

THE CONTENT OF THE EVANGELISTIC MESSAGE

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Introduction

Since Dr. Watson has asked us--in his memorandum of June 24--to write papers that "should be simple and to the point," I will try to comply to his request by presenting this brief paper as a series of statements to which I will add some explanations.

As a general background for this presentation I would like to begin with some notes of personal testimony which will serve, simultaneusly, to explain how I became interested in this particular theme.

I grew up in a Plymouth Brethren type of protestant congregation. My first theological training--in the Latin American Biblical Seminary--was within the "evangelical" branch (in the North American sense

of the word "evangelical") of the protestant tradition and in a deeply evangelistically oriented theological institution. Because of these different elements of my own formation, and as a matter of fact, I have surely heard thousand of the so called "evangelistic sermons." I have even preached some of them.

My interest, therefore, in the theme of the content of the evangelistic message is a natural result of my interest in the preaching and evangelistic ministry of the Church.

Unfortunately, we do not still have a written history of Latin American protestant preaching. (This fact--the lack of a written history--was made evident in a recent article Dr. Orlando Costas wrote for a *DICCIONARIO DE HISTORIA DE LA IGLESIA* which will be published in Spanish.)

It is supposed, at least in our Latin American evangelical context, that the content of the gospel message is passed on from one generation to another through the Church's preaching ministry (even more than through the theological teaching of our seminaries). It is,

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therefore, necessary to pay special attention to this aspect of the ministry of the Church.

In relation to our contribution in the present opportunity, we have divided our presentation in three parts: the first one has to do with what is being preached in our Latin American protestant churches, at least in the majority of cases, with some references to the historical roots of this situation; the second part includes some remarks on Wesley's sermons; the third deals with an interpretation of the causes of this situation.

I

EVANGELISTIC PREACHING IN LATIN AMERICA:

A GENERAL APPRAISAL

1. The kind of Christianity which was brought into Latin America by the Spanish conquistadores and colonizers gave shape not only to the establishment of Christian catholicism in our continent but also, in a very specific way, to the kind of protestant Christianity which was afterward founded.

The 16th century hispanic version of Roman

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Catholicism-- which was the one exported to what now is Latin America-- was the result of a war of seven centuries which was considered simultaneously as a nationalistic struggle (that is to say, a war of retaliation, conquest, and expulsion from the Spanish soil of a foreign invader) and as a religious crusade (that is to say, a war to expel the infidels, the moors).

This same sense of crusade was transplanted to the New World and so the native people of the land had to be forced to accept Christianity... and that particular version of it.

At the same time, those who dared to challenge the position of the predominant Church were considered "heretics" and, as such, had to be persecuted (which frequently included imprisonment and even death). As a reaction to this attitude and action of the official church, for a large segment of the Latin American protestants, to be a Roman catholic was practically synonymous of not being Christian. This holds true even

Today.

2. Because of this historical context and especially due to the origins of the protestant work in Latin America (apart from what we might term the "ethnic" protestant work), protestants stressed in their evangelistic thrust the following two points (among others): (1) the need for personal conversion as the only mean to be saved (and, therefore, to become a Christian); and (2) the need to leave the Roman Catholic Church and to be affiliated to and identified with an evangelical (protestant) community. Conversion, as a result, was considered to be conversion to God and against the predominant Church.

A new resurgence of this same attitude is manifest today in the evangelistic work of many pentecostal-type independent groups.

3. For protestants the gospel (evangelion) was equated to salvation: to accept the gospel of Jesus Christ was to accept God's salvation through faith. The dictum extra ecclesia

nulla salus is rejected with respect to the Roman Catholic ^{Church}. But, in spite of the fact that it was emphasized that "No religion saves. The only one who saves is Jesus Christ," the reality was that in practice a new "version" of that dictum appears: now it is not applied to the huge institution represented by the Catholic Church, but to the different evangelical congregations or denominations (and, on occasions not even to all of them).

4. The salvation with which the evangel is identified is considered to be, in its essence: (1) salvation of the soul. Although sometimes the language used in preaching tends to be somewhat ambiguous, the main emphasis in our evangelistic proclamation lies in this aspect. Due to a dualistic anthropological vision, "man" is considered to be ultimately a soul which needs to be saved.

As a consequence, the biblical doctrine of the resurrection of the body is not an important theme in evangelical preaching. Its place is taken by the affirmation that we "have"

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an immortal soul which should be our ultimate concern and which shall be saved or condemned. (When the theme of the resurrection of the body is introduced in the preaching proclamation, there is no theological articulation of its meaning within the totality of the message. No attempt is made to theologically explain the relation between an immortal soul which is already saved and the resurrection); (2) this salvation is mainly understood as an eschatological salvation: as life after death. A Latin American pastor wrote some years ago: "In general, it is today considered that to evangelize is just to proclaim Christ as Saviour and to call people to repent, and it does not matter in which condition the repented people are left..."

