

“A THEOLOGY OF COLLABORATIVE EVANGELIZATION”

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Evangelization is the Gospel in action as God the Evangelist works through the Church to reconcile fallen humanity to himself. Insofar as this is centered in God’s redemptive intention and activity, evangelism is inescapably theological. While methodological considerations are necessary in evangelistic strategizing, these must be subservient to—and ultimately judged by its fidelity to—a biblical and theological understanding of evangelism. This essay seeks to paint in broad strokes a portrait of such a theology of evangelism, and in the process indicate how the element of collaboration is integral to its meaning.

We will begin by (1) attempting a definition of evangelism that is grounded in the eschatological reality of the Kingdom of God. The inaugurated but not yet consummated Kingdom serves as the backdrop for our deliberations. We will then move (2) to articulate a theology of collaborative evangelization that is anchored in the Trinity, the nature of the Church and the Gospel, and the work of the Spirit in the world. We shall argue that the task of evangelization, when appraised theologically, is a corporate undertaking that is grounded in the *koinonia* of the people of God. Collaboration between different expressions and members of Christ’s Body is integral to evangelism.

A: THE KINGDOM OF GOD AS THEOLOGICAL HORIZON FOR EVANGELISM

The word “evangelism” is derived from the root word, “evangel” or *euangelion*, meaning “joyous news” or “gospel.” In the Greco-Roman world, *euangelion* referred to the announcing of victory or the expressing of gratitude for victory won. It was a joyous term used to celebrate the fulfillment of long awaited expectation. The early Christians appropriated this word to designate the nexus of redemptive accomplishments centered in Jesus, who began his ministry “proclaiming the *euangelion*” of the arrival of the Kingdom of God (Mk 1:14-15).

Since the establishment of God’s Kingdom on earth was central to the eschatological expectation of the Jews, Jesus’ announcement was no doubt understood as nothing less than the fulfillment of their long awaited hope. His healings and exorcisms were signs of the Kingdom (Lk 4:18-19; 11:20; Mt 11:4-6; 12:28), while his parabolic teachings signaled the presence of the Kingdom among his hearers, challenging them to respond to him in faith. In Christ we have “the presence of the future,” when the age to come has invaded this present age; in him the “last days” of prophetic expectation have arrived. The very designation of Jesus as the *Christ* (Mk 8:29) bespeaks an eschatological framework. Yet paradoxically, this Kingdom that has arrived remain a reality that awaits final realization in the future (Mt 8:11; Lk 13:28).¹

¹ The biblical materials on the Kingdom of God are comprehensively dealt with in G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) and George E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) and *Jesus and the Kingdom* (Waco: Word, 1964).

Eschatology is thus the hermeneutical key to unlock the significance of Jesus in the Gospels. The same eschatological tenure is discernible in the rest of the New Testament. Though the expression, “the kingdom of God” is rare outside the Gospels, the reality it points to is undeniably present in the other New Testament books. Acts’ account of the progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome begins and ends with references to the kingdom (1:6 & 28:31). Sandwiched between them is the account of the spread of the message of Christ, suggesting perhaps an underlying interpenetration between the concept of the Kingdom and Christ. Such an approach is true of Paul as well, for we find in his letters the language of the Kingdom being subsumed under the characteristic Pauline phrase, “in Christ.” In Paul’s theology, Christ represents the vanguard of a new humanity; to be “in Christ” is to enter into the new eschatological reality of the age to come.

The *euangelion* that Christ and the early Christians embodied and proclaimed is orientated to the eschatological Kingdom. As Abraham observes, eschatology is the theological horizon for evangelism.² Evangelism as the publishing of the good news of what God has done in Christ is an eschatological activity following in the trajectory emanating from the ministry of Jesus. It is at heart a theological activity undertaken by the Church in the “already-but-not-yet” period between the inauguration of the Kingdom at the Incarnation and its consummation at the Second Coming.

