

Evangelism and Apologetics

by Stephen C. Perks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of evangelism as a specific calling and apologetics as a requirement for all believers, highlighting the need to defend the faith intellectually.

Scripture: John 12:32, Acts 8:4, Ephesians 4:11, 2 Timothy 4:5, 1 Peter 3:15

Topics: "Evangelism", "Apologetics"

Description

Stephen C. Perks delivers a sermon emphasizing the importance of understanding the roles of evangelists and preachers in the church. He explains that evangelists bring the good news to the unconverted, while preachers teach the Christian faith systematically to believers. Perks highlights the need for evangelists to be specifically called and ordained, as seen in the examples of Philip and Timothy in the New Testament. He also stresses the significance of defending the faith, explaining that all believers are called to be prepared to give a reasoned argument in defense of their faith, challenging the misconception that Christianity is solely a matter of the heart.

Transcript

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers. (Eph. 4:11)

And we entered into the house of Philip the evangelist. (Act. 21:8)

But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. (2 Tim. 4:5)

They that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word. (Act. 8:4)

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear. (1 Peter 3:15)

The Greek word euangelizo means to bring good news, to announce or proclaim glad tidings. The euangelion is the glad tidings or good news announced, the gospel. A euangelistes, an evangelist, is the one who brings or proclaims the good news. This word group is contrasted in the New Testament with the kerusso word group: kerusso means to proclaim or preach, and kerugma, the substantive, is a proclamation. The kerux is the herald or preacher of the proclamation. In this latter word group the emphasis is much more on the official and formal nature of the message. A herald (kerux) was an official

messenger with authority to proclaim the message of kings, princes and magistrates etc.

The meaning and use of these word groups overlap considerably in the New Testament however. Thus in Matt. 4:23 we are told that Jesus was teaching in the synagogues and "preaching (kerusson) the gospel (euangelion) of the kingdom." Likewise Philip, who was an evangelist, is said to have "preached" (ekerussen) Christ to the Samaritans (Act. 8:5). It is not possible, therefore, to attach any great significance to these words with regard to the differing offices and roles of the preacher and the evangelist. There is undoubtedly a difference between the two, however, and this is established on the basis of Eph. 4:11.

Generally speaking the difference between the work of an evangelist and that of a preacher or teacher is understood in the following way: an evangelist is one who announces the good news, and thus who initially brings the message of salvation to those who are outside of the kingdom of God. The preacher or teacher is one who expounds the gospel or the word of God in its fulness, and thus who teaches the Christian faith systematically to the faithful. The difference is primarily one of office, however, not of method. The preacher's emphasis is on the systematic exposition of the Bible, though this certainly involves proclaiming good news to the congregation, and the emphasis of the evangelist is on proclaiming the gospel to the unconverted, which involves preaching or teaching the word of God.

I. The office of evangelist

In Ephesians 4:11-14 we are told that Christ has instituted certain ministries in His church for the equipping of His people for the work of service, and in order that the church might be built up and that we might grow in faith and in our understanding of the faith, so that the body of Christ might mature into the image of Christ. One of these ministries is that of the evangelist. The task of evangelism, therefore, is a specific calling to certain individuals. It is one of several offices which Christ has instituted for the work of the church and for its edification. It is not an office given to all, and hence evangelism is not a task or a duty to be shouldered by all believers. Some are called and ordained as evangelists, and they have this specific function within the church as such. Some are given this calling by God and the gifts to pursue it according to God's word. Some are called by God to do so and given the gifts, yet they may not be recognised or ordained by any institutionally organised church, but nevertheless they carry out their calling in obedience to God as He equips them and gives them opportunity. The point is simply that this is a calling and an office which is given to some and not to others. Not all Christians are called or obliged to engage in evangelism by the word of God.

Philip, we are told, was specifically called as an evangelist (Act. 21:8, 8:5). So also was Timothy (2 Tim. 4:5). It is clear, therefore, from the New Testament that evangelism is a task entrusted to certain people and the gifts and office of an evangelist limited to those people. The task of evangelism is not applicable to all Christians.

