

Evangelism in the 21st Century

The dictionary defines evangelism as: **1** : the winning or revival of personal commitments to Christ
2 : militant or crusading zeal (beginning around 1626) [Merriam-Webster]

According to a Biblical dictionary: Evangelize, Evangelism Basic Definition. "To evangelize" is to proclaim the good news of the victory of God's salvation. "Evangelism" [Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology]

A popular encyclopedia online says: **Evangelism** refers to the practice of relaying information about a particular set of beliefs to others who do not hold those beliefs. The term is often used in reference to Christianity, where the scriptures often describe "evangelism" as "spreading the Gospel". [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evangelism>] A **gospel** (from Old English, *gōd spell* "good news") is a writing that describes the life, ministry, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. The word is primarily used to refer to the four **canonical gospels**: the Gospel of Matthew, Gospel of Mark, Gospel of Luke and Gospel of John although it is also used for non-canonical writings such as the Gospel of Thomas. The term "Gospel" refers also to the message itself of the four Gospels or of the whole New Testament. [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel>] The Good News that Jesus spoke about was primarily the coming of the Kingdom of God and I believe it is the best summary of what evangelism is about today.

Through words and actions Jesus spent his days telling all people about this Realm of God and doing things that reflected and demonstrated the wholeness of God's Realm among them. The Kingdom of God was not simply a sign to be observed nor a particular place here or there, but a way of God's grace (*grace: God's Recreational Activity Causing Excellence*) in the people's midst. [Luke 17:20-21] It is something that is captured in the mind and heart of those who are open to its spirit and vitality, received through a childlike faith, [Mark 10:15] being born from above, [John 3:5] being enabled to think and do in God's ways and not with self-centered human tendencies. [Mark 7:21] It is the kind of realm or world in which most of us would like to be living, a world of wholeness, love, and peace (*peace: People Energizing Alternatives Causing Equality*).

What then is the real spirit of evangelism today? To me the essence of evangelism in the 21st Century is celebrating the presence of the Spirit of God that Jesus announced in preaching the Kingdom of God. Jesus said the Kingdom of God was like freedom to those who are bound, refreshing water to the thirsty, rejoicing in wonders that were occurring, growth and development, and God's Realm can be compared to all that is good and wonderful. [Luke 13:15-22] To want, to know, and to allow that Spirit to be the essence of all that we are as a person in body, mind, and spirit will allow that Realm to be a reality for us. Before we can evangelize we need to become evangelists. Remember, you cannot give away or share what you do not possess. It might be helpful to see what the Scriptures have to say about Spirit.

The Spirit is referred to as the breath of God that gives us life, our source and essence as humans. [Job 33:4] "*The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.*" [Genesis 2:7 (NIV)] Our humanity however is not automatic or forced and in no way assures that we will experience or demonstrate the values or expressions that are akin to the Realm of God. Our moral and ethical behavior is possible but not always probable. It is a gift, but like every gift it must be nourished and developed. As conscious beings we are not meant to operate on automatic pilot. Becoming a part of the Realm or Kingdom of God requires knowledge, understanding and practice. That age old question, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" is a good example of what I mean. The answer may be misleading; practice, practice, practice. If your practice is flawed you will not perform at Carnegie Hall. A good artist who makes it to Carnegie Hall is one whose practice is constantly refined and continues in refinement all of their performing lives. To participate in the Realm of God one must always keep fit in faith and works.

Evangelism is a celebration of the Spirit of God because it involves the whole person both inwardly and outwardly. Another way of expressing evangelism is that it is sacramental. We generally define a sacrament as, *"outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace"* [The Book of Common Prayer, pg. 857] made available to us by gift. There are two sections of Scripture that may demonstrate this gift of wholeness in the Realm of God. *"Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?'" Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."* [John 3:3-8 (NRS)] The Apostle writing in Galatians speaks of conflicts in our life between the inward and the outward in this way, *"The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."* [Galatians 5:19-23 (NIV)] There is no law or force that makes us who we are; it comes from being born from above and practicing the spirit and ethos that defines the Realm of God.

Evangelism today is helping people to celebrate their gift of a complete and wholesome life and to provide a supportive community to encourage and enable their ongoing development and performance. We need evangelists who celebrate a complete wholeness in their lives and who encourage and enable others by their example and actions. That is what Jesus did and what followers of Jesus need to be doing today. Jesus was not happy with the religious leaders of his day because they wanted power and imposed rules and regulations on people without being faithful examples of their piety. Jesus, as a faithful adherent of the Jewish customs, was disappointed by their lack of love and humility. *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others."* *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence."* *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth."* [Matthew 23:23, 25, 27 (NRS)]

Evangelism today is not very popular among many Christians because most of what we see in the public media is not evangelism in the Biblical sense but proselytizing - which is to recruit someone to one's party, institution, or faith. Jesus did not establish a party, create an institution, nor a new faith. What so many Christians forget or do not realize is that Jesus was a Rabbi, a leader among the people of his time. He did not even try to convert people to Judaism but rather to introduce them to God and especially the ways of the Kingdom of God. As a Rabbi he ministered to many who were not Jewish but he ministered to them as they were without any condition or invitation to become Jewish. A few examples of this in the Gospels are, when Jesus healed the Roman Officer's servant, [Matthew 8:5-13 + Luke 7:1-10] Jesus heals the Gentile woman's daughter in the region of Phoenicia, [Mark 7:24-30 + Matthew 15:21-28] Jesus reaches out to the woman of Samaria about God and godliness and says, *"Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."* [John 4:21-24 (NRS)] [John 4:1-42] The truth is that God is not a Jew, a Samaritan, a Christian, or of any human group but the very Spirit through which the whole living Universe was created.