The establishment of God’s Kingdom on earth is nothing less than the putting down of all rebellion against God the King and the restoration of fallen creation, in par-

² William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

ticular the reconciliation of sinful humanity. This evangel entails the reversal of God's vandalized Shalom and the realization of his intention for creation. And God himself is the primary Evangelist in this *evangel*-istic mission of cosmic renewal. The Incarnation and all that Christ has set in motion signal the beginning of the realization of God's redemptive plan. And integral to the divine economy of salvation is the establishment of the Church as the embodiment of the Gospel and agent of the Kingdom.

It is against this backdrop of eschatological restoration that we understand the mission of the Church and derive our theological view of evangelism.³ Whichever way one looks at it, collaboration is a necessary feature common to both missions and evangelism. While missions represents the broader framework of all that the Church does in the world to fulfill God's Kingdom agenda, evangelism may be more narrowly defined as "that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time."⁴ Whether we are seeking to align society to God's revealed will, or point sinners to Christ, the Church is graciously given a part to play in the work of the Kingdom. Such an awesome responsibility can neither be undertaken without the cooperation of the different expressions of the Church, nor entered into without a sense of collaborative dependency upon the Holy Spirit.

³ Without entering into the debate as to whether, or how, one should differentiate between "mission" and "evangelism," we assume for our purposes that the two are inseparably linked, with the latter perhaps being narrower in its focus than the former. Cf. David J. Bosch's helpful discussion, "Evangelism: Theological Currents and Cross-currents Today," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11/3 (1987): 98-103.

⁴ *Logic*, 95.

While evangelism entails kerygmatic proclamation, it is not exhausted by it.⁵ Neither can it be restricted to the collaborative efforts at staging overtly evangelistic campaigns, e.g., where different churches join hands to mount a citywide evangelistic outreach. Though such undertakings are instantiations of collaborative evangelization, they do not however exhaust the meaning of ‘collaborative’ or ‘evangelization.’ Collaborating to fulfill God’s entrusted mission is not only a wise strategic move by the Church, it is a necessary implicate of a theological understanding of the church and its mission and/or evangelistic mandate.

B: COLLABORATION INTEGRAL TO A THEOLOGY OF EVANGELISM

1. The Triune Character of Evangelization

The trinitarian relationship within the Godhead informs our understanding of the nature of salvation, for the Trinity describes not only the inner relations within the Godhead but also characterizes the activity of God in the economy of salvation.⁶ Who God is, is invariably reflected in what he does; God’s work in history thus has a distinctly trinitarian character, for the Gospel as the actualization of his redemptive plan in history is the collaborative activity of Father, Son, and Spirit. Salvation begins in the loving heart of the Father, the Originator of the Evangel. The heart of the Evangel is Jesus the incarnate Son, through whose death and resurrection sin has been atoned and reconciliation

⁵ See Abraham’s critique of evangelism defined only in terms of proclamation, *Logic*, 40-69.

⁶ Following Karl Rahner, we maintain that there is no disjuncture between the immanent Trinity (God-in-himself) and the economic Trinity (God-for-us). The so-called Rahner’s Rule applies: “The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity.” Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 22.

achieved. And the redemptive effects of the Evangel are made efficacious by the Spirit, whose work it is to convict, convert, sanctify, and empower for life and service in the Body of Christ.

Arising from this divine plan of salvation is the calling forth of a people who together mirror the image of the Triune God in its ecclesial life,⁷ however distorted that reflection may be. The communion of divine persons within the Trinity thus finds an analogous correspondence in the ecclesial communion of believers. One might say that the coordinated convergence and confluence of the activities of the persons of the Godhead is paradigmatic for evangelism today. The way in which Father, Son, and Spirit work in concert to effect the reconciliation of the world, and the gracious and sovereign way in which God arranges all things to work together for the good of drawing sinners to himself, model for us a multi-pronged approach in evangelism that entails the confluence of variegated influences.

When different expressions of the one universal Church of Christ collaborate in proclaiming Christ, in inviting sinners to submit to his lordship, and in initiating them into the Church, they are evangelizing in a manner consonant with the *modus operandi* of the triune God.

