Christ crucified, remains a stumbling block and foolishness.

The second aspect of the message follows immediately, "This Jesus, whom I preach to you, is the Messiah" (Acts 17.3). It amazes me to sometimes hear sermons that make no mention of Christ. It is indeed possible to encounter Christless Christianity yet that cannot be the true gospel, because the heart of the Christian faith is that Jesus is the Christ. We must certainly preach the mechanics of salvation and the need for faith, but beneath that lies the fact that Jesus is the Messiah.

What is our motivation?

Behind the comments of Paul in his letter apparently lies some false accusation that was being levelled against him, yet in responding to this he sets out some important principles about the motivation for the evangelist.

On one side are the negatives, which demonstrate that it is possible to preach Christ for wrong motives. The evangelist is not in it for personal gain. Paul says it should not be a cloak for covetousness (1 Th 2.5). It is possible for evangelists who see great success to do well materially out of evangelism. Great harm is done to the cause of Christ when this happens and indeed when ministers of the gospel become worldly. Sadly there is no shortage of examples through history where this has happened, and indeed today.

Secondly, we must be careful not to please men. That is to say that we are changing the gospel message in order to make it more palatable. It is not unusual to hear that there are aspects of our message (about sin, judgement or hell) that put people off, and so the expectation is that we will change these things. Paul gives a particular example where the preacher uses flattering words. The gospel is profoundly unflattering because it presents men and women with their fallenness and the fact that we cannot save ourselves. Flattering words are common today in telling people that we are essentially good, or that salvation is in our hands, this panders to our human pride.

If these are wrong motives, what should be our true motives? First, there is love. Paul writes: "We were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children" and he goes on to speak of "affectionately longing for you". This is not easy. It is all too easy to become a vindictive and grumpy preacher, castigating people for their sin and lack of faith rather than pleading and longing that they turn to Christ. Of course such ministry can still work. Jonah, the most effective evangelist in the Bible, demonstrates that it is the message that counts, not the messenger. He did not want the Ninevites to repent, and apparently kept his message to a bare minimum, yet the people repented regardless, a wonderful testimony to the grace and sovereignty of God. Nevertheless, the motivation for the preacher is love, as a nursing mother for her children.

Whilst we are not to be concerned with pleasing men, we are certainly to be concerned with pleasing God. This means that we are first and foremost to be concerned to be faithful to God in what we say and in the manner in which we say it. The gospel may be foolishness to the world but it is the wisdom of God. We have been given this message to proclaim and we have been commanded to proclaim it.

So far we have looked at what evangelism is, what the evangel is and what our motivation should be. There is more to add, and we will return to this in the next issue when we look at the way Paul set about the task and the cost of the gospel.

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