II. Evangelism in Acts chapter 8, vv. 1-4

In Acts 8:4 we are told that "they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word." The word translated preaching here is euangelizomenoi. Thus, when this persecution came the result was that those who were scattered by it went everywhere evangelising, or preaching the word. It should be observed here that the scripture does not say that all were required to go evangelising. Not all can do this, or are in a position to do it even if they had the ability and the desire. This incident represents, therefore, a special case of evangelistic activity at a crucial period in the life of the early church. It is not to be seen as

a normal situation or as an example or blueprint for a church evangelism programme. It was an unusual situation brought about by severe persecution. Of course, the ultimate purpose was from God; it was of His doing so that the gospel might be preached intensively over a larger area than would otherwise have happened. But this incident does not constitute a paradigm for normal evangelistic activity. It was a divinely ordained situation brought about by the disruption of normal life. These people were persecuted and scattered because of their adherence to the faith. There was thus a fundamental change in their lives. This was a time of great activity by God's Spirit and of revival (v. 6). This was a desperate time with a specific outpouring of the Holy Spirit for those times. In ordinary times these people would not have done this. They would have had jobs, responsibilities, duties etc., all of which it would have been right for them to tend to. It would have been irresponsible and wrong for them to uproot and leave their jobs and stations in life to engage in this kind of evangelism in normal circumstances. But these were abnormal circumstances created by God Himself for this specific purpose. These people were forced out of their normal stations and circumstances in life. They were not commanded by God to do this, it was the result of an abnormal situation brought about by the secret will of God.

It has been suggested that the word translated "preaching" in Acts 8:4 would be better translated as "gossiping." [2] The verse would then read as follows: "They that were scattered abroad went everywhere gossiping the word." This is a good interpretation in my opinion. It describes very well what happened at this time. Great persecution had come upon the people of God; they had been ejected from their homes and scattered around the country. All this was the result of the adversity of God's enemies against His people. But the outcome was to God's glory, for these people were scattered, and instead of crushing the church and ending the preaching of the gospel, which was clearly what the persecution was intended to do, the result was that the gospel was spread further afield. Thus God brought great glory out of great persecution of His people, for wherever they came they were telling people of what had happened to them because of their belief in Christ, how they had been persecuted, and many of them thrown into prison and even killed, and how they had escaped to tell the story and spread the good news about Jesus Christ to others.

Let me give you a contemporary illustration which might help to throw some light on this situation. If we lived in one of the Eastern Soviet Bloc countries which has just gone through a civil war, like Romania, things might be very similar. An oppressed people suddenly find themselves in the midst of great turmoil and social upheaval. There is an attempt by the people to throw off the shackles of state tyranny and obtain their freedom, but the forces loyal to the old regime are fighting back and life is disrupted to an unusual degree. Many have had their homes destroyed and their families killed, and hence life cannot continue as before. But the revolution is gaining power and the people are hopeful of victory. Such people would naturally be full of what was happening, talking about it, gossiping about the most recent events, and even in the midst of such tragedy and suffering there would be hope; and as victory drew near everyone involved would be spreading information and announcing the good news of impending victory wherever they went.

There are of course significant differences between this situation and that in Acts chapter 8. But in many respects the situation would be similar. The same gossiping about what had happened would take place just as it did in Acts. This is a result of human nature. The cause and the setting may be different, but human nature responds in the same way. But when the war is over life settles down to normality again. The unusual degree of excitement and gossiping of the news would stop. Ordinary people would have to get on with their ordinary jobs and everyday lives, of course in a new found freedom which doubtless

would make a great difference to their lives. But their lives must return to the normal everyday routine etc.

What I am saying is simply this: unusual circumstances throw ordinary people into unusual roles. And this is what happened in Acts. God brought great glory out of it. Indeed He planned it. But what happened was not the result of God's commanding His people to do certain things directly. These people were not commanded to go off evangelising. They were thrown into turmoil and great upheaval, and the unusual outburst and degree of evangelism and gossiping of the gospel was the natural outcome of this extraordinary situation. We cannot therefore use this passage as a text for teaching normal evangelistic activity. It is not a paradigm for church evangelistic programmes, for we cannot all up and leave our jobs, towns and responsibilities; it would be wrong and against God's word to do so in normal circumstances: "Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called" says the apostle (1 Cor. 7:20). This does not mean that we cannot change our occupations or professions when we become Christians, but simply that we must not do so merely as a result of becoming a Christian - unless of course to carry on with it would be a violation of God's law. Indeed God may call us to something different, even to a life of evangelism. But this may not be, and usually is not the case. We must not think that becoming a Christian means, therefore, that we must rashly set off on evangelistic missions etc. Evangelism is a specific calling, and if God is calling us to this office it will be made clear. In normal circumstances we are to carry on in the situation we are in when we become Christians. Becoming a Christian does not automatically make us evangelists, nor does it mean that we have a duty to engage in evangelism.