2. The Church as Evangel and Evangelizing Agent

Just as there is unity in diversity within the Trinity, so the Church, despite its manifold expressions and ministries, is one body united in one Spirit, one Lord, and one

⁷ See Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 191-220; Ajith Fernando, "The Church: The Mirror of the Trinity," in William D. Taylor,

God and Father of all (Eph 4:4-6; cf. 1 Cor 12:4-6). This theme of unity comports with the high priestly prayer of Jesus that his disciples should be one (Jn 17:11, 21-23). In so doing they mirror the oneness between the Son and the Father. This similitude between disciples and master is also demonstrated in the love that Christians have for each other (Jn 14:34-35), which will have an impact on the world's perception of the reality of Christ.

How Christians relate in church has a direct bearing on its effectiveness in pointing to Christ. There is reciprocal impact between ecclesial life and evangelistic witness. When anointed and empowered by the Spirit, the Church becomes a sign of the Kingdom, a prototype of what life under the King is like. Despite its failings and ambiguous existence, the Church is to be a proleptic manifestation of the new transformed creation that is the Kingdom of God. It is not simply the messenger of the Gospel; it is at the same time the Gospel message itself. The Church is as much *evangel* as it is *evangelist*.

The Church may be described as “apostle to the world,”⁸ in the sense that its identity is inseparable from its mission. As God's missional agent, it is an integral part of the establishment of the Kingdom. When the Church lives up to its calling, it becomes the Gospel in action in history. The Church continues Christ's ministry. One cannot speak of Christ and the Gospel without at the same time speak about the Church and its mission.

ed., *Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 239f.

⁸ Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 110f.

Christology, ecclesiology, and missiology/evangelism are theologically intertwined.⁹

Without in any way dissolving Christ into the historicity of the earthly Church, one must affirm that any construal of the Gospel or Christology that does not take into account the present ministry of the living Christ through his Church is theologically inadequate.

The implications for ecclesial life and ministry are clear. The infightings, competitiveness, and parochialism that often mark relations among churches and organizations militate against a Kingdom mindset that sees all ministries converging ultimately at serving a common King and Kingdom. Paul's strictures against divisiveness at Corinth are needed today. What we do may differ—some plant the seed, others water it (1 Cor 3:6)—but ultimately it is God who gives the increase, and ultimately it is the cause of God's Kingdom that is served. We therefore need to celebrate the diversity of spiritual gifts and deploy them synergistically to serve God's redemptive agenda.

Collaboration assumes that not everyone in Christ's Body is the same, and it is precisely because they are different that makes collaboration in ministry necessary and possible. This diversity extends also to the structures in which Christians serve. Contributions to the work of the Kingdom come from all quarters of the Church. No single congregation or organization has all the spiritual gifts. Rather, they are distributed and manifested over a range of modality and sodality structures, i.e., local churches and Christian agencies. While all Christians are committed to serving the Kingdom, they do so through

⁹ See Darrell L. Guder's missionary theology, *Be My Witnesses: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messengers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), e.g., 3-17; and C. Norman Kraus, *The Authentic Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 20f.

different channels and structures. Some serve in churches, while others do so through church-related agencies that carry out specialized ministries.

3. The Communion of Saints and Evangelism as Initiation into the Kingdom

Collaborative evangelization finds support theologically from the communion of saints. The Church comprises more than just the sum of Christians across the world at any given time; it includes those who have gone before and those who come after as well. The Church must be understood both synchronically and diachronically, the former in the sense that all believers alive at a given point in time across the world are part of the Church, and the latter in the sense that membership in Christ's Church transcends time so that our spiritual forebears are as much part of the Church as we are. Collaboration in evangelism needs to come to terms with both these aspects.

We do the work of Kingdom-evangelization today standing on the shoulders of others in the Body who have gone before us. One may speak of intergenerational collaboration in ministry. Our spiritual ancestors laid foundations that we are currently building upon. There is a sense in which the spiritual gifts that God released through the lives of our spiritual ancestors continue to operate across time and space, and contribute to building up the Church today.

