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The Wholeness of Evangelism

A Bible Study Guide

by Alfred C. Krass

In the last issue we printed excerpts from "Mission and Evangelism—An Ecumenical Affirmation," a text produced by the World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in 1980. One of the challenges of such statements is to figure out how to use them. Both for that reason, and because the study is valuable in its own right, we offer a set of Bible studies developed as a companion piece to an earlier document, the "Policy Statement on Evangelism," adopted by the National Council of Churches in 1976. These eight studies, appearing here and in the next three issues, deal with four dimensions of evangelism: personal, social, communal, and public.

There are a variety of settings in which these studies might be appropriate: small groups of seminarians (TSF-related or otherwise), courses on evangelism, adult education. We have found the time guidelines to be helpful. They are arranged to provide a 90-minute study, and can help a group avoid getting stuck on the first question. And here we would pass along two of the suggestions offered in the introduction (not printed here). First, strive to make the discussion groups ecumenical, i.e., crossing denominational, cultural, social, age and gender lines. Second, plan adequate time for prayer. And let us know here in Madison what happens. —editors

Commitment to Jesus Christ Is a Personal Event A

"Commitment to Jesus Christ," the Policy Statement says, "is a *personal* event." It goes on to describe it: "By the power of the Holy Spirit sinners experience the divine forgiveness and commit themselves to live obediently to Christ the living Lord."

A second paragraph elaborates on what obedience to Christ will mean: "Commitment to Jesus Christ means to embrace more completely in our *personal* lives the new way of life which God's grace initiates, manifesting the Spirit's fruit of love, joy, peace, goodness, meekness, gentleness, and self-control."

In speaking so clearly of the church's mandate to engage in personal evangelism, the National Council departed from a tendency of recent years—apparent both within the Council and in most of its member communions—to minimize the personal dimension of evangelism, and to speak primarily of evangelism's other dimensions. A self-critique was involved in this. The denominational representatives on the Evangelism Working Group had to confess that, "The churches still seem strangely bound by a reluctance to name the Name of Jesus as Lord and Savior. . . . There is a great need . . . to recover the ability . . . to bear witness to that Name in word and deed."

That will mean speaking to persons, to individuals, about God's forgiveness in Christ and about his call to persons to commit themselves to live obediently to Christ. The Statement does not wince at referring to people as "sinners," nor at saying that "the power of the Holy Spirit" is necessary to bring people to live a new life. It affirms that Christ is not merely an historical figure, but "a living Lord." Persons must, through the power of the Holy Spirit, enter into living relationship with him in order to come to new life.

SESSION ONE

Text: Acts 2:36-47

Other references you may wish to consult in this session and the next: Jn. 15, Gal. 5:16-26, Col. 3:1-17

At the time of writing, Alfred Krass was a consultant to the Evangelism Working Group. He is currently involved in neighborhood ministry in Philadelphia, and contributes a regular column on urban mission to The Other Side. Studies ©National Council of Churches, reprinted by permission. The entire policy statement may be obtained from the NCC, 475 Riverside Drive, New York 10027.

Preliminary discussion questions (20-30 minutes)

1. How do you respond to the term "sinner"? Do you conceive of evangelism as being addressed to sinners in need of forgiveness?
2. What does "the power of the Holy Spirit" mean to you? Do those who engage in evangelism need to depend on the Spirit's working? In what way? Are there forms of evangelism which seem to you *not* to show such dependence?
3. Have the churches of your community been "strangely bound by a reluctance to name the Name of Jesus as Lord and Savior?"

Study of the Text: Acts 2:36-47 (60 minutes)

The Pentecost story is probably familiar to most of the people in your group. For our study we have therefore chosen only its ending—the effect of the sign worked by the Spirit, and Peter's interpretation of it, on the hearers, and what happened as a result.

The text begins with Peter's summary of his message (v. 36). It immediately goes on to describe the people's response (v. 37), and Peter's answer to their question (vv. 38-40).

1. To whom was Peter speaking?
2. Into which category does what Peter says about Jesus in v. 36 fall: (a) religious doctrine, (b) current events, or (c) philosophical affirmation? What does it mean to preach good *news*?
3. What are the titles Peter applies to Jesus? Do you know the linguistic origin of these words? What does each mean? Do we use these words in everyday speech in America today? How could we translate them into current parlance?
4. Can we say to people today what Peter said to the people of Israel: "You crucified Jesus"? *If so*, in what sense? *If not*, what is the sin people commit today concerning their response to Jesus? Or is it wrong for us to accuse people of guilt with respect to Jesus? Would it be desirable for us to take a more positive approach?
5. Why were the people "deeply troubled" or "cut to the heart"? What led them to affirm their guilt? What leads people to do this today—"hellfire and brimstone" preaching? Compassion and sensitivity?
6. In what sense must people today be saved from God's punishment? Do they stand in mortal danger? Or did that apply only to the people of Peter's day?

We learn in v. 41 that 3000 people were baptized on the Day of Pentecost.

7. What did that baptism mean?
8. Would your church practice allow you to baptize people so quickly? What does baptism mean in your communion? What requirement should be met before it is administered? Are we correct in adopting substantially different baptismal practices from the early church?

Vv. 42-47 give us a description of what followed upon the baptism.

9. List the steps which the new believers took in their new life in Christ. What were the characteristics of this life?
10. How many of these are permanent characteristics of the life of all Christian communities? Which do you feel characterized only the early period of church history and need not characterize our church life today?
11. How can people today "learn from the apostles"? Is continuous Christian education a part of the life of all the members of your church today, or do the churches limit Christian education mainly to the time before one joins the church?
12. Can a person be a solitary Christian?
13. Why does Luke add the comment in v. 47 about the growth of the church to his description of the early Christians' communal life (he could have placed it elsewhere)? Is there some relationship?

