

The Modern Approach Critiqued

It is my conviction that modern evangelicals are increasingly adopting a way of evangelism that makes evangelistic preaching in the apostolic style more difficult, if not a virtual impossibility. I say this because to carry out Christ's instructions in addressing sinners as Peter did in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:42-43) would run directly counter to the principles of evangelism in a growing number of evangelical churches today.¹

This, of course, means that the modern evangelical way of evangelism in the church must be wrong; it must be unscriptural, non-apostolic and, therefore, failing to fulfil Christ's mandate.

Heavy charges, heavy indeed.

If it be said, in reply, that God uses the method modern evangelicals employ, and that there are conversions, and that this justifies the innovation – the end justifies the means – the answer is patent: 'the end justifies the means' may be a worldly-wise adage, but scriptural it is not. The fact that God, in his sovereignty – even where he does not approve – can use both us and our schemes to bring sinners to Christ, does not absolve us from our responsibility to obey his

¹ Indeed, I have been told that my approach will only frighten the fish, and drive them away; hence, my approach is not conducive to what is wanted in today's evangelism. But this is to misunderstand the biblical illustration. When Christ speaks of being 'fishers of men' (Matt. 4:19), the parallel is with the dragnet, not fly fishing – where the angler, working with stealth, lures and deceives the fish into taking the bait. Christ never pulled his punches to avoid offending his hearers. See John 6:25-71, for instance. By the way, it isn't 'my approach'. As we have seen in Acts 10:42-43 (and abundantly elsewhere in Scripture), it is the biblical way.

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word.² It is the old question of the twofold will of God – his secret will and his revealed will, his will of decree and purpose, and his will of command.³ Our duty is plain: ‘It is required of stewards that they be found faithful’ (1 Cor. 4:2), faithful to God, faithful to his word. We must obey God’s revealed will in Scripture, and leave his secret will to the disposal of his sovereignty. What is more, the definition of ‘successful’ is fraught with difficulty. Only the day of judgment will show the genuineness or otherwise of the conversions in question:

Each one’s work will become manifest, for the day [of judgment] will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done...

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God (1 Cor. 3:13; 4:5).

Nor must we forget the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1-9,18-23).

While the same, of course, goes for all our gospel efforts, including mine, I am convinced that the modern method of evangelism is more likely to prove to lead to more spurious conversions than the old, biblical way. But as I say, the decisive day will declare it. Meanwhile Scripture, not providence, must be our authority.

So, returning to my charge that modern evangelism is at odds with apostolic evangelistic addresses, let me take this

² Compare Num. 20:9-13. Although he was offended at the way Moses carried out his command, and while Moses had to take responsibility for his sin, even so God gave Israel water from the rock. Take the episode with Balak and Balaam (Num. 22-24). And so on.

³ See my *Offer*.

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further by probing the modern evangelical way of evangelism.⁴

The basic building block of modern evangelism is to attract *and hold* unbelievers – pagans, in fact – in prolonged church attendance while they are evangelised; attract and hold them for a considerable time, please note. Most evangelicals take it absolutely for granted that this is one of their greatest tasks, even though there isn't an ounce of Scripture to justify it – indeed, even though Scripture is against it.⁵ The fundamental concept of the *ekklēsia* is that believers are the 'called-out ones', the 'separated ones', separated from the world (1 Cor. 5:12; 2 Cor. 6:14-18). If unbelievers did assemble with the believers in the early days, it was an oddity, unsought by the saints (1 Cor. 14:23-25). Not so today! Getting unbelievers into church attendance is the dominant principle of contemporary evangelism.⁶

As a consequence, schemes are devised and programmes drawn up to accomplish it. In this way, the church is fundamentally changed or geared – 're-engineered' is a favoured word – to facilitate it. Naturally so! This 're-engineering' is essential; no pagan would have the slightest interest in the biblical life of the *ekklēsia* (see Acts 2:42, for instance, plus 1 Corinthians 5). Indeed, quite the opposite.

⁴ Contrary to the impression some may draw from what follows, I am convinced that the gospel should be preached within the *ekklēsia*. See the Appendix 'Gospel Preaching in Church: Eight Reasons' in my *Relationship*.

⁵ I admit that ever since the Fathers foisted Christendom on the world, 1800 years ago, 'church attendance' has been a fact of life. The modern application of this principle and practice is the root and branch re-engineering of the *ekklēsia* to promote it. The truth is, however, that 'church attendance' is unknown in Scripture. In new-covenant terms, it is impossible to 'attend church'; the saints in covenant are 'the church'. As for encouraging pagans to 'come to church', nothing could be more at variance with the principles of the new-covenant *ekklēsia*. See my *Relationship*.

⁶ I have already drawn attention to the fact that Acts 10 does not record a 'church service'.

