

The Theology of Evangelism: The Heart of the Matter

by William J. Abraham

The central task of a theology of evangelism is to provide a clear and credible account of the ministry of evangelism which will foster and illuminate responsible evangelistic practices by the Christian church and its agents in the modern world.

To date very limited attention has been given to this crucial subject. The chief reason for this is that evangelism falls between a rock and hard place. The rock is the extraordinary silence on the part of systematic theologians on the subject of evangelism. The hard place is the inability of practical theology to reach any sustained measure of internal self-criticism. Evangelism as a topic of inquiry falls within both systematic and practical theology. Within systematic theology it falls within the domain of ecclesiology; it is central to any comprehensive analysis of the mission and task of the church. Within practical theology, it has a space all to itself, although practical theology is in such conceptual disarray that this does not count for much.¹ Given the ambivalent status of evangelism as a subject of inquiry within theology, evangelism as a ministry of the church can become everything and anything. The challenge is to mesh these two concerns into one coherent enterprise. The task is this: we need to spell out an account of evangelism which will be both serviceable in the actual practice of ministry and viable in its own right theologically. Beyond that, such an account must be suitably informed by historical considerations and true to the richness of the Christian gospel. We need an analysis of evangelism which will be at once historically grounded, theologically credible, and practically apt.

Despite the conceptual confusion and fog in the field, the last twenty years or so have seen an astonishing birthing of interest in evangelism. As part of this development, most mainline churches have become greatly enamored of church growth, due in part to the fact that this permits its leaders to set aside the hard theological questions which have to be faced. In Evangelical circles Christians in this tradition have for almost a century seen themselves as the sole owners of evangelism, so much so that many find it difficult to distinguish between evangelism and evangelicalism.² For the most part Evangelicals have construed evangelism as essentially the proclamation of the gospel to unbelievers. In fact church growth and proclamation constitute the two major visions of evangelism currency available to us. Converting people to God, making disciples, and

saving souls, make up the relevant minority reports. In what follows I shall argue that we need to construe evangelism as a polymorphous ministry directed to initiating people into the kingdom of God.

I

Evangelism is a peculiarly Christian concept. It does not arise naturally in non-Christian contexts, although, of course, it can be stretched for usage in other religious traditions. Even in the Christian tradition it has had a very unstable usage down through the ages.³ The seeds for evangelistic activity are very clearly rooted in the earlier Jewish tradition. Yet the early Christians had no developed theory of evangelism. Moreover, there was something of a division of the house when it came to evangelistic practice. Evangelism clearly took place within the Jewish circles that originally gave birth to Christianity, but the shift into Gentile circles was accompanied by deep reluctance and enormous tension. The picture of the early Christians marching out to evangelize the Roman empire in order to fulfill the great commission is a myth. It took determined leadership by figures like Stephen and Paul to carry the day on the issue. The apostle Peter, if Luke is right, needed nothing less than a special divine revelation to convert him to evangelistic work among the Gentiles.⁴ This whole story has yet to be adequately unraveled historically.

The language used to talk about evangelism is of limited value. Clearly the central verb used to cover the activity of evangelism, *euangelizomai*, is best translated by our verb, 'proclaim'.⁵ Hence "to evangelize" basically meant the proclaiming of the good news of the gospel. Much has been made of this in the last century or so. Christians from very diverse backgrounds have argued that this provides sufficient warrant for construing evangelism today as proclamation.⁶ This only succeeds, however, if the exclusive warrant for envisioning evangelism rests on biblical word studies, and if the only relevant terms related for evangelism focus on proclamation. Neither of these assumptions can be sustained. The first does not hold because it is not at all clear that it is appropriate to derive a vision of evangelism merely from verbal considerations related to the etymology of 'evangelism'. One suspects that even the early Christians would have been wary of this, for they were not intentionally developing a theory of evan-

gelism in their writings. The second assumption does not hold because, not only do we have references to evangelistic activity, we also learn of workers in evangelism, namely 'evangelists'. The best way to construe these workers is to see them as second generation apostles.⁷ They represent those who did similar work to the apostles, that is, proclaimed the gospel and established converts in the faith in Christian communities, but they were naturally distinguished from the apostles in that they did not have that unique relationship to the risen Lord which was central to the work of the twelve and Paul. If we focus on this evidence, then it would be very misleading to restrict the work of evangelism in the early church to the activity of proclamation.