III. Defending the faith

However, all believers are called to be prepared to give a defence of their faith: "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear" (1 Pet. 3:15). The word here translated "reason" is apologia, and it means a verbal defence or a speech in defence. We are all thus required by scripture to be ready to give a reasonable argument in defence of our faith. From the Greek word apologia we get the English word apology, and also the word apologetics. Apologetics is the task of explaining and defending the faith, and it is a very important part of our Christian witness, for we are all required to be ready to do this to some degree.

This is a significant requirement of scripture, since if we are to give a reasonable defence of our faith we must first understand the faith. We must therefore begin growing in our knowledge and understanding of the word of God from the moment we become Christians if we are to be in a position to give an adequate defence of our faith to those who ask it of us.

It is a fact that in our churches and theological colleges today this biblical pattern of evangelism as a specific calling and apologetics or defending the faith as the calling of all believers has been overturned. And this is a problem that prevails in all denominations. Our colleges have stood the Bible on its head here - as indeed they have in many other things. In theological and Bible colleges apologetics is taught to pastors and ministerial students, and is seen as a course particularly relevant to their ministry, but not something with which the individual members of the congregations to which they will minister should be burdened. In other words, it is a specialist course for ministers. And at the same time, especially among evangelical churches and colleges, pastors are encouraged to train their congregations in evangelism and encourage their members to get involved in evangelism in some way. So we have church evangelism programmes geared to training members of churches for the task of evangelism, but hardly ever do we have apologetics programmes for training members of the congregation in defending the faith. Defending

the faith is seen as the job of the specialist, the minister perhaps, and evangelism the duty of every member of the congregation in some way.

Yet this is a complete reversal of the pattern set forth in scripture, where evangelism is a specific calling to certain individuals, and apologetics or defending the faith, the duty of all believers. So pastors train in apologetics at college, and then they leave college and train their congregations in evangelism, when they should rather be trained to teach the members of their congregations to defend the faith, and train for evangelism those with that particular calling.

There is probably no denomination, no college, or even church today, especially among evangelical churches, that has not reversed this biblical pattern. What is the result? Well, it's obvious: Christians do a fair bit of street evangelism and door knocking etc., especially the young and enthusiastic, but hardly ever do they engage in defending the faith biblically.

The interesting thing here is that many evangelicals who pride themselves on their evangelistic activities do not like nor engage in apologetics, in defending the faith. If one does engage in a reasonable defense of the faith one can be accused of being an "apologist" in the most condescending and disapproving manner, as if this were not a good thing. Indeed, defending the faith is seen by some as wrong because it is deemed to be an intellectual approach to the faith, and the faith, such people say, is not about the intellect but about the heart. But of course the Christian faith is about the intellect, just as much as it is about the heart or anything else. Man is a fallen, sinful creature; and his sin manifests itself in the whole of his being, in his intellect as well as in his heart or will (total depravity). And God has saved the whole man, not just the heart but the intellect also. Therefore the Christian faith speaks to and must be obeyed in our intellectual life just as much as in any other aspect of life; indeed, unless the mind is subject to Christ nothing else can be, for it is through our minds that we have access to the word of God which tells us how to obey God. Thus the apostle says: "be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Rom. 12:2 cf. Eph. 4:23). Yet we are told by some that Christianity is a religion of the heart, not of the head.

This is a totally false and unbiblical dichotomy. The Bible does not set the mind or the intellect over against the heart in this way. Biblically speaking, the heart and the mind are the same thing. Man is a unity and to speak of the mind of man, or of the heart of man, is simply to speak about the whole person in terms of one particular aspect of his being. It is exceedingly misleading, and can result in great error, to split man up into different compartments such as heart and mind and then talk about them as if they were different things, and as if a man's mind or intellect could be separated from his heart and thus from his religion.

