

EVANGELISM IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Evangelism In the Early Church, by Michael Green. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1970. Reviewed by Douglas DeCelle, Dayton, Ohio.

I. Introduction

Michael Green's Evangelism In the Early Church, is a thorough and multifaceted examination of Christian evangelism during the remarkable period between Paul and Origen. Green, conscious of God's role and inscrutable intentions for bringing persons to Christ, is reluctant to assert baldly that the Early Church was "successful" in its mission.¹ Nevertheless, the book leaves the reader with a deep appreciation for the energy and sophistication that the Early Church brought to the task of spreading Christ's gospel.

Green lavishly documents his book from a wide array of sources. No less than 55 pages of endnotes accompany the text. Most of this information, however, Green derives from the literature which came into existence during Christianity's first two centuries--the New Testament principally, followed by the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, Apologists, Apocryphal literature, and so on. Green approaches his subject by selecting a facet of evangelism, say, missionizing among the Gentiles. He begins with comments or approaches used by Jesus himself and recorded in the Gospels. He moves to Paul or accounts of Paul's ministry in

¹ p. 274.

Acts. And, if appropriate, he then moves on to consider comments made by, say, Ignatius, Hermes, Justin, and so on. Roughly paralleling the expansion of Christianity, the argument repeatedly moves from Jesus to the Apostles to Gentile Christians. This lends Green's work with an exegetical quality. Indeed, the entire third chapter, "The Evangel," consists of New Testament word studies.

None of this is to suggest an inflexible or tedious design which is constructed entirely on citations--listed in order--from Jesus, Paul, Clement, and so on. Indeed, several sections draw on non-Christian sources. The final chapter, which explains how the faith spread in urban areas and along commercial thoroughfares, is an example. Nevertheless, the New Testament looms large in Green's presentation. This leaves the reader with a sense of the organic unity between the scriptures and the vitality and expansion of the faith which followed.

II. Advantages and Obstacles

Green begins the book with two chapters which list the advantages and disadvantages which the first two centuries held for the nascent church. Political conditions were among the chief advantages. Augustus' consolidation of an empire which encircled the Mediterranean, his pacification of dissident and far flung provinces, and his attention to roads were immense advantages to early evangelists who criss-crossed the empire with

their message.

The advantage of the "peace of Rome" was matched by the empire-wide dissemination of Greek culture. Greek-speaking Christian missionaries did not have to overcome a language barrier in the early centuries. Nor did they have to introduce the concept of monotheism for the first time. Greek philosophical thought had already begun to erode archaic religious elements which dominated many First Century pieties. Moreover, the popular mystery cults which arose in response to the sterile state religion raised questions in believers' minds that Christianity later proved adept in answering. These enthusiastic cults conditioned people to think about guilt, self-determination in the face of fate, and the hope for life after death.

Finally, the empire-wide dispersion of Judaism, a religion tolerated by Rome, provided unparalleled advantages for Christians. Says Green:

The Jews provided a preparation for the gospel; they accustomed the ancient world to the idea of proselytism, of conversion to an exclusive monotheistic religion.²

These advantages were balanced by several disadvantages which Green reviews in his second chapter, "Obstacles to Evangelism." Despite its Jewish and even Palestinian background, the gospel offended almost every aspect of Judaism. For instance, the conviction that Jesus was the Messiah clashed with conven-

² p. 26.

tional Jewish Messianic thinking. Christian ecclesiology, moreover, suggested that Israel's chosen status had been revoked. Christians dispensed with the ceremonial law which distinguished Jews from other groups. And worst of all, Christian theology relativized the centrality of Jewish Law. In combination, these ideas left faithful Jews feeling that their faith had been stolen by the Christian sect.

Christianity similarly collided with Pagan culture, especially the imperial cult. Romans were actually rather tolerant of foreign deities. Imperial Rome hosted a assortment of religious practices throughout the empire. Judaism, for example, was tolerated, as were a variety of cult groups. In this broad-minded environment, Christian sectarian practices were out of phase. Christians did not participate in gladiatorial contests, business contracts, the teaching of pagan literature, or in offering obeisance to the emperor. This latter refusal eventually attracted the official wrath of the state and mounting persecutions until the time of Constantine.