This is confirmed by the later history of evangelism across the centuries, even though that history is far from uniform. It is clear that in the patristic period evangelism included the formation of Christians; it was not confined merely to proclamation. This is borne out by the actual work of evangelists when they traveled into new territory.⁸ It is also confirmed by the extensive use of individual and corporate spiritual direction focused on the incorporation of converts into the church and into the life of faith. Especially interesting with respect to corporate spiritual direction is the development of the catechumenate. Considerable care was taken to ensure that seekers really knew the gospel for themselves and to see that they were well grounded in the basic content and practices of the faith. This was a slow process, but it was absolutely essential if commitment was to be substantial and long-lasting. Not surprisingly, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire this delicate component in the work of evangelism became eroded. It was well nigh impossible for the Church to cope with the hordes of uninstructed pagans who were shepherded *en masse* into the faith.

Even then, one can still see vestiges of this dimension of evangelism in the medieval period in the work to convert the heathen tribes of northern Europe. It would have been totally impractical and spiritually dangerous to restrict the work of evangelism to proclamation. It was absolutely essential that converts be baptized and minimally established in the faith. Exactly the same is true for the great burst of missionary activity which arose in the nineteenth century. With all its faults, this constitutes a brilliant episode in the history of evangelism; it bears ample testimony to the need to see evangelism as including the early phases of Christian initiation.

The missing link between the medieval and modern period is, of course, the Reformation and its

aftermath. The Reformers had next to no interest in evangelism. Either they believed that this work was purely the responsibility of the first apostles, or they held that it had already been done. Either way, the center of attention lay in the reforming of the church from its varied corruptions. In the western church it was the Roman Catholics and Pietists who first came to see that confining the work of evangelism to antiquity was both unbiblical and unrealistic. The debt we owe to the Pietists in recovering the ministry of evangelism in the modern period is incalculable. A crucial conduit for their approach to evangelism is visible in the life and work of John Wesley, one of the greatest evangelists in the history of the church. The Moravians helped Wesley to find a deep assurance of his own salvation and then provided him with both the stimulus and the initial model to work out the kind of evangelistic ministry which would be effective in his day and generation. What is especially significant is the creativity displayed by Wesley and his co-workers. He reluctantly launched forth into field preaching and carefully experimented with various sorts of small groups until he found a way to form the kind of Christian disciples who would act as salt and light in the world. All this was done, on the one hand, out of a deep theological appropriation of biblical and patristic sources, and on the other hand, out of a deep humility which forced him to depend constantly on the daily inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Wesley's legacy in evangelism was ambivalent in the extreme. His anthropocentric focus and his tendency to depend rather naively on the narrow epistemologies of the Enlightenment left many of his later followers and admirers unprotected from the acids of modernity. One wing reduced his rich contribution to a focus on social action which is currently embodied in various schemes for social liberation. Influenced by Marxist suspicions of piety, there is virtually no interest in evangelism in this domain.⁹ The more conservative wing of Wesley's followers developed his legacy into various schemes for revival. Initially these kept intact the Wesleyan impulse to reform of the nation, but this did not last; in time, it gave birth to the tumultuous Pentecostal and Charismatic movements which are only now receiving the historical and theological attention they deserve. The net result has been that evangelism has lost its moorings. It has been disconnected both intellectually and institutionally from the life of the church with disastrous results all around. Evangelism has been reduced to forms of social action among liberals and reduced to manipulative schemes of conversion among conservatives. To be sure, this is ex-

aggerated and oversimplified, but the work of binding up the wounds of our fathers and mothers in evangelism has scarcely begun.

The last decade or so has seen the beginnings of a really deep conversation. The origins of this are manifold. The collapse of Christendom in Europe, the intellectual and social failure of Communism, the internal disintegration of the Enlightenment obsession with science and epistemology, the burgeoning experiments in ecclesial renewal represented by the Charismatic movement, the surprising emergence of post-Christian forms of religion from within Christianity, all these and more have created space for a serious debate about evangelism. As yet the points of convergence are few and far between. It is clear, for example, that evangelism must attend to the arrival of the kingdom of God as absolutely constitutive of the gospel. It is also clear that evangelism is constitutive of apostolic identity. Any church which fails to reckon with this has missed a crucial component of apostolic Christianity, whatever else it may claim about its apostolic pedigree. Beyond that, it is obvious that serious renewal in evangelism will entail extensive conversation on deeply contested theological and practical issues. It will also entail a fresh encounter with the gospel embodied in the rich canonical traditions of the church.

