

The Biblical Basis of Need-orientated Evangelism

‘I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.’ (John 4:35 & 36)

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The principles of need-orientated evangelism run right the way through the Bible, from Moses to Malachi and from the Gospels to the messages to the Seven Churches in the book of Revelation. The basic principle which we see used by both the prophets and Jesus is that of ‘beginning where people are’. This means taking the contemporary situation in the nation or community, or an individual person’s life, and using that as the basis, or starting point, for communicating the word of God.

There is, however, an important difference between the method of the prophets and the practice of Jesus which we will examine in greater detail.

The Way of the Prophets

We find with the prophets that they used the contemporary situation in secular society directly as the means for communicating the word of God without actually meeting the specific physical needs of the people in the way that Jesus did. Their sincerity and compassion for the people is, however, not to be doubted and as such we may examine the way in which they met the needs of the people by challenging the underlying moral and spiritual cause of social malaise and then finding the opportunity for declaring the word of God.

The Spiritual Cause

Moses was regularly confronted by the grumbles of

the people during the years of wandering through the desert. He recognised that the real cause of discontent was not food and drinking water, but the spiritual condition of the people. He was constantly getting before God in intercession to save the nation from the wrath of God. Many times he used the misfortunes that had befallen the people to declare the word of God.

Early in the ministry of Isaiah he described the state of the nation: ‘Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being stripped by



foreigners right before you’ (Isaiah 1: 7). The prophet then identified the reason why this calamity had overtaken the people: ‘Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption; they have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the holy one of Israel and turned their backs on him’ (1: 4).

Having diagnosed what was wrong in the nation and identified this as the reason why catastrophe had overtaken his generation,

Isaiah used this as the means for declaring the word of the Lord ‘Hear, O heavens! Listen O earth! for the Lord has spoken; I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me’ (1: 2).

Two hundred years later, Haggai, the earliest of the post exilic prophets used a similar method but dealt with the physical condition of the people in a practical way. He identified the situation, ‘You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it’ (Haggai 1: 6).

The prophet identified the reason for the socio-economic plight of the people. He said it was because God had ‘called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces’ and also on the labour of the people’s hands. The reason why they had incurred the judgement of God instead of his blessing was because they coveted material

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possessions and neglected spiritual values. Upon returning from exile they had built themselves comfortable panelled houses while the house of God, the Temple, remained a ruin. Haggai called for a full scale community response, directing the people to go up into the mountains and bring down timber in order to rebuild the temple. It was only when this community project was completed that Haggai communicated the message of God to the people ‘I am with you’, declares the Lord’ (1: 13).

The Way of Jesus

Jesus used a similar method to that of the prophets but after identifying the needs of the people he took steps to meet those needs as well as conveying to them the word of God. When Jesus realised that the crowd that had followed him into the Galilean hills were without food and were in danger of fainting on the long walk back to their villages, he not only identified the problem but he also met the needs of the people in a practical way by feeding them. The disciples organised the people into groups and there can be little doubt that everyone soon knew the miraculous way in which Jesus had divided the small amount of food which was shared among so many. This provided a powerful setting for Jesus to convey his message concerning the kingdom of God.

Sensitivity to Needs

On another occasion people wanted to have their children blessed. When the disciples saw parents bringing their children to Jesus they regarded this as an unwarranted intrusion into Jesus’ ministry. They believed his mission to proclaim the kingdom was too important to be distracted by such trivialities. Jesus’ own attitude was in sharp contrast; he had time for people. His love for people and his concern for their personal needs are conveyed in numerous accounts of little incidents like this of blessing the children. Mark records that he used the occasion for teaching about the nature of the kingdom of God saying ‘I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it’ (Mark 10: 15).

Jesus’ sensitivity to the personal needs of the people around him is seen many times in the Gospel accounts of his ministry. His tender compassion in dealing with the woman who had been caught in an adulterous situation and who was being dragged by the

authorities to a place of summary execution shows the blend of mercy and justice that lies at the heart of the revelation of the divine nature in the teaching of Jesus. When the authorities failed to press their accusations, Jesus’ response was ‘neither do I condemn you, go now and leave your life of sin’ (John 8:11).

