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The Purpose of Evangelism

LAWRENCE E. BARKER

I have several questions in my mind about both the theological basis and the methodology of evangelism.

1. For what purpose do we want to evangelize? Is it to call new members to our numbers? Is it to save souls? Is bearing witness to the gospel of Jesus the Christ the same as evangelizing?

2. To what extent are we seeking to meet needs, or are we trying to create needs? We believe that human beings need to know God's love and to experience that redemptive power. Some persons do not feel that need. Do we help people feel the need? Or is our biblical charge to speak to the need? It seems to me that the Holy Spirit, Christ the teacher, is to create the need. When the need is man-created, either by fear or by manipulation, I wonder how real the experience may be.

In the same vein I recall the statement of Ole Olden in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends*:¹ "I should like to change the name 'seekers' to 'explorers'. There is a considerable difference there: we do not 'seek' the Atlantic, we explore it. The whole field of religious experience has to be explored, and has to be described in a language understandable to modern men and women."

It would appear to me that the primary purpose of witness and outreach is to find the seeker and equip him through a caring community to become an explorer.

3. How is growth to be evaluated? Dare we limit it to the number of members or participants, and the size of the budget? Clearly individuals must grow as well as meetings. Evangelism needs to be seen as introducing persons not only to the saving grace but also to the difficult ethical values to which this leads. I would not want to place a value on one hundred new converts compared to twenty Christians seeking to live out the total gospel. A meeting of twenty dedicated Christians living

out the gospel may be a stronger witness to God's love. The modern church suffers from the success syndrome. The call of Scripture is not to success but to obedience.

Obedience is the call. Saving souls becomes a by-product of following God's leading.

4. Is there a need for paid leadership to make evangelism happen? This seems contrary to Scripture and to the experience of early Friends. The released Friend idea is very valid for the outreach of a meeting. The release may be from the need for monetary employment. More clearly we need to release members from certain tasks within the meeting, so that they can devote more energy to special areas of need and interest. The proper use of the spiritual gifts of the membership is a central issue. The caring community should recognize the gift and assist in finding the task so that the gift can be fully utilized, in addition to defining the task and then finding the person. In the midst of this we need to make certain that the life of the meeting does not become imbalanced.

One way to release the members is to have someone available to do the busy tasks of meeting life. A paid person who frees the members from the details may be more valuable than a highly-trained theologian leading the charge. Let me be quick to say that a well-trained competent person to assist in thinking through and putting into action the claims of the gospel is also needed.

Some of the literature I read on evangelism makes me think that the pastor should have a course in merchandising. Are we proclaiming the gospel or are we selling a package? When does persuasion become pressure?

5. The contagion of caring does not necessarily mean a successful church as popularly defined, but certainly reveals a community of believers which has a healthy self-esteem. Such a church is much more likely to have the courage to boldly proclaim the total gospel than one which is searching for its place in the sun. Evangelism for some becomes a means for survival instead of an outgrowth of spiritual health. Perhaps it is time for Quakerism to so boldly proclaim our understanding of God's redemptive love that we cease to exist as a sepa-

rate Christian religious order. What did Jesus mean when he said, "He who would lose his life, will save it"?

The Norwegians have a tale about a fisherman and his two sons. One day while all three were fishing in their rowboat, a sudden storm darkened the sky. The storm was so dark and violent that the fisherman and his sons could not even see the shoreline. They did not know which way to go to escape the dangers of the storm.

Suddenly they saw a dim orange glow many miles away. They thought surely the glow must be coming from land. They rowed toward it. As they got closer they realized the glow was from a large fire.

When the fisherman reached land safely with his two sons, his wife told him that a fire had destroyed the family's house and all their possessions.

"Everything is gone," the woman told her husband, who seemed unmoved by the news. He said nothing for a moment and then responded: "A few hours ago we were lost at sea. I saw the orange glow of the fire and realized this was land. We rowed our boat toward the glow and were saved. The fire that destroyed our home was the light that saved our lives."

Our failure often becomes our success when seen from a different point of view.

I believe that it is very important to understand the ministry of caring as a valid method of evangelism and outreach. Perhaps it is the most valid form because it treats persons as children of God instead of statistics to be added to the column of souls saved. The caring community is concerned about persons both within the fellowship and without. The caring reaches not only to individuals but to social structures, because social structures affect individuals.

The Wilmington Meeting has developed some expertise in sponsoring federally-assisted housing units for low and moderate income families. Our question was not how many people would become involved in the meeting but rather: is there a need and can we help meet the need? The resources of the local meeting need to be recognized and used. Not only the gifts of the people but the physical plant and the financial strength must be committed to caring about people.

Father Greeley of the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago suggests that there are four essential ingredients of modern life. Any social group can be evaluated in terms of how well these four are being fulfilled. They are: 1) global vision, 2) the hopefulness that is required to begin again, 3) pragmatic realism, and 4) a sense of community. The local church is uniquely equipped to assist in fulfilling these four because we bring in the fifth dimension, the Spirit of God. Our Christian faith affirms these values.

No meeting can survive if it does not have a global vision. It must have a world view, seeing all persons as children of God. Involved also is the necessity to respond to the needs of persons wherever they may be. We can offer hope only if we personally have discovered the hopefulness required to begin again. With so much emphasis on success, we need to remember that failure is not sinful. As Christians we can have the hope, the faith, and the courage to try again. Someone put it this way: "There is no sin in falling down; the sin is in not getting up."

Often the church has been accused of being so heavenly-minded that it is of no earthly value. Thus the call for pragmatic realism, while maintaining a high vision of the ideal as proclaimed by Christ, is essential. Much has been made of the sense of community as a Christian virtue. It remains perhaps the one area we cannot create, but can only allow to happen as God's Spirit moves and as individuals respond to God's love.

The community of caring must never become a closed community. The open community runs the risk of not being supportive enough at crucial moments because of its wider concerns. The more closed community runs the risk of excluding persons and ministries which need love. The fellowship of the early church reached across economic and social lines. Today's community of caring, if it is to be contagious, must also include all persons.

The reason to reach out to other persons is that we care. We care because we have experienced God's redemptive grace for ourselves. The last words of Friedrich von Hügel are significant: "Caring is the greatest thing. Caring matters most."

Immanuel Kant said that every personality is like a pyramid resting on its apex. There is one basic choice which supports every other choice in life. To change the primary decision will alter the whole structure of a personality.

We can help persons make this choice by clearly articulating and living the choice we have made to accept God's forgiveness and grace.

1. London: London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1960, paragraph 125.

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