5. Two additional very important consequences are derived from this particular perception of the gospel (salvation): first, the proclamation of the gospel is understood almost exclusively in terms of its verbal proclamation. This verbal aspect is: preaching in a formal way
the act of

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(be it in a church building, in the open air or through the so-called mass media--radio, television, printed material) and personal witness (which is also conceived as telling others--by words--that Jesus Christ is our Saviour); and second, the gospel message is deprived of all its historical elements (except the fact that Jesus is a historical person--although sometimes somehow idealized) and of all its historical implications.

This deprivation is manifested in the fact that in relation to our salvation the only aspects of Jesus' life which matter are his death and resurrection. (This has been expressly said from our pulpits.)

There is, in fact, a devaluation of history.

6. In our Latin American evangelical tradition we have stressed through our evangelistic preaching (and through preaching in general) the role of the corpus paulinum (and Peter's and John's epistles, in a lesser degree) in the theological configuration of our understanding of the gospel message. The use of the other parts

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of the Holy Scriptures (the Gospels, the epistle of James, Revelation, not to mention the Old Testament) has played a secondary role in our preaching and teaching.

7. This general picture of the Latin American evangelical preaching is true, with but a few exceptions, of all the protestant churches, the Methodist Church included.

Nevertheless, it has to be said that several church denominations and faith-mission organizations have shown, throughout the years of their ministry in Latin America, a genuine and keen interest in different kinds of social work (especially education and health). Does this point to a certain unconscious dissatisfaction with their own theological stances?

It has to be furthermore said that many churches (not to mention the Latin American evangelical theologians) are becoming more and more aware of the limitations of this understanding of the gospel. They are trying to incorporate new insights in the

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evangelistic preaching.

II

EVANGELISTIC PREACHING AND WESLEY'S SERMONS

8. Wesley made very clear in his preaching ministry what were his priorities and what was his deepest longing for his hearers. He said that: (1) He had written down in his sermons what he had found in the Holy Scriptures about "the way to heaven".* One and only thing he wished to know: "to get safely to the port of salvation";* (2) he was going to present this way to heaven not as a humanly elaborated set of thoughts but as "the experimental religion of the Holy Scriptures";* (3) the church is a society of men (and women) who gather together, in the first place, with the purpose of saving their souls and of helping each other in this salvation (Sermon LII); and (4) the church has also ("then," that is after looking after the salvation of those who gather together) the purpose of caring for the salvation of all men from the misery "present and future" (that is to say, for "the destruction of the kingdom of Satan

* (Preface)

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and the building up the kingdom of Christ"--
Sermon 211).

9. This specifically manifested purpose is in fact carried out through Wesley's preaching. Prof. Outler (THEOLOGY IN THE WESLEYAN SPIRIT) has offered some statistical information which gives us a clear picture of this interest and purpose (of Wesley): according to the available data Mark 1.15 ("Repent and believe the gospel") is the text most ^{widely} used by Wesley (190 times). Then follow: 2 Cor. 8.9; Eph. 2.8; Gal. 6.14 (167, 133 and 129 respectively). These figures stress the fact that the invitation to repentance was always linked to the gospel's offer of reconciliation through Christ and salvation by grace (Outler). These are the three pillars of Wesley's own religious experience: repentance, reconciliation, and grace.

10. God's ultimate purpose was man's sanctification. Citing some commentators of the Apostles' Creed ("I believe... in the Holy Catholic Church") Wesley said: "And another [writer] even says

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that the Church is called "holy" because our Lord had the purpose that all the members of the Church were holy" (Sermon: "Of the Church"). Wesley stresses the fact that the new birth "is the first step towards our sanctification" (Sermon: "On the Lord's vineyard"). And then he adds: "They [the Methodists] take care to keep each one [sanctification and justification] in the place which corresponds to them, putting the same emphasis in one as in the other" (id.).

11. But Wesley understands this sanctification as something very personal and individualistic: his final concern is the sanctification of the individual. When he talks about a "holy people" one cannot avoid the impression that the concept of "people" has been emptied of its really corporative content. This is manifest in Sermon VII, called "The road to the Kingdom": "We have to consider in first place the nature of true religion which the Lord calls 'the kingdom of God.'" And then adds: "The Holy Scriptures calls this joint holiness and happiness 'the kingdom of God' and 'the kingdom of heaven.'" It is

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called 'kingdom of God' because it is the immediate fruit which results when God reigns in the heart... It is called 'kingdom of heaven' because, in a sense, it opens the heaven to the soul."

The fact that the kingdom of God is called "religion" (with a calificative: "true religion") makes us suspect that we are in the presence of a form of "spiritualistic reductionism" of the kingdom concept. This is made evident when Wesley explains that the kingdom is nothing else but God's reign in the individual's soul.

This is why Wesley can preach another sermon based on Mark 1.15 and make but a passing reference to the kingdom.

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12. Nevertheless, it has to be also said that Wesley stressed the following important point: the gospel of Christ is not presented to us as any other type of religion but social: there is no holiness which is no social holiness.