Not only was Christian behavior out of step with the political currents of Greco-Roman society, Christian teachings also struck pagans as bizarre. The folly of the cross, the association of Christians with lower social classes, and the simple gossip which arose in response to secret meetings, were all strikes against the prospect of advancing the gospel.

III. The Message

Green's next three chapters ("The Evangel," "Evangelizing the Jews," and "Evangelizing the Gentiles") deal with the message which the earliest Christians carried into the world. The first of the three--"The Evangel"--is the book's most polemical section. It provides some basis for understanding the next two chapters. In "The Evangel," Green argues against a strong current in contemporary theology which asserts that the Early Church went forth with a "heavily stylized pattern of the gospel."³ Called the "kerygma," it consists of a five or seven point message which was the standard pattern used in early preaching. According to this view,

...it is the encounter with Christ in the preaching of the kerygma which elicits faith, not any series of doctrinal assertions about a peasant rabbi of Nazareth.⁴

This thinking, however, clashes with a central thesis of Evangelism In the Early Church, which holds that the early evangelists showcased different elements of the gospel for different audiences. For example, the apostles approached their Jewish neighbors through massive and ingenious appeal to the Hebrew Bible. This approach was irrelevant for Gentile audiences. Those outside the Jewish world had little conditioning to expect a messiah or hope to see David's Kingdom established in Israel.

³ p. 61.

⁴Ibid.

As we will see, the "lordship" (rather than "messiahship") of Jesus Christ over the dominating powers in Gentile life had particular appeal outside Judaism. Green's goal in Chapter Three is to show that the Greek word kerussein (to proclaim) is by no means the only New Testament verb used to convey the act of spreading the Christian message.⁵ The idea that early Christians went forth with a simple stylized proclamation which was associated with the kerussein word group is more an element of 20th Century theology than the New Testament. There are indeed three terms--euaggelizesthai (to tell good news), kerussein (to proclaim), and marturein (to bear witness). Lengthy studies of each word dominate the chapter.

The sharing of "good news" is, in fact, the New Testament's most frequent expression for the spreading of the Christian message. In secular use, euaggelion was the word which referred to tidings of military victory or the announcement of an emperor's birth. For Christians, the euaggelion had to do with the eschatological import of various events--the birth of Christ, his resurrection, God's sojourn on earth in Jesus, and so on.

The word group around kerusso is virtually synonymous with the group around eugglion. Kerusso is like the herald's announcement that the Jubilee Year is beginning.

Finally, the New Testament authors used martureo. This was

⁵ p. 48.

a legal term denoting witness to facts and events.⁶ The concept of "witness" entails the involvement of people in the events about which they are speaking. Luke, for instance, carefully restricts his use of witness to eye-witnesses who participated in the events of Jesus' life.

Green's point in reviewing these concepts is to show that the Early Church did not convey its message in a simplistic formula which addressed all situations. Rather the Church was flexible in the presentation of a message whose ultimate content was the person and work of Jesus Christ. Says Green in summing up his intent:

Perhaps the only merit of the sketch attempted here has been to avoid the unduly cramping effects of concentrating too much upon the putative contents of a supposedly fairly rigid kerygma. It has also, perhaps, suggested something of the variety among the earliest Christians in their presentation of the gospel which was basically homogeneous; and this is a characteristic which certainly persisted into subsequent generations.⁷

The next two chapters, "Evangelizing the Jews" and "Evangelizing the Gentiles" demonstrate the ingenuity used by the first Christians in shaping the gospel to appeal to different hearers. Jews, for instance, were always appealed to through their scriptures. This is amply evident in the New Testament which bristles with the certainty that the Law and Prophets had been fulfilled. The essential idea was that the predicted Mes-

⁶ p. 70.

