

Supernatural Evangelism – Naturally!

What is evangelism?

The rumour that I only know three Greek words and that two of those are *doner kebab*

- is overstating the truth – but the fact is, that most of us, don't spend a lot of time worrying about NT Greek
- but when considering a word like 'evangelism' (*euangelistes*) that can be a mistake
- In actual fact the New Testament does not use the word 'evangelism' at all
- the only English word even remotely like it that our New Testament versions use is 'evangelist'
- In Acts 21:8 we meet Philip the Evangelist, who was one of the seven
- his appointment had originally been to sort out the lunch boxes for Greek and Hebrew widows (Acts 6)
- but in Acts 8:5 we find him 'proclaiming the Christ' at a city in Samaria
- 'he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ' (Acts 8:12)
- later Philip spoke to the Ethiopian official who had been reading the Bible (from Isaiah 53)
- and beginning with 'that very passage of Scripture ... told him the good news about Jesus' (Acts 8:35)
- the Bible record of Philip ends with his travelling about and preaching the gospel in all the towns (Acts 8:40)

The second use of the word 'evangelist' is in Paul's second letter to Timothy, where he exhorts the younger brother

- to do the work of an evangelist (2 Timothy 4:5) – it seems that Paul is setting up an evangelical-pastorate
- which might throw some light on the third and final use of the word in the New Testament (Ephesians 4:11)
- where Paul, in describing the founding of the church by the Lord Jesus Christ says: It was he who gave -
- 'some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers'
- my observation being that in the appointment of an evangelist and pastor
- we need not think that different types of NT ministry are mutually exclusive – instead these may overlap

Strong's Concordance simply defines an evangelist as 'a preacher of the gospel'

- the word coming from a root word (*euangelizo*) which means to announce the good news
- I think this is an important point – evangelism is announcing good news, 'good news' being the same as gospel
- the NT uses one word for the phrase that NIV variously translates proclaim/teach/tell the good news
- there are 10 instances of this in the book that we call the *Acts of the Apostles* - they are worth a mention
- we have previously mentioned two but I think the other eight bear mentioning – the two we mentioned
- 'Philip ... preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ' (Acts 8:12)
- 'Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus' (Acts 8:35)
- 'the Apostles ... never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ' (Acts 5:42)
- 'God spoke to Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all' (Acts 10:36)
- (they) 'began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus' (Acts 11:20)
- In Lystra and Derbe and the surrounding country 'they continued to preach the good news' (Acts 14:7)
- 'We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from worthless things to the living God' Acts 14:15)
- 'The preached the good news in that city (Derbe) and won a large number of disciples' (Acts 14:21)
- 'Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection' (Acts 17:18)
- Paul's sermon at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-41) is one of the six great sermons in Acts beginning:

'We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus ... Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.'

(Acts 13:32, 38)

- however, in order to give an overview of the Apostolic message (the gospel) I am referring to Acts 2:14-47

What is the evangel? (The content of evangelical proclamation)

Since August 2006 I have done a chaplaincy round in two north Plymouth Hospitals

- in these I find that I am often asked about my church – this question might come in different forms
- as a Methodist minister, I might be asked the difference between a Methodist and an Anglican
- as minister of a large suburban church and a small village chapel, I might be asked something about those
- these are not bad conversations to have – but they are not proclaiming the gospel
- while I might not need to say in this context (as I have done in other contexts)
- ‘tell them the good news about Jesus rather than the bad news about the church’
- most of us know what that means

Speeches or sermons form a significant part of Acts and those of Peter, Paul and Stephen make up a quarter of it

- in studying Acts we are in touch with the earliest Christian preaching and its content, the six sermons
- Peter at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-41); after the healing of a beggar (Acts 3:12-26)
- Stephen before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:1-60); Peter at Caesarea Philippi (Acts 10:34-43, 47)
- Paul at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-41); Paul at Athens (Acts 17:16-34) reveal six major points
- which are all contained in Peter’s Pentecost sermon and often repeated in the other sermons
- Jesus was the promised Messiah or Saviour
- the death of Jesus was part of God’s plan
- God raised Jesus from death as he promised
- The resurrection of Jesus was witnessed and proved
- Jesus is glorified now and for ever
- All must repent and believe in him

While I am not saying for one moment that Christians should immediately launch into these six points

- or feel morally obliged to get all six into every conversation
- when given the opportunity to say something about the church or our faith – keep these in mind
- when asked, ‘well what is it that makes your church different?’ or any other question
- we can easily get distracted to peripherals and talk about the authority of the Bible (which I accept)
- or the format of the Sunday services (which to me is neither here nor there), or the building
- or about having a choir or not having a choir, about having a band or not having a band
- about having coffee and doughnuts before, during, or after the service - or all three!

