

1-1-1990

## Evangelism on Our Knees: The View from Acts

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### Recommended Citation

Ash, Tony (1990) "Evangelism on Our Knees: The View from Acts," *Leaven*: Vol. 1: Iss. 4, Article 4.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol1/iss4/4>

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# Evangelism On Our Knee



## The View From Acts



A continuing struggle in my pilgrimage with Christ has been the subject of evangelism. For over 40 years I have experienced an inner tension, and my conversations with others convince me many people have the same spiritual turmoil. Perhaps a sharing of my difficulties will be helpful to others.

On the one side I have experienced a strong aversion to so much that is connected with evangelistic efforts in the church. Even some of the language, like “soul winning” and “bringing people to Jesus” stirs negative reactions within me. I am disturbed by what I perceive to be “high pressure” efforts to convert people. Many of the techniques commonly employed in evangelism seem to be distasteful, or ineffective, or simply (for me) impossible. At the same time, when I hear stirring exhortations to reach the lost, I feel a tremendous sense of guilt. We are sometimes urged to participate in a particular mode of evangelism when it is implied that if it is not done that way, then it is not done as God wishes. I find myself resisting, and even resenting such appeals.

I do not claim to be right in all these attitudes. But these are honest feelings, and I share them for others who may wish an advocate for their own reactions.

After what may seem a negative beginning, I wish to focus on the other side of my psychological dilemma. I am unreservedly in favor of evangelism. It must be done! I am deeply concerned about a church which seems, in many places, to have lost its evangelistic

fervor.

My deep commitment is based on two factors. The first is biblical. The entire Bible is the story of God’s mission to humanity. Take that away, and nothing is left. God made man, and calls man to be what he has made him to be. This explains promises, kingdom, Christ, and church. All are expressions of the divine passion that wishes humans to find meaning in the One who made them. Scripture is written to record God’s quest for mankind. The call to evangelism is the human replication (though considerably muted) of that God-initiated urgency.

The second factor explaining my concerns is personal. I am the product of evangelism. I did not grow up in the bosom of the church, though I recall having felt religious stirrings from an early age. When I was in my final year of high school, a Christian friend took the initiative of love and brought me into contact with the church. In that fellowship, after half a year, I made my confession and was baptized into Christ. That decision has changed my whole life, both in terms of career and of life perspective. I cannot now imagine living without Christ. Nor can I imagine what my life would have been had I not met him. I frequently ask myself how many others in the world (and around me) are waiting, as I was, for the right word and encouragement to stir them to a decision. If a friend of mine had not been evangelistic, my whole life would have been different. I am obviously extremely grateful for evangelism, and convinced of its importance.

Readers who find themselves in a dilemma similar to mine will appreciate the fact that for 40 years I have been troubled by conflicting feelings, including a mixture of concern for the lost, certain aversions, guilt, a critical spirit, and joy.

All of this has led me to ask one question again and again. “Why are we not doing evangelism?” Per-

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haps that is too broad. My real question might be "Why am I not doing evangelism?" One response to my self criticism might be that I have done it but not in the way many brethren tell me it ought to be done. Perhaps this is true.

There are, however, other reasons, discovered in my own inner self, as well as by talking to other Christians. Without pretending to be exhaustive, a list might include the following:

- 1) Shyness, introversion, feelings of inferiority. Along with this might go fear of ridicule ("some kind of religious nut"), or the fear of failure at something which matters so much (perhaps God will hold me responsible for not converting so and so).
- 2) Reticence or pure rejection of many of the methods popularly used and advertised in the church.
- 3) A sense of revulsion at the "manipulation by guilt" techniques sometimes used to stir people to evangelism.
- 4) A lack of interest in whether people are saved or lost.
- 5) The sense that God's love is so great that he will not condemn anyone, so why exert ourselves.

These all deserve comment, even extended discussion. Here I simply mention them. I want to offer another reason, and use it as a springboard for the rest of this discussion:

- 6) In my opinion many people feel, but few speak, of a conviction that the evangelistic message of our fathers and grandfathers is no longer one with which they are comfortable. More, they feel it is an unbiblical emphasis and approach. I speak of the message that centers more in the identity of the true church than in a decision to follow Christ. It is the approach which is more concerned to encourage people to abandon what is perceived as error and to lead them to accept a view of church that is perceived as true. In connection

with this perspective, much "evangelism" was directed to other believers in Christ, encouraging them to come out of sectarianism and into the truth.

***In my opinion many people feel, but few speak, of a conviction that the evangelistic message of our fathers and grandfathers is no longer one with which they are comfortable.***

These above words could engender considerable discussion. Suffice it to say that those who object to the "old" approach would argue that they are deeply con-

cerned to be biblical and to search for the truth. The argument is not with the ideals but with the specific conclusions of past days.

