

The Implications of Ecclesiology for Proselytism and Evangelism

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1. Evangelism

The earliest "Evangelist" was Jesus Christ, proclaiming to his fellow Jews that the Kingdom of God is at hand and is being inaugurated in his own ministry. Jesus proclaimed not so much himself, but God and God's Kingdom.

The second stage in early Christian evangelism was that of Jesus' early followers, as they too spoke to the Jews, seeking to persuade them that Jesus was the Messiah for whom they looked. Both Jesus and his early followers seem to have been largely unsuccessful in their own day, if their attempts are measured statistically by the numbers of their converts, and by around A.D. 135 Jewish Christianity had practically died out.

A third stage in early Christian evangelism, beginning perhaps as early as 50 A.D., was that of Christians addressing, not so much the Jews, as the Gentiles of the Greco-Roman world. The principal evangelist at this stage, and its most powerful leader, was probably St. Paul. By this time, however, there had been a gradual shift in the proclamation or emphasis, from "Jesus' good news about God and God's Kingdom" to "the church's good news about Jesus." By this time, one might say, the proclaimer has become the proclamation, the Evangelist has become the Evangel. And this shift of emphasis, even of content, is reflected in the official position of the Episcopal Church, to which we now turn.

The official position of the Episcopal Church includes the following authoritative definition of "Evangelism," adopted by its 1973 General Convention: "The presentation of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, in such ways that persons may be led to believe in him as Savior and follow him as Lord, within the fellowship of his Church."

Thus, in this definition, the Gospel or good news, the content of the proclamation, is Jesus himself (stage three, above), rather than Jesus' good news about God and God's Kingdom (stage one, above). This is not to say, of course, that the two contents are mutually exclusive, but rather that there has been a shift of emphasis. One can say, after all, that the "Gospel about Jesus"

(stage three) is nearly the same as “the good news that Jesus’ Gospel was and is about God and God’s Kingdom” (stage one). But, by the time of stage three, there has been a shift of emphasis, and this shift is reflected in the 1973 definition where Jesus is the content of the proclamation and no mention is made of God or God’s Kingdom. One might reply that the omission was unintentional, but Jesus’ original proclamation needs to be kept in mind. The good news in which we believe is not only Jesus himself, but Jesus in relation to God, Jesus as Son of God, and thus God is also part of the good news: There is a God and Jesus is the definitive revelation of God. People need Jesus but people also need God, and the two are, for Christians, closely related

The Episcopal Church also has an authoritative definition of “Mission,” incorporated within the Catechism of its Book of Common Prayer: “The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ ... as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love.” (p.855). To compare and analyze the official definitions of evangelism and mission above, it is noteworthy that the church’s mission is seen as virtually everything the church does, or should be doing, in extending the reconciling work of Christ, whereas evangelism is seen as one part of mission, the part that emphasizes the initial proclamation or *kerygma* or spreading of the Gospel (however it may be defined, whether in terms of stage one or stage three above). Evangelism is, as it were, the first step in the church’s mission, the moment of initiative or beginning. The concept of mission, by contrast, is broader and more encompassing, and includes all that follows: catechesis and catechumenal formation, doctrinal and moral teaching, serving and humanitarian ministry, sanctification, working for Christian justice and peace, living the Christian life. But Evangelism, or proclamation, is the first step.

It is also worthy of note that worship is in the Prayer Book Catechism seen as one part of mission, and that it is not identified there as being the same as evangelism. This is important for the following reason. It is not enough to offer the Liturgy and then claim that one has done one’s duty towards evangelism. This view is contrary to the official teaching of the Prayer Book, as quoted above, which indicates that both worship and evangelism (described as proclamation) are constituent but distinguishable components of mission. Worship is, of course, all-important, but it does not take the place of evangelism.

2. Proselytism

Proselytism is properly distinguished from evangelism, although it must be added that the Episcopal Church has no official definition of proselytism. In the recent major edition of Webster's dictionary of the English/American language, to proselytize means to seek to convert from one religion to another. If this definition be accepted, however, most Christians would offer little opposition to it, since they all presumably believe that Christianity is either the only one true religion or at least the religion that is in some sense superior to all the others. The difficulty for many Christians, for many Christian churches, however, comes when the definition of proselytism is extended as meaning to seek to convert from one *church* to another. At the most basic level, no church likes to lose members, so all churches oppose attitudes and acts of proselytism pursued by other churches. It is therefore necessary, for the purpose of this paper, to distinguish between churches which proselytize and churches which are being proselytized against, so to speak. A given church for example, depending upon what doctrine it has of itself, its ecclesiology, might think it all right to proselytize the members of another church, but protest vehemently when some other church does the same to it! In fact, in the former case, of church A seeking to convert members of church B, proselytism may be re-defined by church A as evangelism, while church B continues to regard it as proselytism! If church A thinks itself to be the only true church, that is, and regards church B as holding an inadequate or erroneous view of the Christian faith, then it may regard itself as obligated to evangelize the members of church B even though, from the perspective of church B, such activity is really not evangelism at all, but proselytism