⁷ p. 77.

siah had come in the person of Jesus Christ. Of course, messianic theologies and expectation went well beyond the Christian sect within Judaism. The Qumran community held intense messianic hopes. They collected proof texts from the Hebrew Bible to shore up their view. Such lists were readily adopted and adapted by Christians.

Despite efforts to ground its faith in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Early Church ran into serious problems with the Jewish world. One of the problems confronting the earliest Christians was the Jewish criticism that Jesus had failed to fulfill messianic expectations. His death, for instance, did not square with the political triumph commonly expected of the messiah. Further, the thought of a god being born of a virgin reminded Jews of pagan myths. On these points of apparent dissonance between expectation and fulfillment, early Christian thinkers demonstrate admirable ingenuity in biblical interpretation. Where, for example, the crucifixion suggested Jesus' political weakness, Christians were quick to point out the cosmic power in the resurrection-ascension.

Despite the creativity that the Early Church used in its appeal to fellow Jews, the success with Israel was limited. It ultimately foundered on five factors. First, if Jesus was the Messiah then Jews who rejected him were logically under God's judgment. Second, early Christian exegesis had a way of transforming the Hebrew scriptures into a Christian tract. Third,

Christians dispensed with or reinterpreted the Law. Fourth, Christianity eliminated or spiritualized Jewish cultic traditions (sabbath, circumcision, the priesthood, and the like). Finally, the love and ingenuity of Christianity's earliest appeal to Jews was replaced by an anti-Jewish attitude that characterized the Second Century Apologists. Belief in the rabbi from Nazareth simply carried too many offensive elements for sweeping success among Jews.

Christians were more successful with Gentiles. The Christian mission to Gentiles also benefited from the same thoroughgoing understanding of both the gospel and the culture that characterized the effort with Jews. Green demonstrates, for example, how the Christians transformed the Jewish idea of God's coming kingdom into a concept more congenial to the Gentile mind, namely the lordship of Jesus. Flexibility generally characterized the way Christians approached different groups in Gentile society. The element of grace must have appealed to slaves; equality to women; power or pardon to cultured classes; wisdom to intellectuals, and so on. Green does not mean to suggest that early Christian evangelists delivered as many messages as there were hearers. Only the presentation adapted. Despite the diversity of their approaches, Christians stuck to a clear three-fold core message: 1.) Idolatry is false hope. 2.) A single transcendent God presides over all. 3.) And, people must repent and commit themselves to Jesus.

Green concludes his chapter, "Evangelizing the Gentiles," with the speculation that the Christians' willingness to die for their beliefs together with their adeptness in "translating" the faith into Gentile thought patterns accounts for the gospel's great success in the non-Jewish world. Green acknowledges that this "translation" may have gone overboard, transforming the message into something sub-Christian. But, in the main, their creativity serves as an example for all Christians since.

...It would be good to be able to feel confident that the Churches of our own day were succeeding half as well, and were displaying anything like the same courage, singleness of aim, Christcentredness and adaptability as those men and women of the first Christian century.⁸

IV. The Messengers

Beginning with Chapter 6, "Conversion," Green turns from the gospel's message to the messengers themselves. In Chapters 6-9, Green explores who the Early Christians were, how they operated, and why. The function of the chapter titled "Conversion," is to show the degree that Christianity was a fresh phenomenon in the ancient world, heralded by people who were different. Judaism-- which was conversionist--was striking enough in its Roman context. To some degree it anticipated what was to come. Christianity makes the skandalon of conversion absolute⁹ by insisting

⁸ p. 143.

⁹ p. 147.

that even Jews be converted and accept baptism. The depth of personal change wrought by Christian conversion, in turn, was crucial to the church's mission. Says Green:

...Once severed the fundamental root of conversion to Christ from the Christian message, and it becomes a broken and lifeless plant, however beautiful the flowers of Christian concern and social involvement it displays.¹⁰

Green moves on to explain that the deep personal change of conversion was wrought by the working of the Holy Spirit and the Word. The latter, while adapted in its presentation to the audience, contained three essential ingredients: 1.) the person of Jesus, 2.) the gift of reconciliation, 3.) and the expectation of concrete response. The reception of baptism, part of the new believer's response, was the sacramental marker of conversion.