Our concern here, however, is not to argue this issue but to move on to biblical evidence. We have selected the book of Acts as our source. As numerous sermons have correctly pointed out, Acts is the evangelistic book **par excellence** of the New Testament. Here are recorded the cases of conversion. Thus, it is to Acts that we go to answer two questions. First, to what did the early Christians convert people? Second, what was the secret of their evangelistic zeal?

### **The Message of the Early Church**

The book of Acts is filled with sermons of varying lengths, as well as by numerous references to preaching. For any who may care to examine the evidence, the texts include the following:

Longer sermons: 2:14-36, 38-40; 3:11-26 (both from Peter); 7:1-53 (Stephen's defense); 10:34-43 (Peter to the house of Cornelius); 13:16-41 (the first recorded sermon of Paul); 17:22-31 (Paul to a pagan audience in Athens); 20:18-35 (an "inside" sermon by Paul to the Ephesian elders); 22:3-21; and 26:2-23 (Paul's defenses).

Shorter speeches: 4:9-12 (Peter to the Jewish leaders); 5:28-32 (Peter before the Sanhedrin); and 14:15-18 (Paul in Lystra).

References to preaching: 4:31 ("spoke the word of God"); 5:42 ("teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ"); 8:5 ("proclaimed the Christ"), 12 ("good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ"); 9:20 ("proclaimed Jesus, saying 'He is the Son of God'"); 17:3 ("it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ'"); 19:8 ("arguing and pleading about the kingdom of God"); 20:21 ("repentance to God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ"); 24:25 ("justice and self-control and future judgment"); and 28:23 ("testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of

Moses and from the prophets”).

An often quoted analysis by C. H. Dodd has found four elements in the preaching of the primitive church. They are the announcement that the age of fulfillment has arrived; a rehearsal of aspects of the life, ministry, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus; citations of Old Testament prophecies; and a call to repentance. All of these can be documented from the above list, though not every element is present in every sermon.

References to the age of fulfillment and to Old Testament texts were not used to “prove” the truthfulness of the Christian claim. Rather, they were to establish the continuity of Christianity with the history of Israel. When Luke wrote the book of Acts, the separation between Christians and Jews was, in many places, quite pronounced. Yet Luke makes it clear that the separation did not cut Christianity away from the Old Testament story. Rather, the history of Israel was the church's history. Those who accepted Jesus as Messiah were the true Israel. In addition, Old Testament references to the “predicted” suffering and resurrection of the Christ had the effect of removing the scandal of crucifixion. To die in such a way was regarded as shameful and humiliating in the extreme. Who would follow a person who died in such disgrace? Preachers of Christ removed the onus by showing that crucifixion, rather than being a shameful thing, was a part of the plan of God. Thus, shame was turned to glory by God himself.

The call to repentance was a consequence of the message about Christ. And the central reality proclaimed about Christ was his resurrection. Had he not been raised, there would have been no church and no New Testament. The resurrection continued the story of Jesus and vindicated him as the one approved by God. Study the sermons in Acts, and the centrality of the resurrection becomes clear. References to the Holy Spirit, so abundant in Acts (over 50 occurrences), argue for the resurrection, since it was the raised and ascended Jesus who poured out the Spirit upon the church (2:33).

The preaching in Acts involves many variables. There are differences in circumstances, audiences addressed, and preachers. But there are also invariables: Christ and his resurrection. Without these the message would not have been the gospel. The form of this announcement might have been accompanied by multiplied scripture citations or by only one basic text or only by allusions and references to scripture. But the central core remained.

What conclusion are we to draw from this material? Certainly it is that those who want to preach the gospel, the message of the church from the beginning, must preach Christ. This does not mean preaching about some other biblical subject and calling it the preaching of Christ. It does—mean bringing every cate-

gory and subject into contact with the person and teachings of Jesus. How are we to interpret morals, worship, or the church in the light of Jesus and his resurrection? Salvation is in Jesus (Acts 4:12), not in a technically correct view of some aspect of Christian doctrine. It is obviously important to believe what is true rather than believing error. But the center is Jesus.

To return to an earlier point, it is the conviction of many in today's church that when much preaching of the last several decades is compared to the biblical message that there are significant divergences. Thus, in evangelism, if a person feels that the church expects him to communicate a traditional message but is also convinced that it is not biblical, the result is often a cessation of any evangelistic effort. To put it bluntly, some would say “People expect me to convert others to the true church, but I don't think that is what the early Christians found important.”