Now we turn more directly to the attitude of the Episcopal Church, which in a general way reflects that of the worldwide Anglican Communion including the Church of England, toward the question of evangelism and proselytism. The Episcopal Church, and other Anglican churches generally, are already known widely for their reluctance to proselytize and for their restriction of evangelism only to persons who are members of no other Christian church. Evangelism, the proclamation of the Gospel in the sense in which this activity is defined by the General Convention and Prayer Book of the Episcopal Church (see above), is generally practiced by Episcopalians only towards persons who are not religious at all, or at least not Christian. Of course, when it is practiced toward members of non-Christian religions, those religions very probably regard such action as being not evangelism but proselytism! There are many figures commemorated in the liturgical calendar of the Episcopal Church whose past ministries may have included a notable zeal for the evangelism/proselytism of members of other religions, people

such as (from January to December) Thomas Aquinas, Anskar, the Martyrs of Japan, Cyril and Methodius, Thomas Bray, Patrick, Cuthbert, Gregory the Illuminator, George Augustus Selwyn, Augustine of Canterbury, the Martyrs of Uganda, Boniface of Mainz, Columba, Bernard Mizeki, Alban, Aidan, David Pendleton Oakerhater, the Martyrs of New Guinea, Ninian, John Coleridge Patteson, Sergius of Radonezh, Remigius, Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky, Henry Martyn, Alfred the Great, James Hannington, Willibrord, Edmund of East Anglia, and Channing Moore Williams, most of whom probably thought it a noble thing to convert persons of other religions to the Christian faith, although there may be slightly less enthusiasm in the Episcopal Church for celebrating such accomplishments today than there was in time past.

3. Ecclesiology

This same reluctance on the part of Episcopalians and Anglicans to seek converts becomes even more pronounced when we consider the attitude toward members of other Christian churches. Usually the Episcopal Church is glad to welcome any member of some other Christian church who of his or her own initiative seeks to switch church membership and become an Episcopalian, but does the Episcopal Church have any policy of initiating, or positively seeking, the evangelism or proselytism of members of other Christian churches? Briefly stated, the answer is NO, but some further distinctions must be made in attempting to delineate and analyze the Episcopal Church's particular attitude toward the Russian Orthodox Church on this question. This paper can obviously not speak for every individual Episcopalian, but, so far as there is an official position of the Episcopal Church on this last question, it is stated in the following resolution, passed by the Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations at its meeting in January of 1992, which expressed "strong disapproval of any efforts on the part of members of this church, clergy or laity, to convert members of the Russian Orthodox Church to the Episcopal Church or any other body or in any way to defame the Russian Orthodox Church or the pious practices of its members."

To the best of my knowledge, the Episcopal Church has no other official policy of deliberately prescinding from evangelism or proselytism toward any other church, other than the Russian Orthodox, and that policy is stated in the foregoing resolution. It is true that Episcopalians are not very active in seeking the conversion of Christians from any other church, but why is there such an explicit policy prescinding from evangelizing or proselytizing towards the Russian Orthodox? I think there are three factors,

geographical, external, and internal, and I now want to probe the substance of each.

First, there is the geographical distance and the dissimilarity of the countries involved. I believe the Episcopal Church generally feels that the Russian Orthodox Church, being the oldest and by far the largest Christian church in the land of Russia, knows best how to minister to the Russian people and is best equipped to do so. It is far better for Episcopalians to assist and support the Russian Orthodox in Russia than to compete with them! Russia is far away from America, even from England, and there seems no point at all in trying to persuade Russians to become Episcopalians, even though most Episcopalians themselves would rather belong to their own church than to the Orthodox. All this is not to say, however, that the Episcopal Church holds to any sort of geographical principle whereby one particular part of the globe, even Russia, is regarded as the “reserved canonical territory” of only one church. (Nor does it appear to us that the Russian Orthodox Church regards England or America as territories within which it will not seek to evangelize or proselytize). No church has the God-given right, we would say, to an exclusive “turf” over one piece of territory, although pragmatically speaking it may make the best sense for churches of a similar sort not to compete with each other in certain places.

