

Ethics and Evangelism: Learning from the Third-Century Church



by Robert E. Webber

A number of years ago, I enrolled in a "preacher-boys" class at a fundamentalist university in the South. The only requirement of the course was to witness to seven people every week and write a brief report on each contact. The teacher of the course—and the founder of the university—was an old-time Southern evangelist who wanted his preacher-boys to be evangelists.

The teacher's method of evangelism had three steps: tell people they are sinners, tell them about Christ, and lead them to salvation. This approach may have converted some people, but statistics would probably show that many of those conversions didn't stick—which is one of the reasons mainline churches are not attracted to hit-and-run evangelism. Mainline churches are, however, becoming increasingly interested in practicing evangelism. The recurring question for such churches is, What kind of evangelism? In response, I would recommend a liturgical approach to evangelism, one that is based on the evangelical practices of the church in the third century. Liturgical evangelism, which is being revived in the Catholic Church, is also an evangelism that emphasizes the ethical side of the gospel. It is this kind of evangelism that will, I believe, take hold in many mainline Protestant churches.

Third-century liturgical evangelism consisted of seven steps—four stages and three rites of passage. This process was designed to bring the converting person to Christ and into the church through a series of seven successively deeper commitments. These stages can be described under the headings of inquiry; rite of entrance; catechumenate; rite of election; purification and enlightenment; rites of initiation; and mystagogy. The ethical content of evangelism appeared in all seven stages.

Here is how it worked: A person who evidenced interest in the gospel was brought to the pastor and elders of the church. An inquiry into or a formal presentation of the gospel took place which emphasized not so much belief in this or that doctrine but the converting person's willingness to adopt the Christian lifestyle—to take up the cross of Jesus and to follow him. If this kind of commitment was made, the convening person went through the rite of welcome, a rite that brought the person into the fellowship of the church as a catechumen.

During the catechumenate, which could last up to three years, the converting person was given time not only to learn the faith, but to live it. When the converting person was able to demonstrate clearly a commitment to the ethical demands of the gospel, he or she entered the period of purification and enlightenment via the rite of election. During the period of purification and enlightenment, which corresponded with Lent, the converting person underwent a time of intense spiritual preparation for baptism. The focus of the preparation was on being purged of the power of sin and on preparing for the rites of initiation into the church. A final renunciation of the power of evil was made in baptism as the converting person stood in the waters. Finally, during the mystagogic period, the convert received teaching regarding the Christian life and the doing of good works, as he or she was integrated into the church.

This form of evangelism in the early church must be viewed in its cultural context, the paganism of the Roman Empire. The people of the Roman world were steeped in an amoral way of life: accustomed to belief in many gods, reliance on magic, and faith in the stars. Consequently, evangelism had to confront people both in the sphere of belief and the realm of lifestyle. Because converts were steeped in paganism, the church needed time to wean them away from their former lifestyle and to teach them the Christian lifestyle.

Inquiry was the initial stage of this process. In inquiry, the good news of salvation was presented and the qualities of life demanded by the gospel made clear. Fortunately, the details of the inquiry have been summarized for us by Hippolytus in *The Apostolic Tradition*, a document written in Rome about 215.

The central issue of inquiry was making the commitment to a new lifestyle, even if that meant changing vocations. Vocations that were related in any way to the powers of evil—such as making idols, being a heathen priest, a user of magic verses, an enchanter, astrologer, diviner, soothsayer, juggler, mountebank or amulet-maker—had to be abandoned, and any lifestyle that led one into immorality was to be rejected. Also, anyone in a job that led to killing—such as that of a charioteer, gladiator, soldier, military commander or civil magistrate with power over people's lives—was required to give it up.

In brief, the period of inquiry was a weeding-out process. Those who came to the church for the wrong reason would not remain. And those who had begun a genuine conversion had to commit themselves to the next phase of the journey. The emphasis was on saying No to the kingdom of evil, which has been overcome by the power of Christ exhibited in his death and resurrection. Those who are to be baptized into his death must learn to "walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). One who claims to follow Jesus and becomes baptized, yet lives in darkness according to the course of this world, is no better than Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24), whose soul, according to Cyril of Jerusalem, "was not buried with Christ, nor did it share in his resurrection."

It was not enough in the third century to have a subjective experience of faith. Faith was to result in works, for "faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:26). Far from assuming a position of works righteousness, the inquiry recognized that commitment to a Christian lifestyle has the effect of producing faith. Behavioral modification produces an inner experience of the external habit. But this transformation does not occur without intention; the convert must intend to adopt the new lifestyle. This act is not an instant accomplishment, taking place in the secret chambers of the heart, but, as the inquiry suggests, a lifelong public commitment.

The ethical emphasis of the inquiry continues throughout the six succeeding steps. For example, in the rite of entrance, a formal repudiation of the old lifestyle takes place in a ceremony of renunciation. In the catechumenate, a weekly prayer of exorcism occurs for the candidate following instruction in the Sunday liturgy. In the rite of election, the sponsor of the converting person must testify to her or his conduct as well as faith. In the period of purification and enlightenment, special emphasis is placed on equipping the converting person to wrestle against the principalities and powers of evil. In the rite of baptism, the convert renounces Satan and spits in the direction of the West, a symbol of the repudiation of the old lifestyle. Finally, in mystagogy, the convert is encouraged to continue to do the good works that characterize the Christian.