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No wonder, then, that, following God's discipline of and within the early church, we read that 'great fear came upon all who heard of it', 'great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things', so that 'none of the rest dared join them' (Acts 5:5,11,13).

In order to accomplish the desired end of attracting unbelievers into church attendance, therefore, the very ambience of the church, from first to last, must be – and is – strictly re-designed, structured, controlled and monitored to make everything non-threatening to unbelievers, not to say appealing to them. Nothing must be done to put them off in any way. 'Thou Shalt Be Nice' is the overriding commandment.⁷ Everything has to bow to the contemporary shibboleth of making pagans feel comfortable in prolonged church attendance, so that the believers can 'get alongside them'. And this leads inevitably to a self-centred, worldly, and superficial 'spirituality' in a growing number of evangelical churches.

For we know what appeals to pagans: they are 'lovers of self... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God' (2 Tim. 3:2,4). Consequently, carnal – what else can it be but carnal if it appeals to unbelievers? – carnal or worldly schemes have to be introduced to attract unbelievers into the life of the *ekklēsia*. Such attractions may well be coated with a religious veneer, but carnal they are and carnal they remain. And Scripture is prostituted in the attempt to justify them. I have argued all this elsewhere.⁸

I now go further to say that it has to be.

⁷ I recall a baptising service I conducted in the late 80s. I preached on Christ's words: 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me' (Luke 9:23). A brother (a charismatic believer) of the young man being baptised did not like the sermon or atmosphere: 'Too solemn', was his dismissive comment.

⁸ For supporting evidence, see my *Relationship; Attracting; New-Covenant Articles Volume 12*.

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To those who protest that I have overstated the case – and wildly so – I respectfully ask them to consult my aforementioned works, and to read on. Moreover, the trend is important here. The evangelical world, of course, is a spectrum. While many churches, no doubt, wish to hold in some measure to the old, biblical line, the pressure is on to slide in the direction I am criticising. The tide is very strong. It will take time, no doubt – and this should be measured in terms of a generation or more, not weeks – but I am convinced that many contemporary evangelicals are too weakly grounded to resist this pressure for long, even if they should wish to. With the rise of ‘seeker-friendly’, ‘seeker-sensitive’, ‘making church attendance attractive to unbelievers’ evangelism, a Rubicon has been crossed. To change the figure, the genie has been let out of the bottle. As has happened in previous years, nothing less than a sovereign intervention of God can put things right.

Those who are still not convinced should keep in mind the tale of the frog. A frog suddenly plunged into very hot water will leap out, while a frog slowly heated in water stands a good (or bad!) chance of being boiled to death. We absorb change as long as it is gradual; we do not wake up to see how far we have slipped *until it is too late*. And remember what happens to the hardest stone subjected to the constant dripping of water.

If nothing else, I hope my book will sound an alarm.

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But what about the objection: ‘Ah, just a minute! Peter was able to deliver his discourse to a group of people who were interested in hearing him, curious about the gospel. What we have to do is to come up with new methods – even attractions – to reach the unchurched, men and women who have little or no interest in the gospel. The old method doesn’t work?’

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I can imagine a modern evangelical speaking thus.⁹

However surprising it may seem, let me say how strongly I agree. The old method really is no longer fit for purpose today – *as long as we adopt the new-fangled purpose*. If the way of evangelism *is* to attract and hold unbelievers in church attendance so that they can be taken from being ‘unchurched’ into being ‘churched’ and so be introduced to the gospel, then of course, new methods have to be dreamed up, and new priorities invented.¹⁰ The biblical way will not work!

But it is not new methods we need, because there should be no new way. It is the old way, the biblical way, which we need. The prophets had to call Israel back to the old way when the people were deserting the Mosaic covenant and, acting contrary to God’s word, were looking to pagans (Egypt, in particular) for help:

Thus says the LORD: ‘Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls’. But they said: ‘We will not walk in it’. I set watchmen over you, saying: ‘Pay attention to the sound of the trumpet!’ But they said: ‘We will not pay attention’ (Jer. 6:16-17).

What is more, since message and method are inextricably linked, with the latter having a dominating role over the former,¹¹ new methods inevitably lead to a new message.¹²

⁹ The language may be different, but the underlying concern is the same. See, for instance, Ray Evans: *Ready, Steady, Grow: Equipping Today’s Gospel Churches*, Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, 2014, p11.

¹⁰ An obsession with numbers, for one. See my *Relationship*.