The problem lies in the following facts: (1) it is not explicitly explained what is the essence of this social holiness; (2) there seems to be no explanation of the link between this social sanctification and the theological bases of Wesley's thought.

Sometimes one has the impression that for Wesley the "social dimension" of sanctification reduces the "other" to an opportunity which is given to the believer to become sanctified in practice.

For what has already been said, one wonders whether when Wesley stresses the fact that he wants to save his country and reform the nation, he is not thinking in terms of the society as the mere addition of individuals.

If it is so, to save the country will basically mean to save people one by one.

III

POSSING THE PROBLEM: SUGGESTIONS

13. It has already been pointed out by different authors the fact that Paul makes only a few references in his epistles to the kingdom of God and to Jesus' life. This fact has been diversely interpreted. Some writers have put Paul over against the Gospels as if Paul had been the hellenizer of the original teaching of Jesus and, as such, as if he had created Christianity as a world religion.

In our Latin American context, this specific problem has not received enough attention from scholars and preachers until recently.

14. The teaching which has been transmitted to the protestant community in our Continent as the teaching of the Reformation (that is to say, as the biblical teaching which was brought into light by the Reformers) emphasizes primarily Paul's doctrines of justification by faith alone (sola fide) and salvation by grace (sola

gratia).

But, Paul's doctrines have been interpreted without any reference to the Gospel stories. As a matter of fact, we find -- in the practical experience of our Latin American evangelical churches -- that the New Testament has been divided in several parts or blocks: (1) The Gospel stories; (2) the epistles (excluding James); (3) James; and (4) Revelation.

To ~~save~~ ^{save} the oneness of the New Testament -- starting from the fact that the epistles, especially Paul's epistles, are considered the central point of reference -- the rest of it (~~the~~ particularly the Gospel stories) is interpreted almost allegorically, to make it fit into the scheme of the Apostle.

15. The question we have to ask ourselves is whether this is a correct procedure (and even whether, within this procedure, Paul has been correctly interpreted).

We would like to offer here the following suggestions:

(1) The a-historical character of the gospel

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message which has been preached in and transmitted through the protestant churches in Latin America is due in part to the fact that we have read Paul without taking into consideration the life and ministry of Jesus. If it is true that it "seems" that Paul himself is not interested in Jesus' "earthly" life, it is also true that: first, according to the book of Acts Paul preached, during his missionary journeys, the kingdom of God; second, the stories about Jesus' life (including especially his death and resurrection) were transmitted in the Christian community as an oral tradition which was later on written down in its present form. The Gospels, as we now have them, do not antedate Paul's writings; and third, being so, it is even more logical that Paul's concept of salvation should be read in the light of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom (since this was the core of his teaching and healing ministry) and not all the way around as it has been done.

(2) Recent studies have been emphasizing the fact

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that Bible translations (both of the Old and New Testament) have been ideologically biased in the sense that they have tended to minimize, spiritualize, and even eliminate some very important aspects of the prophetic proclamation which are undoubtedly included as essential parts of God's message.

A recent book by Dr. Thomas Hanks has stressed this point. In an article on Jacques Pons' doctoral dissertation (L'oppression dans l'Ancien Testament)⁽¹⁹⁵⁾

Dr. Hanks writes the following: "If we translate a Pauline epistle like Romans in the light of Pons' study we can see at once that 'oppression' may indeed be as fundamental to Paul's theology as it is to Jesus, Luke, James and the Old Testament." "Thus--continues Dr. Hanks-- a basic text like Romans 1.18 might well read like this: 'For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all violence (aseleian) and oppression (adikian) of people who by their very oppression (adikia) of their fellows end up suppressing truth itself.'" And he concludes: "Pons' study makes clear not only the ideological prejudices of existing N. T. translations but of our

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N. E. lexicons themselves... For instance, Arndt and Gingrich fail to give 'oppression' as a possible translation for adikia ('injustice') and anomia ('lawlessness') or 'violence' as a possible rendering of asebeia ('impiety, ungodliness')."

This problem (the translation of the New Testament and especially the epistles) shows that we have been reading Paul (and Peter, so to speak) through the religious and ideological perspectives of the hellenistic world and not through the liberating perspective of the Old Testament (as it was put into Greek, first in the Septuagint and later in the New Testament writings).

(3) Paul's theology of salvation, therefore, has to be interpreted in the light of Jesus' preaching (and ministry) about the kingdom. + If Paul did not use very much the expression "kingdom of God" it was because he translated it into terms which would better communicate the idea to his readers (who were mostly gentiles or members of mixed congregations). (I think we have misinterpreted this translation.)

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(4) It is necessary to make a re-elaboration of Wesley's thinking about sanctification and its historical implications. But this re-elaboration should take as its starting point not mainly Wesley's sermons and theological writings but his pastoral and caring ministry, his actions as an actual missionary to the poor and disinherited of his times. This is to say that we should read Wesley "backwards" from his praxis...