A further consequence of this dilemma has to do with the identification of prospective converts. Those who find the traditional message unbiblical do not think their basic call is to convert believers from other communions. Rather, they see their task as winning those in the world away from the Evil One and to Christ. But since that is often not the prevailing

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expectation of the church, they again find themselves frustrated, and give up all efforts at evangelism.

### **The Motivating Power of the Early Church**

Preachers and hearers alike are aware of the various ways attempts are made to motivate Christians to evangelistic concern and activity. Frequently, the result of these techniques is to produce guilt. The pain of guilt then can lead to avoidance, and evangelism is not done. There are also personal objections that many feel to the popularly advertised methods of evangelism. These objections can also be translated into evangelistic malaise.

What do we find in Acts? How was the church motivated and empowered to the task which they performed so successfully? What can we learn to help us

today?

First, we assume it can be argued without objection that response to the impact of Jesus was powerful motivation. One can hardly imagine the early disciples being indifferent after exposure to the Lord. This may argue that the modern church has allowed the impact of Jesus to dim. And this may be due to lack of focus on Jesus in preaching.

But there is more to be discovered from Acts. Consider the following evidence:

Acts 1:8. Disciples, who has been personally trained by Jesus, were to witness, but not until they had received the power of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 4:8. Peter, speaking powerfully to the Jewish leaders about the healing of a lame man by the name of Jesus, did so as a man "full of the Holy Spirit."

Acts 4:24–31. The early church, mandated by the Jewish leaders to silence about Jesus, responded by praying to God. Their prayer was answered by a filling with the Spirit, leading them to preach the word with boldness, despite the threat against them.

Acts 6:3, 5, 10; 7:51, 55. Stephen, who preached so courageously, even in the face of death, is repeatedly described as a man of the Spirit.

Acts 8:29, 39. Philip was led by the Spirit to his meeting with the Ethiopian eunuch. When the eunuch had become a follower of the Lord, the Spirit caught Philip away.

Acts 10: 2, 4, 9, 19, 30. In the story of the conversion of Cornelius, frequent references occur to the presence of prayer and to the leading of God's Spirit.

Acts 13 :2, 4. As the church in Antioch of Syria sent Barnabas and Saul on the first mission tour, it was done in the context and empowering of prayer and the Spirit.

Acts 16:6, 7. By prohibitions, the Spirit so guided Paul that he made his way to Troas, and the European mission began.

Acts 19:21. Though interpreters differ, many regard this as indicating that the Holy Spirit led Paul to his decision to go to Rome.

From this evidence, we can conclude that evangelism in the early church was motivated and empowered by God. The church prayed, and God answered. The Spirit of God is frequently found mentioned in Acts in connection with the mission of the church. Acts is not the story of what men did by themselves. It is a story of what God did, through men. Further, many of these men were those who had previously been seen as weak and as failures (cf. Peter's denial of Jesus with his courage in Acts 4:8-12).

But God took weak human vessels, and by his power brought strength out of weakness.

Here we have what I consider a very important insight. Too often calls to evangelism overlook the most important element: the empowering of God. We are asked to operate in our own power. When we find that we lack that power, we become frustrated and guilt ridden. We are called to run before we have learned to walk, or to walk before we have even crawled.

Thus, we need to return to the proper starting place for evangelism. We need to go to our knees, admitting our weaknesses and failures, and petitioning God for his strength. This activity may be very painful. We may have to admit that we have not really cared about the lost, or that we were afraid, or that we have made foolish mistakes. Of course God knew all this, but it may be wrenching for us to make the admissions.

Having acknowledged our weaknesses, we then appeal to God for his resources. We can be sure that God has a burning desire that his creatures come to him. He would use us to reap that harvest. And, surely, he will empower us to accomplish his will.

This does not mean that any one of us can do anything. We will still have our shortcomings, and we may realize that some tasks are impossible for us. But who of us can know what God might do in any of our lives? One of the greatest wrongs we could commit would be to assume that certain things are impossible for us before praying God to use us as fully as it is possible for us to be used.

We pray, then, that God will give us boldness or a loving spirit or wisdom. We ask him to open doors for evangelism (cf. Col. 4:2–4). The results may be surprising. We may be led to some places we did not expect to go; into some interviews we might never have anticipated; into some friendships never previously conceived. We may find ourselves God's chief agents in leading people to the fullness of life only found in Christ.

Certainly we can now pursue evangelism free of the guilt and conflict that may once have characterized us. The job is no longer our responsibility alone, but it is God's work. We simply offer ourselves to him. He will place us where he wishes to use us, and he will give us the resources we need. This is a great relief, for now "soul winning" becomes a divine achievement, not a human burden.

Will each of us? will the church? make a commitment to a continual regimen of prayer that God will use us to further his mission of calling men to him? Only eternity will see the results of this resolve.