

Evangelistic Practice...Then (in early Roman culture) and Now (in today's American culture)

David Suryk for the U of Chicago GCF, 5 March 2010

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The thesis is one sentence: The early Christians (1) embodied the Gospel message and hope in Christ (2) in their life together, and (3) in their speech and conduct before (4) the watching Jewish and Gentile world.

That was then....

I. The watching Jewish and Gentile world (point 4)

- A. Jewish responses: growing opposition to the Jesus version of the Story of Israel; Acts 9 (Paul to Damascus) and 11 (first called "Christians" in Antioch); Jewish Diaspora; Church grew to become predominantly a Gentile Christian church
- B. Gentile responses—
 1. Greco-Roman religion
 - a. Religion not compartmentalized, but embraced and covered all aspects of life—family, business, civic life, and diplomacy
 - b. Traditional G-R religion to preserve the status quo in family, business, polis and Empire
 - c. Participation in G-R religion made you a good citizen (member of the polis and Empire)
 - d. G-R religion was intensely pluralistic and polytheistic: "religious" beliefs varied widely concerning the gods and what it meant to live in this life (pain, suffering, fate, etc.) and what happens at death (extinction, life among the stars, some spiritual afterlife, but no resurrection of a physical body—see N.T. Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*); they yearned for deliverance from this hard life; Paganism wasn't a coherent religion but a collection of religious movements, cults and schools of philosophy; people brought their gods with them as they traveled or were taken captive by the Roman Empire; key to life's meaning came from philosophies and not from worship.
 2. Both Jews and Christians took fire: deviation from G-R religion not easily tolerated: "atheists" either denied the existence of the gods (e.g. Epicureanism) or claimed exclusive monotheism (Jews and Christians); atheism was a denial of the order of society and said in essence that the societal order was perverse; atheism a cause for execution (Domitian in 95 AD had several high Roman citizens executed for atheism).
 3. Christianity no longer viewed as part of Judaism; lost the Jewish umbrella protection; Christians formed ἐκκλησία, the church; in the 2nd and 3rd centuries called the "third race".

II. The Gospel Message that Paul received from the Lord (see Galatians 1-2; cf 1 Corinthians 15) and taught and defended (point 1). Paul's Gospel message: A story about Israel, Jesus, and the world (e.g. Romans 1:1-18; Ephesians 2)

- A. A story about Israel (Rom 1:2-3), about Jesus Christ (Rom 1:3-4, 9), about the world (Rom 1:5b-6, 16) and the new way to be human in the world.. Jesus gathered a new community: reconstituted "Israel" around himself, challenged Jewish symbols (Temple, Sabbath, Torah, Land, Family) and retold the story of Israel with himself as its climax, and opened the way of salvation open to the Gentiles. (Rom 15:8-9ff; 16:25-27; cf John 12:20-26)
- B. It's always been about "Jews and Gentiles"—divided but then united in Christ, and in Christ reconciled together to God. This reconciliation to God is by faith in Christ, and not by Torah/works-keeping. Eph 2 (cf. Paul's entire argument in his letter to the Romans).
- C. This true Story focused around Christ and his people: his agenda for Israel, his death for the sins of the whole world, his resurrection from the dead to a new physical-bodily life, his gathering together a new community animated by the Holy Spirit with himself as its Lord. This Story calls all peoples everywhere to repent and believe in the Lord Christ so as to become together the New Humanity as members together in Christ's church. This Story calls us to live now this new life together in Christ, as we await the resurrection of the dead, the divine judgment (putting things to right) and the coming of New Creation in its fullness. This Story demands to be embodied publicly in the world and shared generously to all—Jew and Gentile alike.

- D. Paul defended this story against Jewish-believers who wanted Gentiles to enter the Church through Torah-keeping and against Gentile-Christians who wanted to go back to their old pagan ways. In Paul's letters he seeks to keep Christians from returning to either Torah-life or to pagan-life.

III. **The Gospel message embodied and lived together in ἐκκλησία. (=assembly of citizens, church!) (Point 2).**

A new social order in the Empire with a different citizenship—not just one cult among many, not a guild, not a burial society, not a volunteer association, but a distinct yet altered polis (πόλις) which is a public entity, and a new yet altered household (οἶκος) which is a private unit. The Church is a new citizenship calling for a new ultimate allegiance (“Jesus is Lord” ergo Caesar is not Lord) a new worship, new way of life, a new orientation to this world (creation good but fallen yet redeemable), a new future (life with God now but a re-embodied life in the return of Christ), and a new telos/end—the reign of God in Christ.

- A. This ἐκκλησία was itself a challenge to the existence of the Roman Empire. Bryan Stone: “To speak of *ecclesia* is to speak of a calling to be a people of God in public, a new and transnational nation gathered and assembled as a visible politics in and for the world.” (*Evangelism After Christendom*, 177) This was a new politics, a new way of being human in the world. Jesus (John 17): in the world but not of the world AND so that the world might believe. Or, in the world, but not of the world so that we can be for the sake of the world.
- B. The life together of the church was to model the new realities of life in Christ to the world. Again, read Paul's letters about not going back to Torah-keeping or going back to pagan ways of life. Christians are to live as members of the one Body of Christ, with Christ as the head and tell others about Christ and to enter into this new life
- C. Household codes: See Dr. Kurt Schaefer's talk and paper on how Paul subverted the household codes that informed much of life in the Roman Empire in the early centuries of the Church. Links found at site mentioned above.
- D. **The church was to live out this life together as shining stars before the watching world**—see e.g. Eph 4:17-5:20 and Phil 2:12-18; 3:20-21 (**Point 3**); The book of Revelation—message to the Seven Churches: churches and surrounding cultures—how well are they embodying the Gospel?
- E. The embodied Gospel was itself part of the message. Key book on that: Bryan Stone's *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Brazos); Rodney Stark's two books, *The Rise of Early Christianity* and *The Cities of God* argue that the rise of early Christianity was not a matter of people being attracted to their beliefs and doctrines but to how the Christians lived. Stark seems to me to be more methodologically naturalistic than is necessary (see e.g. *Cities*, p. 64). A clearer picture: the Christians in their life together embodied the message they shared. People were attracted to the lives of the believers, and their joy and hope in Christ, and the Holy Spirit was dynamically at work.
- F. *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, George Hunter III—the typical pattern: Fellowship, Ministry and Conversations, and then Belief, Invitation and Commitment. Versus the Roman (Catholic) Model: Presentation, Decision, Fellowship (at 53)
- G. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Baker Academic).

....**This is now** Here's let's discuss this together

- IV. How would you describe the watching world today generally? more locally? What are their ultimate loyalties, loyalties that over-ride other priorities? Or, what gods are in play? What aspects of the Gospel message meet resistance to those who embody other gods in contemporary American culture? [Worldview handouts]
- V. What is a common Evangelical understanding of the Gospel message? How has the contemporary church embodied that common understanding of the message? How has this led to a distorted or caricature of what the Church is supposed to be?
- VI. What is the Gospel message you embody and share? How do you and your GCF relate to one another in Christ every day life? To those around you outside Christ?
- VII. In what ways might Christ be calling your witnessing community at the U of C to embody the Gospel message and hope in Christ in your life together, and in your speech and conduct before the watching world? How can you personally and as a fellowship fuel your desire for the Kingdom of God, or better aim your love for Christ and his reign?
- VIII. Closing thoughts from Bryan Stone—handout (choice and pertinent quotes at 194 and 195)