The author concludes this pivotal chapter by dealing with three contemporary objections to the call for conversion as it was issued by the first Christians. He argues that their universal call for conversion was necessary to provide the Church with a distinct message and a motivated membership. The chapter closes with several individual conversion stories.

The next chapter, "The Evangelists" provides examples which illustrate the principles established in "Conversion." Put bluntly, the gospel was attractive because its messengers manifested converted attitudes and ways of living. Green begins by

¹⁰ p. 148.

describing the Early Church's professional or full-time evangelists. These include wandering prophets, teachers, and apostles whose style resembled that of Jesus himself. To this group, Green adds ecclesiastical types--presbyters and bishops--and theologians--instructors in catechetical schools.

The author then turns to discuss non-professional missionaries. Green attributes to informal evangelists most of the credit for the gospel's early success. At its inception, Christianity was essentially a lay movement. Every believer was an evangelist. This is one reason for the faith's early spread through the lower classes.

The work of evangelism not only occupied every believer, it also benefitted from the admirable quality of Christian lives. This theme, coupled with the idea of the adaptability of evangelistic presentation, is a central message of Evangelism In the Early Church.

This connection between belief and behavior runs right through Christian literature. The two cannot be separated without disastrous results, among them the end of effective evangelism. That is why the New Testament writers are so intolerant both of doctrinal and moral defections among their converts.¹¹

The section headings in the last half of this chapter describe the aspects of new life which, together with the message itself, were so compelling to potential converts. Green lists the inclusive fellowship, transformed characters, joy, endurance,

¹¹ p. 179.

and supernatural manifestations of power.

The eighth chapter--by far the longest--is a listing of the diversity of settings exploited by early Christians to tell their good news. Again, the section titles reveal Green's direction. Early Christians spoke of their Lord and new life in every imaginable setting from formal urban synagogues to bedrooms and slave quarters in private households. This chapter adds to the reader's growing impression that evangelism in the Early Church received energetic attention by every believer, in every possible setting, and was validated by transformed lives.

Why did early Christians lavish so much ingenuity and passion on reaching others with the gospel's message, sometimes at the cost of their lives? It is to this question that Green turns in the ninth chapter, "Evangelistic Motives."

The first motive was gratitude. God's love begets a loving response. Thus, the first Christians--as an act of thanksgiving--gave themselves to sharing their joy with others. Christ's instruction to "make disciples" was not nearly the motivator that was his entire life's pattern. The fact that God the Son stooped to the depths of Calvary,¹² more than any command, created the missionary impulse of many early Christians.

The second motivation grew out of a sense of responsibility or the desire to live lives commensurate with the love that God had shown. Paul was especially concerned not to disappoint God.

¹² p. 243.

He struggled in his personal life so not to be ashamed before his Lord on the day of judgment.¹³ While the early Christians did not engage in energetic evangelistic work for heavenly reward, they were conscientious about "living lives worthy of their calling."¹⁴ This then was an impetus to engage in mission.

Finally, honest concern for peoples' ultimate destinies motivated the first Christians. Convinced that salvation through personal efforts was a futile enterprise, the Early Church urgently went about preaching that salvation was a gift. Persuading people to receive the gift was the particularly Christian solution for people's lost condition.

V. Evangelistic Strategy

Green's final chapter, "Evangelistic Strategy" is a repository for miscellaneous information that did not fit elsewhere. For instance, Green explains how the faith tended to spread along commercial thoroughfares that linked the cities in the Roman Empire. Christian missionaries quickly established bridgeheads in cities. From urban centers the message radiated slowly into the countryside. The gospel tended to run up rivers like the Nile or Rhine. By the Second Century, Christianity began to reach areas that Judaism had not touched.

Green attributes to Paul a shrewd evangelistic strategy that

¹³ p. 243.