Evangelism today must be about the wonderful life that is ours in connection to the whole of all that exists from this Divine Source. One of the acclamations of this might be seen in the end of Paul's letter to the Romans, *"Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen."* [Romans 16:25-27 (NRSA)]

I am a Christian and was raised in the northern areas of New Jersey. As I grew and left New Jersey to attend college in several States I became aware that not everyone was like me. I began to see a variety of Christians and met many who were not Christian. I also learned that people were different, regardless of their faith alone, because other parts were not at all like New Jersey. As I purveyed this great variety of the people of God I began to remember what we were told in the creation stories in Genesis about God's reflections of all that was made on several days, *"And God saw that it was good."* [Genesis 1:1 – 2:24] This diversity in no way diminished my gratitude for my upbringing as a Christian in New Jersey but it did give me a greater respect for my appreciation and gratitude to God. It was exciting to personally realize that God so loved the world and everyone in all times and in all places; maybe even life further out in the Universe. It brings to my mind one of the stirring hymns we sing in our Christian churches:

*Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation;
O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health and salvation:
join the great throng, psaltery, organ, and song,
sounding in glad adoration.*

[The Hymnal 1982, The Episcopal Church, Church Publishing Incorporated, New York, pg. 390]

This does not, however, disallow the beauty and majesty of God in other people and places. Dare we forget the parable that Jesus told according to the Gospels? Perhaps you can recall the story of the "Good Samaritan" wherein it was not the Priest or the Levite who stopped to care for a battered man by the side of a road from Jerusalem to Jericho but a Samaritan man. *"But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."* [Luke 10:32-37 (NRSA)]

Let us hear these words today, *"Go and do likewise."* We certainly need to hear the words of Scripture but we even more must become doers, *"Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing."* [James 1:21-25 (NRSA)] Remember, action always speaks louder than words and is often much more effective.

Evangelism has the power to help us change and renew us but not by the power of force or coercion. The power of the Gospel is patterned after the life of Jesus who declared to us the powerful love of God's Realm. Perhaps this acronym may be helpful, **POWER (People Offering Ways Enabling Renewal)**.

- **People:** Jesus was a person who called people, at least twelve disciples, who went with him around various areas to make a difference in the lives of others. Jesus also, we are told, *"appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was*

about to go." [Luke 10:1-11] Jesus taught them to serve others in word and especially in deed. After the resurrection it was the disciples who continued the ministry of Jesus in word and deed.

- **Offering:** Offering the love and care of God was the way Jesus taught about the Realm of God. His attentiveness and concern for people in need was not the custom in his day nor is it always happening now. He established a vision for the world that reflected the kind of Realm God intended for everyone. He came to serve and not to be served.
- **Ways:** Jesus and his disciples learned to think out of the box. They learn to speak and adapt to a variety of situations, cultures, and human needs that would change them and the circumstances and thoughts of those to whom they ministered. Many hope for the ways of God to become a reality but **HOPE** comes when we are **Habitually Open to Progressive Exploration**. When will we make God's ways our habit?
- **Enabling:** Is simply to provide someone with the means or opportunity to make something possible, practical, or easy. Jesus helped people see how the Creator's presence could enable and recreate their circumstances. His words and healing action never put them down but raised them up to have a moment in the Kingdom of God that had come among them.
- **Renewal:** When Jesus and his disciples invoked the presence of God in the midst of people their lives were renewed. These events often brought crowds to come and see what was happening. The evangelism of Jesus and his disciples brought renewal and change to many.

Unlike many evangelists today Jesus did not seek crowds or advertise for public attention and participation. His ministry was personal and compassionate with a focus on each person individually. He never looked for a thank you but was truly pleased when the one leper came back to express his gratitude. There is no hint as to how Jesus earned a living but there were no offerings taken, tickets sold, and no obligation from anyone except to use their renewed lives for the benefit of others.

I would propose that all who are followers of Jesus are evangelists of one sort or another and that we convey, by our words and actions, good news or bad news. It is only normal that everyone tends to talk about things and circumstances that mean something or from which they have received significant meaning or enjoyment. This is why the Scripture says that those with God's Spirit will be witnesses [Acts 1:8] and that we should "*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.*" [1 Peter 3:15 (NIV)] Let us then, as the evangelists we are, "let our light shine to everyone, so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Creator". [Matthew 5:16]

May the caring peace of God that goes beyond human comprehension, declare God's love for you in your heart and mind as we see it in Jesus Christ; and may the blessing of God, loving Creator, gracious Liberator, and life giving Spirit keep you steadfast now and always. Amen.