Yet very often, it must be said, church leaders will discourage members of their congregations from engaging in apologetics. They will say, "Oh! don't get involved in arguing for the faith." Now why shouldn't they? The scriptures tell us to do this. We need to understand the biblical priorities here, and we need to reassess our priorities when they are not in line with scripture. The Bible commands us to be ready to argue for the faith, to give a reasoned speech or argument in defense of the faith.

Why then should pastors and evangelists discourage Christians from reasoning about the truth? Is it because they are frightened of revealing their utter ignorance about the Bible and about its teachings, an ignorance that is today so common among professional ministers and evangelists? Or is it because they are frightened of losing the argument, or of not being able to reason about their faith? Often this is the

case, but what kind of faith is at the back of such an attitude?

IV. Diagnosis of an evangelical phobia

The problem is that in many churches there is great activity with street evangelism and door knocking, but very little, if any, preparing of Christians to give a defence, a reasoned argument, for their faith. Furthermore, there has developed, especially among evangelicals, a definite phobia about reasoning for the faith.

There are three main reasons for this I believe: the first is that, as mentioned above, there is this wrong idea of Christianity as a heart religion as opposed to a head religion. It is considered "fleshly" to engage in an argument about the faith because this involves the intellect and the intellect is deemed to be in opposition to the "spirit." This kind of thinking is really an extreme form of pietism. It is a wrong understanding of what spirituality is. To be spiritual in the biblical sense involves most definitely the intellect. Our minds must be subject to Christ and engaged for his service. Indeed this is an aspect of the first commandment. We are to serve the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind (Mat. 22:37), in other words in the totality of our beings.

Those who discourage Christians from engaging in apologetics because they believe such reasoning to be of the flesh do not believe that the gospel is intellectually defensible. But of course it is. Furthermore, Christians need to understand that Christianity is the only intellectually defensible position there is, that there is only Christian truth, and that all that does not conform to that truth is in error.

If the gospel is not truth then why do we believe it? If it is truth then we may and should defend it intellectually. Does the Bible say that we should not defend the faith because it is not intellectually defensible? Of course not; the thought is preposterous. Yet many Christians seem to think that defending the faith is useless at best, and at worst wrong and "unspiritual." Indeed we are commanded to avoid foolish controversies (Tit. 3:9), but a reasoned argument in defense of the faith is not foolish, since scripture requires all believers to be ready offer such a defence.

The Bible tells us that all thoughts are to be brought into captivity to Jesus Christ. We are told that our Christian warfare is "destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). Is that the language of an apostle who thought that the gospel is intellectually indefensible? Never! Paul stood up at Athens to take on the whole of pagan philosophy, for he knew it was all foolishness and error (Rom. 1:21-22), and that only the Christian religion was intellectually as well as morally defensible. There is no aspect of life, no discipline, academic or otherwise, no area of thought or study where the truth of God's word is not authoritative and basic to a proper understanding of those areas, for God created the whole world and it can be understood properly only in terms of His creative purpose.

Second, however, street evangelism and door knocking etc. require much less work. It is far easier in many ways, but it looks good, and it gives the impression of great commitment. Of course street evangelism may signify great commitment, but it can also hide a lack of it. The trouble with most street evangelism is that it is all noise and not much substance. It requires very little real practising of the Christian faith. Indeed, at the least it requires merely the giving away of a tract.

Defending the faith, on the other hand, requires first of all an understanding of the faith, and this in turn requires growth and maturity in the faith. Such growth in the faith and in our understanding of the faith is

part of the process of sanctification. The apostle says "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13). God is sanctifying us, if we are truly Christians, and part of this sanctification is growth in the faith. But we are to work this out. We are not merely passive in our sanctification, but active in living out the faith. And part of this activity is growing in our knowledge of the faith (Eph. 4:13-15). Without growth there is no sanctification, and without sanctification there is no perseverance in the faith, and without perseverance there is no reality in our faith.

Thus we are all given the task of defending the faith, and defending the faith requires understanding the faith, and this requires growth both in our knowledge and understanding, and in our practice of the Christian religion. And this is an essential aspect of our sanctification.

Yet many Christians do not want to grow in their faith. They do not want to put work and effort into learning and growing in the faith. They would rather remain as children, spoon-fed on an effortless religion that requires nothing of them but promises everything in return.