The content of the evangelical proclamation must focus on the message of the person and work of Jesus

- Jesus was the promised Messiah or Saviour
- the death of Jesus was part of God’s plan
- God raised Jesus from death as he promised
- The resurrection of Jesus was witnessed and proved
- Jesus is glorified now and for ever
- All must repent and believe in him

In our proclamation of the gospel we must also be careful not to add anything to the gospel-message

- the temptation for Baptists is that it is Jesus and Baptism
- the temptation for Charismatics is that it is Jesus and some kind of spiritual blessing or gift
- for certain evangelicals it is Jesus and the Five Points of Calvinism (only one or two out of five for me!)
- for Victorian Methodists it was about repenting of our sins, trusting in Jesus (so far so good you might say)
- *and* not smoking, not drinking, not gambling, not dancing and not playing games on Sundays (5/5 for me!)

The difference between evangelism, preaching and witnessing

So far I have made no distinction between evangelism, preaching and witnessing

- Witnessing is important in the NT particularly in the writings of John and Acts
- (the Greek word, in its origin can mean not only testifying or witnessing but doing so to the point of death)
- The witness-theme in the NT stresses the importance of the historical foundations of the Christian faith
- The NT insists on the role of eyewitnesses who bear testimony to what they have seen and heard (NIDNTT)

It is a vital part of the total task of the Church and the individual believer to make Christ known

- preaching is one way of doing that and it is possible to be a preacher who is primarily an evangelist
- witnessing is another way of doing that and witnessing can be an important part of the preached message
- while in modern terms ‘preaching’ is something we more readily associate with a group not an individual
- in New Testament terms, it simply means to tell the good news (not necessarily in a sermonic style)
- on the other hand it is possible not only to witness to a large group but to a smaller group or individual
- some people are making fine distinctions with these words
- contending that witnessing is what Jesus has done for you (a task to which all Christians are called)
- while preaching is what Jesus will do for someone else (a task to which only preacher-evangelists are called)
- but I do not see it that way and I don’t think that the NT allows such subtle distinctions

Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

(Acts 5:42)

Gospel-signs

In the latter half of the last century parts of the church were very involved in different types of evangelistic work

- from the high-profile Billy Graham Crusades to courses and training programmes on how to witness, such as
- *Person to Person, Knowing God Personally, Evangelism Explosion*

I ought to preface my remarks on these by recalling an incident concerning D L Moody

- sometimes thought to be the greatest evangelist of the 19th century
- a lady once criticised D L Moody for his methods of evangelism in attempting to win people to the Lord
- Moody replied, 'I agree with you. I don't like the way I do it either. Tell me, how do you do it?'
- The lady replied, 'I don't do it.' Moody responded
- 'I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it!'

It was my privilege (and I use the word advisedly) to attend nine Mission London meetings in 1989

- I had been taken behind the scenes at Earl's Court by a coach driver with fish and chips for the choir
- and as we were scurrying through backstage the platform cleared and I was greeted by George Beverley Shea
- who shook me by the hand and said to me, 'What have you got in that box?'
- I replied 'fish and chips for the choir' – 'carry on he said' and went on his way
- next out was Billy Graham – he looked at me rather inquisitively and asked, 'What have you got in that box?'
- I don't expect I need to repeat the answer – as a Christian I was glad to meet him and to go to the meetings
- but I was a bit worried about the unbelievers – I saw one looking like a frightened lion in a den of Daniels
- everything was well-arranged for the Christian – we were not vulnerable at all
- we were playing on home ground, and there were thousands of us
- I am pretty sure the Christians far outnumbered the unbelievers – hardly Billy Graham's fault, was it?