II

Any such encounter is likely to yield the following platitude: whatever the gospel is, it centers on the inauguration of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead. Hence the gospel is not first and foremost about a network of moral injunctions, nor about this or that kind of religious experience, nor about the arrival of the church, nor about some scheme of political liberation, nor about some magic formula to gain health and wealth, nor about a quick and easy way to find celestial fire-insurance. It is constituted by those extraordinary events in and through Jesus of Nazareth through which God acted in history by his Holy Spirit to establish his rule in the world.

We owe this rediscovery to a revolutionary shift in New Testament studies brought about by Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer. Not surprisingly, it has taken time to assimilate what the arrival of the kingdom means. Materially, Weiss and Schweitzer have not been the best of guides in this complex territory. We have stumbled through the various texts on the kingdom, lurching now to purely futuristic conceptions of the kingdom which have failed to material-

ize, and then to purely realized visions of the kingdom which dissolve any future dimension into a timeless, Platonic eternity. In the end we cannot avoid a contested historical and theological judgment. The claim of the Church is that God has come to us uniquely to establish his rule in and through Jesus Christ; what began there by the work of the Holy Spirit continues in the world today through the work of that same Spirit; in God's own time, that work will be brought to a fitting consummation. This is the heart of the gospel.¹⁰

To construe the gospel in this fashion in the contemporary situation is to invite immediate challenge about its viability in the modern world. This is entirely natural, for Christians are deeply divided on both the content of the faith and on the norms to which we should appeal to settle disputes about its credibility. Christians, in other words, are in conflict about the status of their primary narrative.

On one end of the spectrum are those who consider this classical rendering of the gospel narrative as strictly incomprehensible to the modern unbeliever. Contemporary proclamation of this narrative, therefore, requires its translation into the idiom of a favored philosophical tradition, such as, say, existentialism or process metaphysics. This became something of a theological orthodoxy in the post-war generation.¹¹ Failure to reach agreement on the chosen philosophical idiom has undermined much of the enthusiasm for this option. It is also clear that this option owes much to a ready acceptance of crucial epistemological constraints imposed by the leading philosophers of the Enlightenment.

It has also been rapidly supplanted among the cultural elites of the Christian tradition by a very different way of construing the incomprehensibility of the narrative. I refer, of course, to the tendency to interpret the account of the gospel outlined above as the product of patriarchal and hierarchical social forces which mask the intention to enslave and oppress. In this hermeneutical trajectory, the general strategy is to derive certain minimal moral concerns in the gospel stones and then construct from these a new narrative of political liberation.¹² It is clear that this option owes much to the political aspirations of the Enlightenment in both its liberal and socialist forms.

Others see in both these options an inevitable reduction of the gospel to suit the intellectual requirements and unredeemed prejudices of the outsider. In fact neither of these options can allow the gospel to be heard in all its radical particularity, beauty, and challenge. They are tone deaf to its richness. In both instances, the gospel is suffocated by attractive in-

tellectual and political visions which are held as beyond intellectual challenge. These visions are threatened at their foundations by the gospel, that is, by eschatological events and actions which cannot be accommodated within the webs of conceivability and credibility out of which they are woven. Few theologians have seen this more clearly than the early Karl Barth, although figures as far apart as Soren Kierkegaard and John Henry Newman in the nineteenth century expressed this same insight with astute brilliance. In turn the latter are the inspiration for two very different ways of resolving the difficulty before us. Both accept that the gospel narrative will appear on the surface to be incomprehensible or incredible to many moderns. The divergence arises from the different strategies deployed to deal with this.

One strategy is simply to accept that the gospel is absurd, given the standard canons of Enlightenment epistemologies. The gospel, however, has its own sources and norm. It is derived and founded on divine revelation. On this analysis the evangelist is called to present faithfully the good news of the kingdom, leaving it to God to supply such additional witness as is needed to bring conviction and conversion. Epistemological theories and systems are simply set aside as secondary or irrelevant.