Third, probably the main reason that so few are able to give a defence for their faith today is because the faith is not taught systematically by those who are called to the ministry and who therefore should teach it. There is great fuss about our experience of worship and what we can get out of being Christians today. And much that passes for preaching in the pulpits of the land is simply information on how one can get the most out of one's experience of God and of the church. But the faith is not taught and the Bible is not expounded sufficiently to give the Christian a proper grounding in his understanding of the Christian religion, and thus most Christians are not able to give a reason for the hope that is in them. They are not able to defend the faith because they do not understand the faith, they have not even begun to understand the faith - and this is so among the clergy and church leadership also. Indeed this is a principal reason why so few Christians are able to defend the faith. If the minister does not understand the faith how can he teach it to his congregation? So ignorance prevails and there is no defence of the faith.

Objection. But some will say "God does not need defending. The Christian faith does not need defending." Doubtless they see the need for a return to faith in Christ in our land. Many are in darkness and the need is for evangelism, so that these people can be made aware of their need and the remedy in Christ.

Answer. I do not doubt that this analysis of the situation is correct. God does not need defending and the people of this nation do indeed need to know about Christ and turn to Him in faith. But the word of God does not command all of us to go out evangelising, it requires us to give a defense of the faith to those who ask it of us. I suggest that obedience to God's word is the answer to the lack of faith in our society, not evangelism. I suggest that obedience to God's word in our priorities would be more beneficial both to the church and to the non-believers in our land. It may be that if the church were able and prepared to defend the faith when it is required - and there are far more opportunities for this than there are real opportunities for evangelism facing the average Christian - there would be less need for frantic evangelistic activities, since those with whom we come into contact at work and at home and in every aspect of our social lives would be given a reason for our faith in a more challenging way than having the gospel shoved down their throats at a street corner.

Let us never forget that the Christian is armed with the truth of God's word, and let us not forget that His word is truth (John 17:17). If truth is not intellectually defensible, if it cannot be reasoned for, then it cannot be much of a truth. It is pagan "wisdom" that is foolish and intellectually indefensible. Let us, therefore,

cease from this silly idea that the gospel is something that should not be reasoned or argued for, and let us step forth in the confidence that our God has spoken, that His word is truth, that truth alone can liberate (John 8:32), and let us therefore begin defending and reasoning for the faith once more.

V. Bearing witness to the faith

Now, it will be seen that being prepared to give a defence of the faith to those who ask as we go about our everyday lives requires far more of us than street evangelism or door knocking requires. It demands a greater degree of consistency in the practice of the Christian faith, for those to whom we speak are those who will observe and watch our lives, and thus our works will bear witness to our words. And these two together, our words and our works, will argue for each other. Thus by our fruits we shall be known to be true Christians. So, defending the faith is important, but it involves practising the faith also. With our words we defend the faith and by our consistent practice of the faith we bear witness to Jesus Christ and proclaim the Christian religion practically.

Thus, the fact that we are not all called to engage in evangelism does not mean that we are not all to proclaim the faith in some way. We are all called to proclaim the faith by the way we live, in word and deed. We are to proclaim Christ by subjecting our whole lives to His word, to His authority. This means that every aspect of our lives must be brought under His Lordship. By doing this we proclaim Jesus Christ and His salvation to those with whom we come into contact far more effectively than engaging in tract distribution, street evangelism etc. The Christian life is a total way of life which embraces all our activities and attitudes. Therefore when we meet others and work with them, or in whatever way we come into contact with them, they are meeting with Christ's people as they practise their religion, living as Christ's subjects according to His will. This is the most effective way of proclaiming Christ.

There are many who lay great stress on evangelism who do not understand the importance of this. I was told once by a senior tutor at a Bible college that Christians should be Theocrats in church life but democrats in their political life. So God is to be Lord of our church life, and in our personal moral behaviour perhaps also, but that is where His Lordship ends. When it comes to politics and public issues etc. the word of God does not feature. Democracy rules, i.e. the will of the people. Political expediency is to be our god then. Thus faith is perceived as having only a limited application to church and personal morality. And since we have to live in a world which consists of more than these areas, and since we have to engage in these other areas of life or else become hermits, Christ's Lordship is suspended in favour of some other authority by which we seek to understand and live our lives. The word of God is thus internalised and spiritualised away in order to keep it out of these "democratic" areas of life. This kind of thinking is typical of the shallow evangelicalism of our age. "Evangelise on the street corner but keep God out of politics" would be a good slogan for today's evangelical churches. Christianity is seen simply as a matter of being saved from hell and having a good church life.