Second, there are doctrinal factors external to the Episcopal Church that lead it to be reticent of either evangelism or proselytism with regard to members of the Orthodox churches. These factors can be summarized by stating that the Orthodox churches come just about the closest of any other Christian church to fulfilling the four points of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral (BCP 1979 pp. 876-878), which the Episcopal Church holds to be the minimum of prerequisites necessary for ecumenical union with any other church: The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, and the Historic Episcopate. Many other Christian churches meet the first three of these requirements, yet the Orthodox and the Roman Catholics are the only major churches that meet the fourth (the Historic Episcopate). But the Roman Catholic Church has unacceptably added an infallible papacy of the Bishop of Rome to the fourth of these points, with the result that, external to itself the Episcopal Church finds its greatest doctrinal compatibility in the churches of the Orthodox tradition. Not all Episcopalians would say this immediately, of course, because in the USA the Orthodox are small and not very visible, but I think this is the view that would be taken by most Episcopalians who have studied the matter and travelled in an Orthodox country. In addition, of all churches other than itself, I think it can be said that the Episcopal Church

finds the least to object to in the churches of the Orthodox tradition, and hence, again, with them it already enjoys its greatest compatibility in basic doctrine. The Orthodox seem so similar to us, even if they don't think so, that we see little point in competing with them.

Third and internally within itself, there is the doctrinal factor of ecclesiology, of the Episcopal Church's self-understanding, for it does not believe itself to be the only one true church outside of which there is no salvation, and thus it feels no internal doctrinal obligation to make any great effort to convert the members of every other church into its own fold. It accepts co-existence and a pluralism of churches as a consequence of freedom, even though, as I have suggested, it feels closer to some churches than to others. The Roman Catholic Church, by contrast, still holds officially to a doctrinal principle that "it is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff." If the Episcopal Church, for example, held so exalted a view of its Presiding Bishop, or of the Archbishop of Canterbury, if it believed that it alone is the repository of the fullness of truth, then as an ecclesiological consequence it would consider itself obligated to seek to evangelize and convert the Orthodox Christians of Russia, an attitude that the Russian Orthodox Church however would understandably consider as proselytism. Likewise, if the Episcopal Church held so fundamentalistic a view of Holy Scripture as that held by some of the extreme American cults and sects, and was sure that its interpretation was correct and all others wrong, then, again, as an ecclesiological consequence it would consider itself obligated to seek to evangelize and convert the Orthodox Christians of Russia, an attitude that the Russian Orthodox Church would also consider as proselytism.

4. Implications

But such an attitude is not the ecclesiology of the Episcopal Church. It has an ecclesiological view of itself that is less exclusivist than that of either the Roman Catholics or the fundamentalists, but it also has a more positive view of the Orthodox Church than it does of any other church besides itself. This is why, because of the three factors noted above, the Episcopal Church has tried to be a good friend of the Russian Orthodox Church at least since the formation of its Russo-Greek Committee at its General Convention of 1862; this is why the Episcopal Church would never seek to "evangelize" the Orthodox peoples of Russia; and this is why it will never be accused of seeking to proselytize them. It does not seek to do so itself and it does not look kindly when any other church does so.

This paper now concludes with a question concerning Orthodox

ecclesiology and its implications for the Orthodox attitude towards evangelism and proselytism of Episcopalians in America and of Anglicans in England and elsewhere. It was agreed in the Dublin Statement of 1984 by the official Orthodox and Anglican representatives of the international Anglican-Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Commission that “Anglicans are accustomed to seeing our divisions as within the Church: they do not believe that they alone are the one true church, but they believe that they belong to it. Orthodox, however, believe that the Orthodox Church is the one true Church of Christ, which as his Body is not and cannot be divided.” (paragraph 9, page 11, edition published by St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press). I think this statement is a true description of Anglican ecclesiology, even of the Episcopal Church’s understanding of itself and of its reluctance to proselytize members of other Christian churches, especially the Orthodox. But do the Orthodox agree that this statement is a true description of Orthodox ecclesiology? If they do, and if they also believe that they are “the one true Church of Christ,” are they not obligated to seek to convert and proselytize Anglicans, and indeed other Christians, wherever they find them even outside of Russia, and to call such proselytism “evangelism”? Anglican ecclesiology does not demand such an attitude, but what is the attitude of the Orthodox towards the evangelism or proselytism of us, if the Orthodox believe that they alone are the one true church? If this is their ecclesiology, should they not demand “evangelistic” rights for themselves all over the world and yet refuse co-existence to other churches within Russia? If they believe they are the one true church of Christ, does not their ecclesiology necessarily lead them to be more active and more aggressive and more exclusive than the ecclesiology of the Episcopal Church leads it to be? It is my impression that this is the case, but as an Anglican I wish it were not, and I would be delighted for the Orthodox to say so!