Not surprisingly, it has been difficult to hold this line indefinitely. Thus Barth's disciples have been driven in one way or another to provide some kind of backing for this posture at the level of critical reflection and epistemology. Others in the neighborhood of this tradition have taken the more radical course of developing a whole system of Reformed epistemology in order to undercut the Enlightenment critique of the gospel. Currently philosophers like Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff are developing a brilliant network of epistemic proposals which at once make sense of the faith of the ordinary believer and equally provide a deep defence of the content of the classical Christian tradition.¹³ The evangelist, on this analysis, is set free to preach and teach the gospel without first having to provide foundations constructed by this or that philosophy.

The other strategy currently being explored goes in a different direction. It begins, like the first strategy, by acknowledging that the gospel cannot be defended on the kind of ground staked out by the Enlightenment. The gospel narrative is indeed absurd when judged by the canons of rationalism and empiricism; Hume is essentially right about this. However, the problem lies not in the gospel but in the narrow conception of reason and experience embodied in the norms of its critics, like Hume and

his followers. Once these have been replaced by more appropriate canons of evaluation, then the Christian theologian is liberated both to teach the full wealth of Christian conviction and to offer a positive account of its epistemic status. Basil Mitchell, Richard Swinburne, Diogenes Allen, and William Alston have developed various proposals along this line.¹⁴ In this case the work of the evangelist is aided and abetted by sophisticated work in positive apologetics.

The crucial divide for evangelism lies not between those who favor a fideist, or a reliabilist, or an evidentialist, or a Reformed approach to the justification of religious belief. The deep issue is whether the Christian Church does or does not have genuine and substantial good news of salvation for the world that can stand in deep continuity with its canonical traditions. Paul's warnings to the Galatians about the substituting of another gospel from that handed over in the tradition are especially pertinent at this juncture.¹⁵ Modern revisionist and radical forms of the Christian tradition since Schleiermacher have generally failed on this count. Moreover, evangelism in any shape or form has rarely survived, not to speak of flourished, on this kind of soil for long.

The crucial schism in the church from this perspective stems, then, not from the break between East and West, nor in the break within the West between Roman Catholic and Protestant, but in the break at the Enlightenment represented by Schleiermacher. It is this third schism which is decisive.¹⁶ In fact, the future of evangelism in the West may well depend on whether the deep wounds sustained from within and which strike at the very core of the gospel narrative itself can ever be healed. In my judgment the future lies in the hands of those who can reach across the divisions of the last millennium and retrieve with integrity the extraordinary narrative bequeathed in the canonical traditions of the early ecumenical traditions. Even though this is not the general consensus which one encounters in much academic theology nor the line one hears from the more visible leadership of the mainline churches, the prospects for this happening now are much greater than they were a generation ago. This is in part made possible by the fact that a deep defense for the gospel narrative can now be mounted at an intellectual and philosophical level which would have been unthinkable thirty years ago. The gospel narrative is a credible narrative¹⁷

III

Staking out the essentials of the gospel narrative, however, is a necessary but not sufficient condition

of arriving at a viable conception of evangelism. We now need to think through the connection between evangelism and the evangel. How are the two to be linked? If the gospel centers on the arrival of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ, how are we to construe the relation between evangelism and the kingdom of God? This is a pivotal matter.

The favored position for some time has been to insist that the natural connection is through some kind of speech act. Thus evangelism has again and again been construed as the proclamation of the gospel. In some cases this has been extended to include teaching the gospel or persuading someone to believe the gospel. In other cases it has been expanded to the proclamation of the gospel in word and deed.¹⁸ In this instance it becomes natural for the actions of the church, say, in education, medical work, social action, and the like, to be construed every bit as much as evangelism as does the verbal proclamation of the gospel. Moreover, it is surely this conception of evangelism that lies behind the enormous efforts currently being made to evangelize the world through radio and television. The warrant for the widely held conviction that the world can be evangelized through television is the claim that communication is of the essence of evangelism. Evangelism is just the verbal proclamation of the gospel; hence in our situation the obvious tool for this is television.¹⁹

We have already seen that the attempt to base this on purely etymological considerations is precarious in the extreme. However, even if the argument about the origins of the term 'evangelism' were to hold, that is, even if 'evangelize' originally meant simply to 'proclaim', this would not settle the matter. We also have to ask if this is the best way to construe evangelism in our situation today. We must explore how far it is appropriate to consider evangelism in these terms in our context. In my judgment it is imperative that we enrich our conception of evangelism to the point where we move beyond mere proclamation to include within it the initial grounding of all believers in the kingdom of God. If we make this shift, then, in fact, we actually come much closer to what evangelists, ancient and modern, have actually done, but, even then, the argument is not advanced on purely historical grounds. The primary considerations circle around the needs of our current situation in our modern western culture. Here I shall be brief and make three points, one negative and two more positive.