Evangelism Explosion is an evangelistic method developed by James Kennedy

- one of the techniques is to wear a lapel badge with two question marks
- and when someone becomes curious enough to remark on it the Christian is able to reply
- that is to remind me that I must ask you two questions
- Do you know for certain that if you were to die tonight you would go to heaven?
- If you were to stand before God and he were to say to you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven ...
- What would you say?’

While remembering the one-liner of D L Moody, I remember the late Dr Donald English contrasting this method

- with the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at Sychar’s Well (John 4)
- I needn’t repeat the gentle parody of the rabbi wearing a badge with two question marks on his robes
- Instead, Jesus spoke to the woman about the only thing that they had in common
- He was a man, she was a woman; he a Jew, she a Samaritan; he a devout rabbi, she a woman with baggage
- but they had both come to well for the same reason – and in the common humanity
- Jesus found a sign of the gospel and expounded it to her – so that having first seen a man
- and later a Jew, and a rabbi, and a prophet – she went away wondering if this were the Christ

What I learn from the story is that while it is not necessarily wrong to have a method in mind

- evangelism is not a technique it is a supernatural activity – as the Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

(1 Corinthians 3:6-7)

It was Jesus who spoke to the woman at the well about water

- to the Galilean fishermen about being fishers of men
- to the crowd that had been fed by the five loaves and two small fish about the bread of life

It ought to encourage us that every week millions of Christians arrive in the workplace on Monday

- they have been in church on Sunday, prayed, sung, read and listened to the great commission
- not so much to ‘go’ as to ‘make disciples’ – ‘going’ is the easy bit, ‘making disciples’ more challenging

One of my former ministers, Gareth Crossley, comments:

‘The irony is that many of God’s people are out there already but are living such introverted lives that they make no real contact with other human beings.’

Gareth Crossley, *Everyday Evangelism*, (Evangelical Press, Welwyn, 1987:78)

It is an error to think that the process of evangelism begins when we start speaking about Jesus

- it begins in the first contact that we have with another person – by electronic media, telephone or in person
- it is a mark of our times that people not only don’t want to be preached at but they don’t want to listen
- they have had their fill of high-powered salesmen – in just about every sphere of retail
- to quote Donald English again, ‘the gospel does not need more salesmen but more free samples’
- ‘the single most important factor which influences the unconverted is the quality of the life we live’ (*EE*:89)
- but many of our encounters with other people are brief – and we need to be ready
- and although I suppose it is a technique I don’t think it is unbiblical - get them to ask the question you want
- and then be ready with the answer (1 Peter 3:15) – we need to look for providential opportunities

In 2003 I attended a football dinner at Plymouth Argyle – I was sat at the table with several young men

- I thought to myself, how I am going to have any opportunity to witness here?
- but I came up with a line that I thought might get them to ask me a question I wanted to be asked
- suddenly it came to me and I said, ‘the only thing I hope is that we don’t have regularly Sunday games’
- ‘Why’s that one asked?’ (Perfect, just what I wanted) ‘Because for me following Argyle is important ...
- but it is nowhere near as important as following Jesus’ (‘We go to Mutley Baptist Church’, they replied.)

At a recent Christian conference for preachers, my esteemed friend, John Gillespie, needed to get some lunch

- we made our way to a little delicatessen shop with a huge array of tempting goodies
- I said, ‘You don’t think that pie will make my friend fat do you? He says people don’t listen to fat preachers.
- Would you listen to a fat preacher?’ The assistant, clearly surprised was not sure what to say
- but the comic value of the interlude enabled me to say where we were from and why we were there

Since 1990 I have tried to carry with me some full colour publicity about my church

- this includes a gospel message and so when I give it away it is not just about me or about the church
- but actually contains some Christian content – there’s not much space (but people are not going to read much)

The God who made the universe loves us yet our relationship with him has been broken by our unbelief and disobedience. Through Jesus Christ, his Son, God came to seek after us and to save us. Jesus died for our sins, has risen from the dead and is calling us now to follow him. He offers forgiveness for the past, new life for the present and hope for the future. With our grateful thanks we offer God our worship and service, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

It also refers people to the church's website – we are working on developing an enquirer's page

- for people who are not Christians to visit – it's more difficult than it sounds
- I am working on some brief gospel content and so far have come up with this:

Christian faith does not mean knowing the answers to everything. It means believing some things are true despite not knowing the answers to everything.