¹⁴ Ephesians 4.1.

would maximize the Apostle's time and energy. The author speculates that Paul selected Roman administrative centers, important Greek and Jewish cultural areas, and commercialized areas to set up pioneer Christian communities. Rome was Paul's ultimate strategic point for eventual world evangelization.

Green sandwiches into this chapter discussion of the role which Christian eschatology played in motivating evangelism. Eschatological urgency, which has always prodded Christians to hasten their work, was not the only factor operating in the Church's early years. The view that worldwide preaching was a condition to be accomplished before history's final wrap-up, also spurred urgent evangelistic activity.

VI. Reflection

For me, Evangelism In the Early Church's most compelling challenge comes with its demonstration of the ingenuity with which early Christians rendered the gospel into thought patterns which their neighbors could understand. The early Church's ministry to fellow Jews is the most striking. That Jesus and a handful of his close associates managed both to transcend the exegetical conventions and theology of their day and yet preserve Israel's faith as Christianity's foundation is remarkable. For this new thrust to endure and develop into the largest world religion, is more remarkable still.

The same could be said of the Gentile mission. The early

evangelists' willingness to understand the thinking of the day and then to "translate" the gospel accordingly, possibly saved the Gentile mission from the fate of the Jewish one.

I fear that the contemporary church is not nearly so connected either with surrounding culture or its own gospel. What is the mind-set--acknowledged or unacknowledged--of those to whom we preach? Do we in Church leadership sufficiently understand the theologies¹⁵ operating in our work place, homes, media, and universities? Further, can we appropriate elements from the gospel that will strike a responsive note in our hearers? I recall the Apostle Paul's Areopagus sermon as an early example of the "exegesis of the congregation" which is so absent today.

I extend this critique to my own ministry--or at least large parts of it. What is the outlook on life that operates to give meaning to my parishioners' personal existences? What informs their ethical decisions, their goals, their politics, their career choices, use of free time, and so on? Individualism, consumerism, utilitarianism, forms of humanism, and Christianity seem to be part of the mix. Beyond naming a few "isms," I can only guess what constitutes the philosophical foundations of my parishioners.

There is another group in my personal orbit whose ideals are much more apparent. These are mental health professionals,

¹⁵M. Eliade in The Sacred and the Profane has said that there is no society which is devoid of a mythic or sacred outlook on life.

social workers, and academics who I hire to teach as a part of my church's adult education program. Because I enjoy sometimes lengthy conversations with these people and because I often read the literature in their fields, I find myself able to connect deeply and theologically with their ideals. Often these individuals have long since rejected Christianity as a source of insight into the human experience or as a style of life worth pursuing. Frequently, I am able to re-present Christian perspectives in a way that both surprises them and speaks profoundly to their concerns. Occasionally, these teachers will attend worship out of curiosity. And one presenter has joined our congregation. This is one group with whom I feel like an evangelist--a bearer of good news. I believe this has to do with my relative understanding of their thought life.

John V. Taylor, in his The Go-Between God,¹⁶ has suggested that deep listening is the most helpful encounter between disciples of Christ and adherents to other faiths. Christians must immerse themselves in other religious perspectives before they endeavor to articulate differences. Intense connectedness between the evangelist-student and believers in other traditions becomes the medium through which the Holy Spirit calls all parties to greater faithfulness. The Early Church knew this instinctively. Its outreach evidences a deep familiarity with the

¹⁶John V. Taylor, The Go-Between God, (London: S.C.M. Press, 1972). This idea is explored in Chapter Nine, "Meeting: The Universal Spirit and the Meeting of Faiths."

ideals and faith of potential converts. And this, Green demonstrates, is an important reason for the gospel's success in the Church's earliest years.

We live in an era when Western Christendom is increasingly giving way to a secular, pluralistic society. What's more, Christians are seeking to encounter all world faiths in a manner devoid of triumphalism. These conditions are remarkably similar to those encountered by our earliest forebears in faith. Given this, the Church's most primitive experiences in evangelism may prove to be our most helpful model.

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