First, continuing to think of evangelism in terms of mere proclamation fosters the practice of disconnecting evangelism from the life of the local church. It nurtures the illusion that evangelism can be done

by the religious entrepreneur who can simply take to the road and engage in this crucial ministry without accountability to the body of Christ. To be sure, there are lots of local churches who welcome this kind of evangelism. It allows them to ignore evangelism entirely as a constitutive element in the mission of the church, for it can hand this responsibility to the itinerating evangelist, or it can keep evangelism to those seasons of the year in which it focuses on the proclamation of the gospel. However, this is not the really deep problem here. The deep problem is that this way of construing evangelism has generally been used to cut evangelism loose from the life of the Christian community precisely because the responsibility of the evangelist has stopped once the proclamation has ceased. On this analysis, the evangelist need not belong to a church; indeed if he does not like the church in which he was brought to faith, he can invent his own on the spot. Nor need the evangelist be accountable to the canonical traditions of the church; indeed if she does not like the canonical narrative of the gospel, then she can invent her own narrative at will. Nor need the evangelist take any responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the seeker or convert; this can be conveniently left to others, say, in the field of Christian education. In all, restricting evangelism to proclamation helps keep intact unhealthy evangelistic practices which should long ago have been abandoned. In a culture mesmerised by the power of the mass media, the church must recognise both the radical limits and the dangers of proclamation in our current situation.

Secondly, restricting evangelism in this manner cannot do the job that needs to be done in an increasingly pluralist and post-Christian culture. Evangelism needs to be expanded to include the early phases of Christian initiation. The gospel must be handed over in such a way that those who receive it may be able to own it for themselves in a deep way and have some sense of what they are embracing. Proclamation is but one part of the process which will make this possible. It will also require teaching and persuasion, spiritual direction, an introduction to the spiritual disciplines and the sacraments of the gospel, initiation into the basics of the Christian moral and doctrinal tradition, some orientation on the kinds of religious experiences which may accompany entry into the kingdom of God, and the like. Without these the new believer will not be able to survive spiritually, morally, or intellectually in the modern world. In short, an evangelistic church will take responsibility for the initial formation of Christian disciples as an integral component of its evangelism.

Thirdly, the wisdom of this strategy is borne out by a very significant recent study of spiritual development in England. In that study careful attention was given to about five hundred people who had come to faith in recent years. The most pertinent piece of information to the issue in hand is that the majority of people studied came to faith over a relatively lengthy period of time.

The gradual process is the way in which the majority of people discover God and the average time taken is about four years: models of evangelism which can help people along the pathway are needed.²⁰

Most “up-front” methods of evangelizing assume that the person will make a sudden decision to follow Christ. They may be asked to indicate this by raising a hand, making their confession, taking a booklet or whatever is the preferred method of the evangelist. The fact is that most people come to God much more gradually. Methods of evangelism which fit this pattern are urgently needed. The nurture group and the catechumenate are the best known at present, but others may need to be devised. The use of one-to-one conversations akin to some form of spiritual direction may be one possibility. Another may be a series of church services where people are introduced to the Christian faith over a period of time and given opportunity to respond at each stage. Even more urgently needed are means of helping non-churchgoers to discover God outside the church building in ways which enable a gradual response.²¹

A useful way to capture this vision of evangelism is to construe evangelism as directed fundamentally toward initiation into the kingdom of God. Achieving this will require both the activity of proclamation and the work of catechesis. More comprehensively we might say that the ministry of evangelism will include effective evangelistic preaching, the active gossiping of the gospel in appropriate ways by all Christians everywhere, and the intentional grounding of new converts in the basics of the Christian faith.²² This in fact comes close to what evangelism looked like in the early church.