A further incident showing Jesus’ love for people and his capacity for entering fully into their personal circumstances to bring comfort and compassion is well illustrated in his dealing with the two sisters at Bethany following the death of their brother Lazarus. Despite the pressures of ministry and his own awareness that the opposition of the authorities was bringing him near to the point of climax and the end of his earthly life, Jesus nevertheless made time for a visit to the little family who had shown him such love and loyalty. He also used the occasion for the important pronouncement ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die’ (John 11: 25). This statement, set in the dramatic context of the raising of Lazarus from the tomb was a vivid illustration of the way in which Jesus met the personal needs of people while at the same time carrying out the main purpose of his ministry to declare the kingdom of God.

Responding to Needs

The ministry of Jesus is a powerful example of the effectiveness of need-orientated evangelism. Meeting the needs of people came naturally to him. It was not something which he did in order to court popularity or gain publicity. In fact, his usual practice was the opposite, to shun publicity by asking those whom he healed to keep quiet about it. There were, of course, occasions such as when Jesus restored the sight of Bartimaeus that the healing was very public. But there is never any indication in the gospels that Jesus went out of his way to perform spectacular miracles. The accounts are always restrained but the essential quality is that of Jesus responding to the needs of people around him and he did so for no other purpose than to help those in need.

Communicating the Message

The Gospel writers make it clear that the primary

purpose in the ministry of Jesus was to communicate the good news about the kingdom of God and the divine revelation of the nature and purposes of the Father of whom Jesus was himself the physical expression - 'anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14: 9). The Gospel narratives show Jesus in a hurry to communicate his message to as many people as possible. In going through the Galilee he doesn't stay long in any one town but pushes on from village to village in order to reach as many people as possible. But wherever he went he could not resist pausing to meet the needs of the people whom he encountered. Thus the practical aspect of his ministry in dealing with the condition of the people ran naturally alongside his main purpose of communicating his message.

Uniting the Two

Meeting the needs of people was paramount with Jesus and took precedence over tradition and conventional practice. In so doing he at no time lost sight of his primary purpose - that of conveying the message concerning the kingdom. But the two were never in conflict in Jesus' ministry. He loved people so he responded to their needs, but their physical needs were not the only ones he met. The people needed to hear the message of the Kingdom. Thus his teaching was as much a part of meeting the needs of the people as his healing miracles or practical help.

That is the essence of need-orientated evangelism. Meeting needs and conveying a message are not two distinct and separate parts. They are two elements in a holistic strategy. This is how they appear in the ministry of Jesus - as two elements integral to the whole.

An Illustration

Practical Communication - Jesus' Way

In Mark 3: 1-6 there is an incident which took place in a synagogue somewhere in the Galilee. It was the Sabbath and the authorities were watching Jesus closely to see if he would heal someone and thus expose himself to the charge of Sabbath breaking. Jesus confronted them with the question 'which is lawful on the Sabbath; to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?' Mark links this with the walk through the cornfields and the bold statement 'the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath' (Mark 2: 27). On this occasion Jesus had not allowed the religious convention of Sabbath observance to prevent his disciples from satisfying their hunger by eating corn plucked from alongside the path.

Identifying Real Needs

One of the unique features in the ministry of Jesus was that he did not simply respond to the expressed needs of the people. He had the ability to see beyond the outward circumstances to the real needs of the individual coming to him for ministry. A good example of this occurred in Capernaum in the early days of the Galilean ministry when the

crowds around the house where Jesus was staying were so great that some men who were attempting to bring a paralysed man to him were unable to get near. When eventually they lowered him through the roof Jesus' response was not to pray for healing or to make any reference to the man's physical condition. Instead he said 'Son, your sins are forgiven' (Mark 2: 5).

Clearly, Jesus had discerned some deep rooted spiritual problem with which it was necessary to deal before the man could be physically released. Again, Jesus used this incident for giving some important teaching and demonstrating the fact that in his own words 'the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' (2: 10). It was only after this statement, which was made in the context of a discussion with some of the teachers of the law, who were opposing Jesus that he finally said to the paralysed man 'Get up, take your mat and go home'.