But this is wrong. We are to proclaim Christ by the way we live in every sphere of activity and thought. This means that we must subject our vocations to His word. We must seek to understand how our chosen profession can be brought under His law and worked out according to His will. So also with our social lives, our economic lives, in our parental responsibilities, and in every other area of life. As we do this, as we reform every aspect of our life to His word, we shall proclaim the Lordship of Jesus Christ and we shall proclaim, by the way we live as Christ's subjects, the message of the gospel to those with whom we come into contact in the normal course and routine of life. Such a thorough reformation will transform our lives and our societies both in private and in public affairs.

So we must put Christ first in all things, which means obedience to His word, whilst at the same time being prepared to give a reason, or a defence, for the hope that is in us to those who ask. In this way, by positively building the kingdom of Christ in our own life, family, vocation etc., and by being prepared to defend the faith when it is required of us, we challenge the non-believing world much more thoroughly and radically.

Let me give you a practical illustration now of how this can happen in one particular area, that of parental responsibility, especially with regard to the provision of a godly education for our children. I believe that the state schooling system is already breaking down, and that in time the schools will become merely child minding centres for parents who refuse to shoulder their educational responsibilities, and in effect they will be on the whole little different from borstals. Their main purpose will simply be the task of restraining the vandals who attend from destroying the buildings and beating up the teachers. I believe that the faithfulness of Christians to God in their parental responsibilities will ultimately have a significance not only for their own children but also for the children of non-believers since they will set a standard, both in moral and academic training, for the education of future generations. As Christians start to apply themselves to this area of life, in the home schooling field and in the provision of private Christian schools, they will also claim the children of non-believers, since those non-believers who do care about their children's education will look for an alternative to the state schools, and they will turn increasingly to the only valid alternative, a Christian educational establishment of some kind. And of course, this in itself, the fact that Christians are doing something about this in obedience to God's word, will be a tremendous witness to their salvation, for it will show that the salvation which is ours in Christ is not simply "pie in the sky when you die," it is a full salvation which embraces the whole of our lives. This is truly the proclamation of Jesus Christ. But it is not just words, or a tract on a street corner, it is a living proclamation of Christ. It is showing the world what salvation means in real terms. But the problem with the church at the moment in this land, and the reason that this is not happening, is that many Christians want to talk about their faith and about salvation, but they do not want to practise it, they do not want to live out their salvation, or work it out practically as the apostle commands us (Phil. 2:12). How can we expect God to honour such lip service with His blessing? Surely we cannot.

We testify to Christ and bear witness to His saving grace as we live out our lives in all areas to His glory according to His will. We are all called to do this. We must give it our attention and our hard work. In our professions and vocations, in our economic and social life, in our parental responsibilities etc. So, I am not saying that we are not to share our faith, for so we are. But this is how we do it. And by doing it this way, by showing it as well as by talking about it, we bear witness to Christ far more effectively. We are to show that what Christ has accomplished for us is a real salvation here and now as well as in the resurrection.

VI. Evangelism and the decline of the church

Christ said "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32). If Christ is preached faithfully, and if He is honoured in the lives of His people, He will draw men to Himself. We shall not need to go knocking on men's doors or accosting them in the streets. They will be knocking on our doors and accosting us in the streets. That is what should be happening, and when the gospel is preached and practised faithfully by God's people I believe that it will happen. When the gospel is preached and practised faithfully the Holy Spirit will be working in this way, bringing men under conviction for sin, for this is why Christ has sent Him: "when he is come he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgement" (John 16:8). When Christ is lifted up, by which I mean when he is preached faithfully and obeyed by His people, He will draw men to Himself. Thus we are told: "it shall come to pass in the last

days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many peoples shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Is. 2:2-3). Now this is spoken, I believe, of Jesus Christ, whom the Temple represented, and of the church, the people of God, which is Zion, by whom the word and the law of God shall be preached.

But when the church is unfaithful it comes under judgement, and "judgement must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?" (1 Pet. 4:17). And we do not see at present the law and the word of God preached and honoured by the church with anything like the degree of faithfulness that there should be. And thus the church is impoverished and under judgement, and as a consequence the world is impoverished and under judgement.

