

The Gaggling of the Church: Evangelism without the *Evangel*.

William Wade.

Francis of Assisi has little to answer for. Although the quotation of ‘preach the gospel at all times; use words if necessary’ has been attributed to him, the historical truth of the matter is that Francis was a prolific gospel preacher.¹ However, in a contemporary world of increasing political (and seemingly ecclesiastical) correctness, the *unspeaking* Christian is a welcome guest at the public square party; and as such, a ‘nice,’ domesticated Francis sits better within this context than a fiery gospel-preaching Francis.

The cosy alternative to gospel preaching, of course, is to witness in lifestyle only, or as some within the contemporary Church are suggesting, to live the ‘way of Jesus’². In this method of being a ‘light to the Gentiles’ (Acts 13:47), when a believer in Jesus Christ lives out in a visible way the inner convictions of the soul, then that is, in itself, contemporary evangelism. There are at least three difficulties with this posture.

First, evangelism is evangel-ism. In other words, the *evangel* must be an integral part of our evangelism. The *evangel*, based on the Greek words *euaggelizo* (εὐαγγελίζο) or *euaggelion* (εὐαγγελίου), is widely translated as either an announcement, or as good news; as a declaration or as preaching. This then means that evangel-ism is a spoken practice. It is certainly not a ‘silent witness’. However, in our current framework of postmodern subjectivism, somehow certain sections of the Christian Church have rewritten the discipline of linguistics to reprove Greek scholars by suggesting that the *evangel* can be a gagged display. In order to be faithful to the biblical text, this suggestion must be bluntly refuted.

Second, there is a theological record of evangelism in the Gospels and particularly in the book of Acts. Contrary to how some progressive Christian writers and thinkers believe, Jesus of Nazareth was a preacher (Matt. 4:17). Not only was he a preacher, but he was a preacher of repentance: an evangelist. His parting command to the

¹ See, for example, Julien Green’s biography of Francis in *God’s Fool: The Life and Times of Francis of Assisi* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1986).

² Ryan Bolger & Eddie Gibbs propose this lifestyle choice as one of the identifying marks within the emerging church in *Emerging Churches* (London: SPCK, 2006).

disciples/apostles was for them to become witnesses (transl. 'martyr'). If Jesus' followers were to ultimately give their lives for the sake of the gospel – the evangel – it would certainly not be for being 'good' men. This drama of how to be a witness is explicitly covered in the missionary endeavours of Paul and his companions as they travel around the Mediterranean. They do not go from town to town with a strategy of silent works; they preach, challenge, cajole, rebuke, bless, and all the while utilising their voices in doing so. They gain some converts and upset many others. They are hailed as gods and yet at times left for dead. Paul's own account of suffering and joy is recorded in 2 Cor. 11. The events of this dramatic chapter did not merely come about because Paul travelled around carrying out good deeds everywhere he went. Paul was a preacher, like his Saviour before him. The theological record is a standing rebuke to those who suggest evangelism is best carried out in silence.

Third, practically, evangelism which is only visible does not work. I have been an evangelist for 12 years, working with British Forces in Germany. I have been generous in my time, money, gift-giving and ministry. However, there are many others within my working context who are also generous in these and many other ways. I believe in the argument of being a visible witness – but this is *not* evangelism. Evangelism can only take place when we speak. It does not happen by osmosis. The regular soldier I am trying to be a witness to does not see me carrying a heavy box from the post room to help a struggling soldier and automatically equate that to the gospel of Jesus Christ. If I buy a soldier a coffee, that act is not understood as explaining the atonement. If I help train boxers for an upcoming fight, that is not perceived as reflecting the salvific work of the cross. The only way this can be transmitted is by *words*, either spoken or written. In other words, evangelism is effective only when the evangel is delivered; the good news of Jesus Christ offered as a sacrifice for our sin, and by doing so welcoming sinners to receive his grace and forgiveness via repentance.

The gagging of the Church takes place when we submit to cultural pressures and try to become silent witnesses. This method does not express the evangel; it flies in the face of biblical theology; and, in the end, is neither relevant nor effective. As challenging as it may be – it is certainly not an easy task (it is a lot easier to be a silent worker of good deeds) – let us allow the evangel to become a part of our evangelism; let us continue the theological mandate of *speaking* to those who do not

know Jesus Christ; and let us practically, by visible witness and certainly by spoken or written word, transmit the redemptive story to a world lost in ambiguity, self-fulfilment, and, tragically, in judgement-inducing sin.