



Biblical Foundation of Church planting

By Jose Carlos Pezini

God's call to Evangelism, to reach the unchurched and to start growing churches

The church of Jesus Christ has always felt that "the Great Commission" passage (Mathew 28:16-20) is a key Scripture passage for understanding the mission of the church and the life of the Christian. It has been the basis for the personal witnessing of many Christians and has been the driving force that has sent missionaries all over the world to reach and preach about Jesus Christ. In the twentieth century, it has been the passage quoted most often in support of God's call for Christian to be involved in the ministry of evangelism. And yet, evangelism is misunderstood by many church leaders and members. It is seen by many as a task to be carried out by professionally trained ministers, missionaries and a few others specially gifted to do this work, not something that all Christian are called to do.

But I believe that the biblical call is for all Christians to be evangelists and do their unique part to bring the gospel to others. The starting point for our evangelism remains the same as it was in the early church. It all begins with God has reached out to us sinful people in Jesus Christ to tell us about and show us God's love and call us back to God from our idolatries and self-serving lives. The beginning point of evangelism is the call to conversion to turn or return to God as the focus and purpose of our lives. Then it is the task of each of us to reach out to those around us to share the good News of Christ that we have received and to demonstrate it by our actions.

However, whereas the beginning point of evangelism may be the call to conversion, seeing evangelism as only the act of individual conversion is a condensed and partial understanding. Our response to God at the time of conversion includes becoming a part of the community of God's people and all that means. David Bosh gives a more complete definition in his book, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* when he says, "Evangelism is the proclamation of salvation in Christ to those who do not believe in him, calling them to repentance and conversion, announcing forgiveness of sin, and inviting them to become living members of Christ's earthly community and to begin a life of service to others in the power of the Holy Spirit." (Bosh 1991, 10)

If we speak of evangelism in terms of making non believers into disciples, we mean much more than making people into new creatures and being assured of a place in heaven. We also mean more than becoming a member of church and making membership in the church the goal of evangelism. Being a disciple means living out the teachings of Jesus and involves a commitment to God's reign, to justice and love, to obedience to the entire will of God. (Bosh 1999, 81) This is carried out while being part

of the community of God's people, the church, as together we carry out God's mission in the world.

Christians have always looked to Jesus Christ to find guidance for how we should live. In our attempts to share with others what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, we continue to look at the life and ministry of Jesus to find a model for doing evangelism, how he both proclaimed and lived out the Good News of God's love and kingdom. Thus we are called to do such things as to center our lives in prayer, to combine our message with healing others' hurts, to evangelize both by our words and by our actions, to serve others, to include all people, to respect and affirm the uniqueness and freedom of others, and so on.

Various words of Jesus have been used over the years to define how and where evangelism and the mission of the church should be carried out. The so called "Great Commission" (Mathew 28:16-20) is the most familiar to many Christians. However, in his book *The Great Commission: Biblical Models for Evangelism*, Mortimer Arias suggests passages from the other three gospels that are of equal importance in defining the evangelistic mission of the church. In fact, he says that our understanding would be deepened and enriched if we studied all four of what he calls Jesus' *last commissions* or final charges to his disciples and interpreted each of them in the context of the whole purpose and unique content of their particular gospel. (Mortimer 1992, 18)

Doing so, for example, we are reminded of Mathew's special emphasis on evangelism in terms of making disciples by baptizing them and teaching them to follow and obey Jesus' teachings. This fits into the character of Mathew's writing as a teaching text with Jesus presented as the new authoritative teacher. (Mortimer 1992, 18)

When we look at Mark, we encounter the text that has defined evangelism in terms of going into the entire world to proclaim the good news to everyone: "Go into the entire world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15). But Arias reminds us that this proclamation is much more than a verbal expression. Throughout Mark the kingdom or reign of God is announced by Jesus in his actions as well as through his words. "The kingdom is multi-dimensional and holistic, and has to be announced holistically through preaching, teaching, healing, exorcising, calling and forming disciples, feeding, comforting and confronting. It is proclamation in action." (Mortimer 1992, 39)

In Luke, we find an emphasis on **repentance and forgiveness in the proclamation**. At the end for Luke's gospel, Jesus says: " Thus, it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witness of these things" (Luke 24: 44-49) In Luke's gospel jubilee themes are emphasized in Jesus' scripture reading from Isaiah in the Nazareth synagogue early in his ministry.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord". (Luke 4:18-19)

Here, Jesus uses Jubilee language and Jubilee actions to tell and demonstrate that entry into God's kingdom brings liberation, healing, rectification, restoration to community and new life to those who had no hope (Mortimer 1992, 57-66). Christian involvement

in social action and social witness can trace some of its roots to this evangelism emphasis in Luke.

Finally, Arias suggests that in the Gospel of John, the last commission give us and ***incarnational model*** for evangelism and mission. Jesus' sends his disciples out into the world just as he was sent by God, (John 20:21) and he gives them the Holy Spirit to empower them for this ministry. The community of disciples and the community of the church are a sent people showing in their life of love the message of new life.

Thus the sent community, by its proclamation or by its neglect of proclamation; by its love or lack of love; by its accepting or rejecting attitude; by its judgmental or by its pastoral approach, is already conveying forgiveness or unforgiveness! Whatever we do in our mission in the world has one or the other effect. This is inevitable in incarnational mission (Arias 1992, 86).

In David Bosch's biblical studies of the origins of evangelism and mission in New Testament texts, he explores the life and writings of the Apostle Paul in addition to the gospels. Along with Paul's particular theological emphases, Bosch notes Paul's focus on evangelism by ***planting new churches***. Paul and his co-worker carefully spread the Christian gospel through their missionary journey and through planting new congregations in many strategic cities of the know world (Bosch 1991, 129-132).

In his book the logic of Evangelism, William Abraham notes that the church in Western Christianity has developed five often competing conceptions of evangelism ministry from such biblical passages as those mentioned above:

1. Proclamation of the gospel
2. church growth and starting new congregations
3. converting unbelievers to Christianity (soul winning)
4. witnessing by sharing our faith or giving our testimony
5. making disciples

Unfortunately, at various times and places usually one aspect of evangelism has been stressed and the others ignored. Typically, this has led to a reductionist view at the expense of a more holistic understanding of evangelism (Abraham 1989, 92-95). All of them are important dimensions of evangelistic ministry, but each alone is inadequate.

Another misunderstanding occurred earlier in this century (and continues on some places) when at times many Christians thought that evangelism and social witness/justice were in opposition. Some people focused on evangelism and other on social witness, and often they argued and fought with each other about whose ministry was more important and should get more money and emphasis in the church. It now seems clear to many people that both our words and our deeds must proclaim the message of Christ. We cannot announce Good News to the poor unless we are also working for justice. Christian actions and deeds are not enough without putting the message into words. Our words without actions of love are not enough either. In his book, ***Be My Witnesses: The Church's Mission, Message and Messengers***, Darrel Guder speaks of this by describing the mission of the church in terms of its witness to God's love in Christ. "We have defined the church's task "to be the witness", and

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