In order to forestall possible misunderstanding, note that this proposal assumes that no evangelism is possible without the concurrent activity of the Holy Spirit. It also insists that evangelism must be

rooted and grounded in the life of the local Christian congregation. Finally, it expects that evangelism will naturally result in the growth of local churches, but this is neither the goal nor focus of the ministry *per se*. The focus is the coming of God’s kingdom in Jesus Christ and the goal is to see people grounded in that kingdom here and now. In short, evangelism is simply the initial formation of genuine disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

IV

In conclusion it is worth reflecting briefly on the implications of our argument for recent discussions about the mission of the church. For almost a century there has been a noisy debate about how to conceive of the overall task of the church. Much of the energy spent on this had been devoted to the relative merits of evangelism, conceived as the verbal proclamation of the gospel, over against social action. The basic assumption has been that mission will consist exclusively of either gospel proclamation, or social action, or some combination of the two in which one will be weighed as of equal or of inferior status to the other.²³ Those who stress the importance of proclamation invariably point out that in the divine scheme of things eternal salvation must necessarily be construed as more important than temporal affairs; those who stress social action invariably stress the radical importance of God’s deep involvement in Christ in the temporal scheme of things.

Independent observers of this debate must surely wonder if this way of framing the issue begins to do justice to the richness of God’s involvement in the world. For example, it trades on a strange silence about God’s care for the natural order. Caring for the good creation God has given us cannot be subsumed under either proclamation or social action, yet this is surely an important task of the church in the modern world. Moreover, it is surely unduly restrictive to reduce the many things the church is called to do to proclamation and social action. It does not begin to touch the wider responsibility of the church to shape the whole tenor of a culture, something which cannot be limited to mere social action. Nor does it touch on the many responsibilities that the church must shoulder in the ongoing training, education, and nurture of its members. Worse still, this debate is silent on a simple and primary task of the church in rendering adequate praise and worship to the living God. Is not our first response to the gospel to gather together and celebrate all the wondrous things that God has done in the inauguration of his kingdom in our midst? Is not this a pri-

mary task of the church? And would not taking it seriously heal us of our moralistic ego-centrism in both our evangelism and our social action?

This is not the place to resolve the issues these comments and questions raise. My point is more modest. The pertinent problem to identify is that this debate leaves out a crucial missing link between proclamation and social action. It assumes that new believers can move naturally from hearing the gospel to social action. This is psychological and spiritual nonsense. A concrete example will make this clear. I began my ministry in a housing estate in Belfast which at that time had the worst murder rate in Western Europe. Terrorism, then as now, was clearly one of the most serious social problems we encountered. In these circumstances to construe the mission of the church exclusively in terms of proclamation and social action sounds initially attractive, but it would have been cruel in the extreme to accept this option. It omits the crucial need for adequate grounding in the faith. Certainly we can ask no less than that the new convert or believer pray for the coming of the kingdom of God here on earth as it is in heaven. An important principle then applies: the more we ask of the convert in social action, the more we must grapple with providing those intellectual, moral, and spiritual resources which will make possible such discipleship. My argument here is that evangelism should be so envisioned as to make this an integral part of its meaning. This deep shift in perspective, were it to be adopted and implemented, would render obsolete the natural tendency to see evangelism and social action as somehow at odds or in competition with one another. It might also open up fresh ways to construe the wider and manifold mission of the church.

Finally, it permits us to see why social action is indeed an integral part of the overall mission of the church. Faithfulness to the gospel entails a deep acceptance of the kingdom of God now and in the future. For the individual this clearly means that he or she have the chance to start all over again, to be “born again from above,” to be baptised, to be initiated into the church, and the like. Entry into the kingdom has its own inimitable grammar and content for the individual. However, the coming of the kingdom has also got its own unique blessings and challenges for society as a whole. Nineteenth century revivalists and twentieth century liberals were absolutely right to insist on this and grapple with what this meant for the social and political issues of the day. Anyone who takes the kingdom of God seriously must do so. In short anyone who takes the gospel seriously must do so. So thinking of evangelism in the way

proposed here will not only drive the church to get ahead with such actions as proclamation and initial catechesis, it will also drive us all to welcome God’s merciful justice to roll across all of creation, society, and human history. ♦

William J. Abraham is the McCreless Professor of Evangelism and Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Southern Methodist University’s Perkins School of Theology. This was a talk given to the Society of Christian Philosophers in April of 1994.

1 For an account of the place of evangelism in theology as a whole see my “Athens, Aldersgate, and SMU: The Place of Evangelism in the Theological Encyclopedia,” in *Journal for the Academy of Evangelism in Theological Education* XL (1990), pp. 64-75.