The emphasis on ethics in evangelism is viable today because, as in the third century, our cultural context is essentially pagan.

In Russia, China and other countries where the government maintains an avowedly atheistic stance, a commitment to a Christian world view and lifestyle clearly separates one from society. There, a price is exacted from those in the church, and that price is higher the more deeply one is involved: it is one thing to attend church, another to be baptized, and still another to commune at the Table of the Lord regularly. Each step distances Christians from an attachment to earthly powers, and each step intensifies their relationship with Christ and the church.

The paganism of American culture is less obvious, for we do not have to contend with a government that suppresses religious freedom or harasses religious leaders. Churches must therefore exert themselves more to distinguish themselves from the pagan values of the surrounding culture—values that often sneak into our churches themselves.

One such value is that of a fervent, messianic Americanism. Much of our recent nationalistic fervor has gone beyond healthy patriotism into the belief that capitalism and democracy are the saviors of the world. Even many religious leaders are adopting the "America saves" slogan. America, many television evangelists are telling us, is God's answer to the problems of the world. They are propagating a secular salvation which the church must oppose. Another Western value is materialism: the goal of life is more money, larger houses, bigger cars, longer vacations, fancier clothes. Come to God, our religious hucksters tell us, and he will bless you with riches beyond your imagination. To this the church must answer, "Nonsense, bunk, heresy!"

Another Western value that has crept into many of our churches and pulpits is the emphasis on success. Climb the ladder, get to the top, be authoritative, aggressive and commanding. The sign of God's approval is big budgets, huge programs, masses of people.

The ethical emphasis in liturgical evangelism calls these secular values into question. It asks people to see the world as Jesus saw it, from the underside. It calls for a world view and a lifestyle that do not buy into the secular salvations of nationalism, materialism and success.

What kind of congregation will welcome a liturgical evangelism that emphasizes the ethical side of the gospel?

First, it must be a church that seeks to be the church rather than a mere institution or social club. It must recognize the pagan nature of its surrounding culture, and seek to become God's alternative community. It must be a community of people willing to define itself by God's standards rather than by the prevailing standards of our culture.

Second, it must be a congregation committed to evangelism. Many Christians are not involved in evangelism because their local church neither encourages it nor has an effective program for dealing with the new convert. What is needed is a two-sided thrust in evangelism, one side encouraging Christians to share their story of faith with neighbor and friend, and the other side providing a program of inquiry as a formal way of dealing with people genuinely interested in converting to Christ. Church members will be more likely to take the first steps of evangelism if there is a support group in the church to carry converts through the various stages of conversion. To bring a person who shows an interest in the gospel into a church that has no program for helping the convert to grow, organize and deepen his or her experience of Christ is self-defeating.

Third, it must be a congregation willing to actualize the mothering role of the church. In general, most Western churches are a collection of individuals who go to church rather than a community of people who are the church. This is a perversion of the meaning of the church as it was experienced in the early communities of faith and advocated by the Reformers. John Calvin, for example, had the mothering instincts of the early church in mind when he said, "There is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keeps us under her care and guidance."

Finally, a church that emphasizes ethics and evangelism is confident that its leaders are able to model conversion. In the ancient church, each converting person had a sponsor who was a spiritual director and a living example of what it means to be a Christian.

As we have seen, evangelism in the third century began with the hearing of the gospel and the call to a new lifestyle. The converting people were led step by step to reject their former way of life and enter the new life in Christ as shared and experienced by the Christian community.

A revival of third-century evangelism is required at the end of the 20th century for several reasons. First, the recovery of the relationship between ethics and evangelism is a biblical task. Jesus' message was less about a belief system and more about a lifestyle. He did not say, "Believe the right things about me," but, "Take up your cross and follow after me." While certain doctrines about Jesus and his mission were developed by the early church, the emphasis still remained on Christian lifestyle. This is evident, for example, in the primitive baptismal catechesis we find in the Letter to the Ephesians.

Second, evangelism that stresses the ethical dimension of the Christian faith is most relevant to our culture, which is pagan and amoral. To reject materialism, greed, sensualism, militarism, power, status and the American way of life, and to affirm peace, justice, the unity of all peoples, the sanctity of human life, true human rights and equal economic opportunity, is to be radically different in world view and action from the world around us.

Third, in liturgical-style evangelism, the third-century church transcended individualistic evangelism and stressed the salvation found in the community of the church. This makes it an evangelism particularly suited to the local church. Through its stages of ever-deepening commitment, and its rites of passage that symbolically represent the conversion journey, liturgical evangelism brings the converting person into a supportive community.

The recovery of the type of evangelism practiced in the third century, adapted to 20th-century circumstances, could meet the evangelistic needs of the mainline church. Here is a model of evangelism that can involve the whole congregation both in calling other people to Christian discipleship and in strengthening the ethical commitment of the faithful.