Furthermore, the fact that Christians are scattered and thoroughly enmeshed within society means that there is greater contact, accessibility, and opportunity for intersection with unbelievers. There are as many ways to share Christ as there are Christians and opportunities. People are different; and there is no single evangelistic approach that is universally appealing or effective. To reach the unreached peoples of the world, we need

a plethora of approaches and the full participation of Christians everywhere. We need all kinds of Christians to reach all kinds of non-Christians. Our differences—ethnic, cultural, gender, academic, ecclesial, theological, experiential, etc.—enable us to connect with our vastly diverse world in ways that would otherwise be impossible if we were monolithic and uniform.

Salvation means being saved not only *from* sin and judgment, but also *for* the new eschatological life of God in the here and now. Whether it designates the process of transition from darkness to light, or progressive spiritual maturity, or involvement in God's ministry, evangelism is necessarily a corporate undertaking. There is reciprocity between evangelism and the *koinonia* of God's people, such that evangelism comes out of the common life of the congregation, and is in turn directed towards the building up and strengthening of Christian *koinonia*.

Evangelism as initiation into the Kingdom is a multi-faceted undertaking that includes among other things helping disciples grow spiritually, appropriate the intellectual claims of the Gospel, inculcate spiritual disciplines, nurture a distinctly Christian worldview and moral vision, develop spiritual gifts, etc. In all these, input from a host of differently gifted believers are needed. No single Christian or group can claim to do all these without the assistance of others within the larger Body, e.g., Bible translators, biblical scholars, theologians, thinkers, missiologists, anthropologists, artists, communicators, etc. To initiate people into the Kingdom, we need the collaboration of many in the Church today, including the contributions of many from Church history whose legacy continues to nourish and inform our life and ministry today.

4. The Evangelizing Spirit at Work in the World

The Spirit of God is not only alive in the Church; he is also at work in the world. Just as the Spirit hovers over the primordial chaos at the dawn of creation, so the Spirit is at work today, pointing to Christ and effecting the new creation that is the Kingdom of God. The Spirit actualizes the Evangel, and he does so through the agency of the Church. If the Church were to act as agent of God's Kingdom, it must do so in partnership with the Spirit, working in dependency upon his empowerment and direction. This too is another facet of a theology of collaborative evangelization.

A Kingdom perspective on evangelization not only calls for greater collaboration between members of Christ's Church, but also points the Church to look beyond itself to discern what the Spirit of God is doing in the world at large. Evangelism from this standpoint entails a readiness to engage the world, to seek the welfare of the city, to endorse, encourage, and even join hands with forces in society that safeguard human dignity, uphold social justice, combat poverty, care for the sick and marginalized, promote reconciliation, work for the common good, and other activities that are consonant with biblical Shalom.¹⁰ At the risk of fudging the line between missions and evangelism, we maintain that such 'worldly' involvements are not only a necessary part of Christian discipleship, but also critical to the building of a credibility platform from which we share Christ. They are expressions of the Evangel; and they pave the way for the commending of the Gospel.

¹⁰ Without digressing to consider whether or how we might collaborate with people who are not believers, we affirm with Scripture that the sovereign Lord is free to use even people who do not acknowledge him. Cyrus the pagan monarch of Persia was called the "anointed" by the Lord (Isa 45:1) insofar as he facilitated the postexilic return of the Jews, so non-Christians can be instruments in God's hand to fulfill his agenda.

The backdrop for a theological understanding of evangelism is the arrival of the Kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus. Evangelization comes out of the meaning of the ‘evangel,’ which entails the continuation of the ministry of Jesus through the Church whom God has graciously appointed as the agent of the Kingdom. This evangelistic mandate is, we maintain, a necessarily collaborative undertaking on account of its grounding in a theology of the Trinity, the Church, its mission, and the Spirit’s work in the world.