2 Thus speaking of Evangelicals in the Church of England in the eighteenth century, the distinguished French historian, Henri Daniel-Rops, writes: “The movement was called Evangelism, and it subsequently exercised a very real influence.” See his *The Church in the Eighteenth Century*, trans. by John Warrington (New York: Doubleday, 1960), p. 226.

3 For an older but still useful overview of the history of evangelism see K. S. Latourette, “Pre-nineteenth Century Evangelism: Its Outstanding Characteristics,” and “Distinctive Features of the Protestant Missionary Methods Of The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in The International Missionary Council, *Evangelism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 1-31.

4 Acts 10.

5 David Barret provides an exhaustive account of the history of the concept in his *Evangelize! A Historical Survey of the Concept* (Birmingham, Ala: New Hope, 1987). He begins by trying to restrict evangelism to proclamation, but in the end fails to sustain this analysis.

6 Especially noteworthy is David Lowes Watson, “The Church as Journalist: Evangelism in the Context of the Local Church in the United States,” *International Review of Missions* 72 (1983), pp. 56-74.

7 See Alastair Campbell, “Do the Work of an Evangelist,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 64 (1992), pp. 117-129.

8 Eusebius is an important witness to this. See *Ecclesiastical History*, 5. 10. 2.

9 James Cone’s comment is especially interesting: “Black theology must counsel blacks to beware of the Wesley brothers and their concern for personal salvation, the “warm heart” and all the rest. What blacks do not need are warm hearts. Our attention must be elsewhere - political, social, and economic freedom!” See *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), p. 206. For an exception to this general observation see John W. De Gruchy, “No Other Gospel Is Liberation Theology a Reduction of the Gospel?” in Christian D. Kettler and Todd H. Speidel, eds., *Incarnational Ministry: The Presence of Christ in Church, Family, and Society* (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1990), pp. 176-190.

10 I have argued for this account of the gospel in *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), chap. 2.

11 I am confining my observations to the scene in North America. English theologians, given a characteristically more practical turn of mind, seem more content to settle for some kind of moralistic theism. For a recent example of see David Jenkins, "Evangelization and Culture," *Theology* 94 (1991), pp. 5-10.

12 Influential examples of this can be found in Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk, Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983) and James Cone, *op cit.*. For an especially insightful evaluation of these kinds of proposals see Ellen Charry, "Literature as Scripture: Privileged Reading in Current Religious Reflection," *Soundings* 54(1991), pp. 65-99. For my own analysis of the issues see "The State of Christian Theology in North America," *The Great Ideas Today* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1991), pp. 242-286.

13 For a useful overview see Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990). The first two volumes of a three volume work in this domain by Alvin Plantinga are available in *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford, 1993), and *Warrant And Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

14 See Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), and William Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithica Cornell University Press, 1992). This material is the tip of a deep iceberg which is only now beginning to have an impact on systematic theology. Also worth noting is Caroline Franks Davis, *The*

Evidential Value of Religious Experience (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

15 Gal. 1: 6-9.

16 I owe this way of expressing the matter to Dr. Andrew Walker in private conversation.

17 For my own contribution to this debate see *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Englewoods Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1985), and "Cumulative Case Arguments for Christian Theism," in William J. Abraham and Steven W. Holtzer, *The Rationality of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 17-38.

18 For example the influential missiologist David J. Bosch writes, "It (evangelism) consists in word *and* deed, proclamation *and* presence, explanation *and* example." See his "Evangelism: Theological Currents and Cross-currents," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (1987), pp. 101, emphasis as in original.

19 For a splendid analysis of so-called television evangelism, see Steve Bruce *Pray TV Televangelism in America* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

20 John Finney, *Finding Faith Today. How does it Happen?* (Swindon: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1992), p. 25.

21 *Idem.*. Finney's suggestions also fit the data that Thomas Albin has gleaned from the diaries of early Methodists. On Albin's analysis, it took on average about two years for early Methodists to move from showing interest in the gospel to where they had a measure of assurance for themselves. Some took up to four years. See his proposed Ph.D. dissertation to be submitted to the University of Cambridge.

22 For an expanded account of this proposal see *The Logic of Evangelism*, chap. 8.

23 For a convenient summary see Bosch, *op. cit.*

©1994 by William J. Abraham
Reprinted by permission of the author.