14. In this story was evangelism carried out by word alone, or were the deeds and lifestyle of the believers also evangelistic?

Summary questions (10 minutes)

A. If this story speaks, as we have maintained, of personal evangelism, what can we infer about personal evangelism from it? Look back at Preliminary questions 1 & 2. Has any new light been shed on them?

B. Do you think the story supports what is said about personal evangelism in the Policy Statement? Are there aspects of the story which go beyond personal evangelism?

Prayer

SESSION TWO

Text: 2 Corinthians 5:17-6:3

Preliminary discussion questions (20 minutes)

1. How does Jesus Christ relate to people?
2. Have you seen persons come to new life when they have committed themselves to him?

Study of the Text: Corinthians 5:17-6:3 (60 minutes)

In Chapters 3-6 Paul is speaking of his work as an apostle. Most of what he says can be applied to those who engage in evangelism as well. We have chosen just a few verses of this section, in which Paul speaks of what happens to people who have become joined to Christ—how their relationship to God changes—and how God uses apostles for his work (vv. 17-20). In v. 21 Paul also speaks of God's goal in his activity on behalf of humankind. In 6:1-3 he pleads with the Corinthians to accept God's grace.

1. As many people have pointed out, the expression "born-again Christian" is not found in the New Testament. The words translated

"born again" in some versions of John (as in Jn. 3:3) really mean "born from above." In our own day many people are suspicious of the claim that a person coming into relationship with Christ is totally transformed. What do verses 17-19 say to this question?

2. The Policy Statement says, "Growth in church membership and calling people to Christian discipleship are not necessarily the same." It speaks of people's coming to discipleship in terms of a "significant change of attitude or behavior." What do these verses say about that?

3. Who is the agent of human transformation? If such transformation does not take place in the process of evangelism, can evangelism be said to have taken place?

4. How can we become better ambassadors for Christ?

5. From v. 21, what would you conclude is the goal of evangelism? What does it mean for people to "share the righteousness of God"? Can you translate that into everyday speech? Is it an individual virtue or a social virtue? What synonyms does *righteousness* have? Do some translations use a different word?

6. In 6:1-3 Paul goes on to relate what he has been saying to salvation. Are people who are successfully evangelized saved thereby? From what? For what? What is the significance of the fact that Paul is addressing this appeal to Christians?

Summary questions (15 minutes)

A. Review preliminary discussion questions 1 and 2 and the preliminary questions from Session 1. Do you now have anything to add to them?

B. How well does what the Policy Statement says with respect to personal evangelism express what Paul says here?

Prayer

CHRISTIAN FORMATION

Fasting: Twentieth Century Style

by Richard J. Foster

The disciplined person is the one who can do what needs to be done when it needs to be done. Now I can take a basketball and I can get it into a basketball hoop—eventually, but I cannot take a basketball and get it into the basketball hoop when it needs to be gotten into the basketball hoop! You see, I am not a disciplined basketball player. This ability to have the power to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done is so crucial in all of life, but it is never more central than in the life of the spirit. It is this life that impregnates and dominates and infiltrates literally everything that we do.

My topic is "Fasting: Twentieth Century Style," but please to not turn that into another soul-killing law because there is a time to feast and there is a time to fast. It is the disciplined person who can feast when feasting is called for and fast when fasting is called for. In fact, the glutton and the extreme ascetic have exactly the same problem. They cannot live appropriately in life. They cannot do what needs to be done when it needs to be done.

In a world dominated by pizza temples and shrines to the golden arches, fasting seems out of place, out of step with the times. In fact, fasting has been in general disrepute in the church for a very long time. In my research I have not found a single full-length book written on the subject of fasting from 1861 to 1954, a period of nearly 100 years. What would account for such an almost total disregard of a discipline so frequently mentioned in Scripture and so ardently practiced by Christians throughout the centuries?

Two things, at least. First, there has been a reaction, and rightly so, to the excessive ascetic practices of the Middle Ages. Second,

there has developed a prevailing philosophy that literally dominates American culture, including American religious culture, that it is a positive virtue to satisfy virtually every human passion. We have developed this style into a theology today, buttressed with verses of Scripture. Whole churches have been created around the worship of these little tin gods of affluence and good feelings. If fasting is used at all today, it is usually either to lose weight or for political pressure; that is, its function is either vanity or manipulation. Fasting as a Christian, spiritual discipline has had tough sledding in our day.

The list of biblical fasters runs like a Who's Who of Scripture: Abraham's servant when he was seeking a bride for Isaac, Moses on Mt. Sinai, Hannah when she prayed for a child, David on several occasions, Elijah after his victory over Jezebel, Ezra when he was mourning Israel's faithlessness, Nehemiah when he was preparing the trip back to Israel, Esther when God's people were threatened with extermination, Daniel on numerous occasions, the people of Ninevah (including the cattle—involuntarily, no doubt), Jesus when he began his public ministry, Paul at the point of his conversion, the Christians at Antioch when they sent off Paul and Barnabas on their mission endeavor, Paul and others when they appointed elders in all of the churches, and on and on it goes.

Not only that, but many of the great Christians throughout church history have fasted: Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, Charles Finney and many, many others.

Of course fasting has not been confined to the Christian faith. Zoroaster fasted, as did Confucius and the Yogas of India. Plato, Socrates, Aristotle—they all fasted. Now the fact that these people both in and out of Scripture fasted does not make it right or even a good thing to do, but it ought to stop us long enough to take another look.

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