When Christ is faithfully preached and the word and the law of God obeyed in Zion, that is by the people of God, men will come to us looking for Christ and salvation. And so God will honour a people that honours God and obeys His word. The fact that the church does go knocking on the world's door suggests to me that something is wrong. The boot is on the wrong foot. Because the church does not honour God it is not blessed and prospered in its mission to the world. Thus the church in our day is in decline. It tries to remedy this situation by devising all sorts of programmes which offer incentives to non-believers to persuade them to attend church. And one such programme or means of "getting them in" and bumping up the church's fortunes is evangelism. In most of these evangelistic programmes the gospel is not preached thoroughly. It is watered down and geared to giving people what they want, or what some evangelistic committee thinks people want. The gospel offered is a soft gospel, an easy time on easy terms with eternal happiness at the end. It is often little better than the indulgences offered by the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation, for the essence of the message can be boiled down to this: "join the church, help it to recover from its declining fortunes and you will get an eternal reward in heaven." But that is not the gospel or the word of God.

Now I am not denying the validity of missions to cities, towns, or anywhere else. Nothing is wrong with evangelism per se. It is a task required of the church and Christ has given the office and specifically called some in the community of His people to do this job. It is the idea of evangelism as an answer to the declining fortunes of the church that is wrong. Evangelism is not a biblical answer to the decline of the church. It is a means of extending the kingdom of God. What often passes for evangelism today is simply a means of recruiting church members on the streets, and this is no answer to the decline of the church. People come to church as a result, but they have no clear idea of what it is about or what Christianity is about. Their heads are full of wrong ideas and no attempt is made to disabuse them of their misconceptions, for that would send them away again. They think the church exists to serve them and provide them with entertainment. It is seen often simply as a club for the nice people. They do not want to put much effort or work into the church, nor alter the basic tenor of their lives. This is because the kind of gospel they received was one aimed at getting them in. It was not the gospel of God, but the gospel of a declining church desperate for members.

Conclusion

The Bible tells us that "judgement must begin at the house of God" (1 Peter 4:17). When the church is in decline therefore it is vital that we see the hand of God at work, for all things are governed by His will. It is folly to think that better evangelistic programmes, crusade meetings etc. will correct the situation, as if it

was a lack of these things that led to the church's decline in our society in the first place. We must look instead to the real cause of the problem. We must seek God and ask Him to show us why He is no longer prospering His church, why He has brought about this situation. The church does not decline because of its enemies, nor because of difficult times or because society is hardened. The church has never declined as a result of such things; it has always thrived on them. God can revive His church and its work in the hardest of times and in the hardest of men, and often has done. Such hardness in men and in society never accounts for the decline of the church. Therefore when the church is languishing, as it is in our day, we must not look outside to the ungodly environment of society as the cause - that is surely to put the cart before the horse, for such an ungodly social environment is often the result of the church's abandonment of its calling in this world to be salt and light, to preserve society. Nor should we seek to remedy the situation by devising programmes aimed at enticing non-believers into church with entertainment worship etc. We must seek instead to understand why God has brought this to pass, for His hand is surely at work in it. The cause of the decline of the church in our nation today is the judgement of God on the church's unfaithfulness. The church must return to God therefore and begin once again to live in obedience to His word in all things.

Of course the church should provide for evangelism as one part of its ministry, but not as an expedient for bumping up or recruiting new members or for covering up the real problems facing it. The answer to the decline of the church in our nation today is the faithful preaching and practice of the whole word of God by those who are the members of Christ's body. No amount of evangelism can alter this. Evangelistic programmes do not make disobedient churches faithful, they simply fill up the pews of disobedient churches with new members.

Clearly, therefore, many of our church leaders today have got their priorities wrong. God's priority is not a full church, it is an obedient church, and not until the church has learned this vitally important lesson and repented of its unfaithfulness and apathy shall our evangelism and our apologetics, our reasoning and arguing for the faith, begin once again to bear real fruit and lead to the extension of the Kingdom of God on earth.

NOTES

1. The substance of this article was a sermon originally preached at Jennyfield Evangelical Church, Harrogate, Yorkshire, on Sunday 29th of July 1990.
2. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (London: Hodder and Stoughton), p. 102.

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