¹¹ Take the dominating effect TV and social media have had on Royalty, politics, sport, and so on. The Royal Family is fast descending into a soap opera played out on TV and Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and SnapChat. TV encourages politicians to play to the gallery. Don’t forget the TV debates between Kennedy and Nixon. For the past three years, the president of the USA has virtually governed by Twitter. Take the effect which the

Certainly we do not need a new message; there is no message other than the gospel. Although externals and incidentals do change, the natural man is fundamentally the same as he ever was, right from his fall in Adam: dead in sin, locked in idolatrous rebellion against God, under his condemnation, blind to spiritual good. Only God's Spirit can regenerate the dead sinner (John 3:3-8), and he is pleased to do this by the preaching of the gospel (John 6:63-64; 1 Cor.

introduction of colour had on TV programmes – including the most serious. The Radio Three of my youth would not be tolerated today. Clement Attlee (the Prime Minister from 1945-1951) would need – and be given – a 48 seconds average response time to a reporter's question on a complicated issue, and this meant he was able to offer a reasoned answer. This response time has now been reduced to considerably less than 10 seconds; hence we live in an age of slick soundbites and catch phrases. Whenever I see a serious TV programme from the 60s, I am struck with its gravity and length of shot. Many serious programmes today are padded with pointless snatches of glitz and colour to brighten the 'show'. As for sport, I recall seeing snooker scores such as 76-58, and still playing; now, TV has brought in the one-frame shoot out, with a maximum of 37 frames even at the very topmost event. Tennis, likewise, has been adjusted to fit in with TV schedules, which are all-dominating. The number of 'likes', 'downloads' and 'followers' is rapidly becoming the ruling principle of life for more and more social-media addicts. Re-engineers of the church have not been slow to spot this and adapt the church to fit in with the tastes of modern pagans conditioned by TV and social media; its services are now snappy, bright, glitzy, full of colour, with plenty of variety, liberally laced with 'street jargon'. In all this, the message has been radically affected for ill.

¹² Roy Hattersley, writing about the battles within the Labour party in the 90s, observed that debate on principle was 'disposed of before coffee time', after which, he said, 'we were able to turn to the aspects of policy we most enjoyed – not formulation but presentation'. He went on: 'Image often took precedence over the ideas, and presentation, instead of being no more than a delivery system, was regarded as the mighty warhead which would blow the enemy to pieces' (Roy Hattersley: *Who Goes Home? Scenes from a Political Life*, Little, Brown and Company, London, 1995, pp292-293).

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1:17-18,23-24; 2:1-5; Jas. 1:18, and so on). It has always been thus. Modern man is no different.

So I say there is no biblical warrant to search for methods to attract unbelievers into church attendance. We have no example of any old-covenant prophet or any new-covenant preacher ever devising carnal schemes – and that is what modern methods amount to with their activities and, not to put too fine a point on it, bribes (a sprat to catch a mackerel)¹³ – to attract unbelievers to ‘events’ so they might be evangelised.

D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

There must be no divorce between the message we give and the methods we use. Surely, all must agree that our methods as well as our message are to be controlled by the New Testament and its teaching? Now the crucial passage on this matter will be found in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5... ‘And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God’. Here the great apostle goes out of his way to explain to us that he deliberately rejected certain methods, and he did so in order that it might be clear to everybody that the results were not of man but of God. He did everything ‘in demonstration of the Spirit and of power’. He deliberately did not use ‘enticing words of man’s wisdom’. In other words, the apostle deliberately avoided what he knew would appeal to the congregation... He became a ‘fool’ [that is, in the eyes of the worldly-wise], he tells us, and did it of set purpose. In this statement we have the apostolic pattern and the apostolic authority for saying that our methods must be controlled in a similar manner, and that always it must be ‘in demonstration of the Spirit and of

¹³ Using ‘a sprat’ as a bait to attract the prize – ‘a mackerel’ – into the net.

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power'. Is it not true to say that some have been guilty of giving a message which is [said to be] controlled by... Scripture, while at the same time arguing that any method that the world finds to be successful may be employed, whether or not in keeping with biblical principles?... In reply to [any] warning, people often ask: 'But why should not the Holy Spirit make use of these modern techniques [and schemes]? Why set them in opposition to one another?' The answer is that... Paul would never have argued like that, but deliberately avoided all that can be subsumed under the heading 'man's wisdom'. He *could* have argued in that manner... but deliberately did not do so.¹⁴

Quite!

So I repeat my charge that the use of carnal methods to attract unbelievers, and hold them in church attendance, makes it exceedingly difficult to preach the gospel biblically to those who have been attracted and held by such methods. Is it not utterly incongruous to use carnal methods to attract unbelievers and then – even while they are enjoying those attractions – to preach something which is abhorrent to them? And, make no mistake, the biblical gospel is abhorrent to the natural man. It always has been; it always will be.

Herein lies the root of the trouble, the dilemma.

And that takes us to the next chapter.

¹⁴ D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Conversions Psychological and Spiritual*, Inter-Varsity Fellowship, London, 1959, pp37-38, emphasis his.