God loves you - whatever circumstances you are in, whatever you have or have not done - God loves you.

God has shown this love for you by coming to the world in person - in Jesus.

Jesus fulfilled God's plan for saving you by dying for you on the cross - not just by dying but by dying for you.

Jesus has shown that he is victorious over everything, including death, by rising again.

God wants you to believe this and live your whole life, every minute of every day, with him and for him.

At the moment, there are two trends in modern society that I am trying to tap into for the gospel

- the first is the popularity of biblical names – most people are interested in the origin or meaning of their name
- and if it is a biblical name that is an opportunity to say something about the story
- but it's best to set it up so that the person asks you something about the name rather than boring them

So, if I meet someone with a biblical name, I might say to them,

- that's a name from the Bible, isn't it? Who was that in the Bible?
- Rather than my lecturing it gives them an opportunity to tell me if they know or perhaps to ask
- I tried this fairly recently with an older teenager, 'Abigail', but she did not seem to be at all interested
- detecting this I said, 'would it help if I told you that she was an intelligent and beautiful woman?'
- 'Well yes, I suppose it would,' she said, laughing. So I continued:
- 'In the Bible, Abigail's husband was a bit of a berk, well, to be honest, he was a lot of a berk
- not least when the King and his army showed up – but Abigail showed hospitality to the King and his men
- and after her husband died, she later married the King – that King was David, an ancestor of Jesus
- the one who was born to be Saviour of the World – Once in Royal David's City and all that ...
- Nice meeting you, Abigail' – I gave her a card and left
- repeating the pattern with Rachel, Rebecca, Naomi, Joshua, Joseph and Luke is not that difficult
- I try to keep the conversation light and fun – because, sadly, Christians have a reputation for being miserable

When is the next significant evangelistic opportunity going to come your way?

- for many of us it will be tomorrow morning when we go into work – we set our stall this way?
- Hello did you have a nice weekend? What did you do? If all goes well they will ask you the same back
- And you reply something like this: 'I nearly always have a good weekend because I love Sundays'
- if you don't say anymore they might ask you 'why?' so that you can reply
- Sunday is a day that I am nearly always at my church, I have some great friends there but best of all
- I belong to a church where the person who speaks at the service tells me something really relevant
- to day to day living – if things go really well, your friend might ask, 'really what did he tell you yesterday?'

What is the most commonly asked question from the 26 December to well on into the New Year?

- Hello, did you have a nice Christmas?' Surely a Christian can manage a good answer to that
- without going into sermon mode or boring the pants off the person who will be scared ever to ask again
- 'Oh! You know, the usual – mother-in-law for dinner, nothing on the telly, but one thing was brilliant?'
- Now you just hope and pray that they ask you, so that you can deliver the line that you have been practising
- 'What was the one thing that was brilliant?' I celebrated the birth of Jesus, my Saviour.

Finally, if I had to tell you two things I really love it would be ice cream and chocolate

- I would not find it hard to tell you about either of these, with enthusiasm
- but suppose I were to take a different tack – with someone I had met a few times
- and had talked with them quite naturally about chocolate – particularly chilli chocolate
- the wonderful thing is that they have never tried chilli chocolate (Lindt or South Devon Chilli Farms)
- how easy would it be for me to say, 'you know that chocolate we were talking about?'
- 'I've got you a bar to try and I hope you don't mind but I thought while I was there
- I would put something else with it that is really important to me and that I would like to share with you too'
- Often I imagine what's the worst that can happen? I suppose the worst that can happen is I can look stupid
- Sometimes being willing to look stupid, or vulnerable is part of sharing in supernatural evangelism naturally

Now we come to some practical exercises and there is a selection for you:

- think of spiritual conversation that you could have with someone about a gospel sign (e.g. water at the well)
- write a gospel message for a postcard, website or similar – but in fewer than 100 words (or 120)
- relate something you might say to a person with a biblical name – that heads towards Jesus
- relate a conversation where you try to get to ask the person what you want to be asked –
- but where your answer quite naturally includes mentioning Jesus