Genuine Love and Concern

The compassion that motivated Jesus to meet the needs of those around him was his genuine love and concern for people. Each new situation, however, presented a unique opportunity for ministering to the spiritual needs, either of the individual who was the focus of his attention, or of the wider community, particularly the people who had gathered around him. In Jesus' ministry we see practical help and conveying a message, with moral or spiritual teaching, fully integrated.

The New Testament Church

The early church followed the example of Jesus. In the first recorded healing miracle after Pentecost when Peter and John healed a crippled man at the Temple gate called Beautiful they seized the opportunity for preaching the gospel. The man's excitement at his miraculous healing caused a large crowd of people to come running into Solomon's colonnade. Peter saw this as an opportunity to witness that it was by faith in the name of Jesus that this man had been healed. He used the incident to make his own witness that Jesus was the one who



God had promised to send through the testimony of the prophets. This led him to make the challenge 'Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord' (Acts 3:19).

This is a powerful example of need-orientated evangelism. Once again we see Peter doing just as Jesus had done; that is, responding to the needs of an individual purely out of compassion. Then, as this incident created a bridgehead with the community, he seized the opportunity for declaring his faith in Jesus. Peter not only made his personal witness, but he went on to use it as the basis for a challenge to faith in the lives of those who listened to his message.

Another Illustration

Meeting Real needs - Paul's Style?

Paul finding himself opposed by Elymas the sorcerer at the beginning of his ministry in Cyprus said that the man would be blinded for a time. When this happened it was seen by the proconsul as a compelling demonstration of the power of God which led him to pay careful attention to the message Paul and Barnabas were bringing with the result that he became a believer.

Paul would undoubtedly have argued that he was, in fact, meeting this man's real needs by speaking severely to him! Luke records that the man was not only heavily into the occult and divination but that he was using these counterfeit spiritual powers for deception in that he was also a false prophet. It was when Elymas interfered with Paul's ministry that the Apostle acted. The proconsul had shown interest in the message Paul was proclaiming and according to Acts 13: 8 Elymas not only opposed Paul and Barnabas but he 'tried to turn the proconsul from faith'. It was this that caused Paul to speak a word of judgement against the man.

Paul would also probably have reasoned that this was for the man's own good in that it was far better for him to experience a period of physical blindness during his life on earth rather than face eternal judgement for deceiving people and actually turning them away from the truth.

Need-orientated evangelism is responding to the needs of an individual purely out of compassion

Practical Ministry

The principles of need-orientated evangelism are firmly established in scripture and examples can be found from the time of Moses to the ministry and mission of the early church. In the examples that have been quoted the principle of responding to the needs of people was paramount. The meeting of those needs was not done for any ulterior motive but out of genuine concern for the people. Practical ministry, however, usually creates a bridgehead, or provides an opportunity for witness to the truth. Bridgeheads, of course, have to be crossed in order to be effective.

Practical Ministry

Jesus used the opportunities presented by a variety of incidents in his ministry for communicating the message which the Father had given him. His own testimony was that he only said and did what the Father told him to do and in the way that the Father directed. Jesus said 'I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it' (John 12: 49). He also testified that 'the Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he does' (John 5: 19 & 20).

From this we must conclude that need-orientated evangelism, which we see lay at the very heart of Jesus' ministry, came from the Father himself. Jesus' own testimony that he did nothing on his own initiative indicates that each part of his ministry and each incident that occurred were directed by the Father as Jesus listened to him and obeyed him even to his final declaration in the Garden of Gethsemane submitting his will to that of the Father. Responding to the needs of the people as an expression of the love of the Father and using it as God gives the opportunity for the declaration of the word of the Lord is a strategy of evangelism which the Father has given to us for use in every generation.

For Discussion:

- 1 Can you identify how the New Testament way differed from the Old Testament way? What does this teach us?
- 2 How do we avoid the dichotomy of 'good deeds' and 'evangelism'?
- 3 How important is to distinguish between 'felt needs' and 'real needs'?

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This is now the third part of a growing resource on need-orientated evangelism. Further sections will be published in future issues, so that you will have a complete and valuable resource on the subject.