

Evangelism and Social Ministry in the Apostolic Church:

Witnessing to God's Shalom

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"Witness to God's shalom (what Christians will eventually come to call "evangelism")... is born out of the prophetic intersection between hope and dissatisfaction, invitation and confrontation, attraction and subversion. It is to the great detriment of evangelism in our time that it has largely lost its moorings in this Jewish prophetic social imagination and in a hopeful vision that is utterly social, this-worldly, historical, material and peaceable. While Christian evangelization is anchored in and points to the person of Jesus, it must learn to drink deeply from the wells of the prophetic tradition apart from which the life, ministry and message of Jesus make no sense."

Brian Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness*, Grand Rapids, Brazos, 2007, p.72

We have to start by recognising that the idea that there might be a division between evangelism and social engagement was never a question for the apostolic church. The rigid division between "spiritual" and "material" only arrived with the Enlightenment, and the idea that there is faith that has no consequences for the way we live would be entirely alien to the early Christians. It is completely absent from the Jewish Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, and so it is also absent from the New Testament and from the life of the New Testament church. The proclamation in word is for the building up of the church (as Paul reminds us constantly, especially in 1 Corinthians), and the community is not a disembodied idea, but a group of people with very basic physical and material needs – food, clothing, shelter. Most of the people probably lived at more or less a subsistence level, and they needed the Good News to be really good news.

The Scriptures they would have heard was the Old Testament, so we can start there with the vision of shalom, present especially, though by no means solely, in the prophets.

Consider for example, Isaiah 11:1-9

¹ A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

² The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³ His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; ⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. ⁶ The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸ The nursing child shall play over

the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹ They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

The saviour, the Messiah, the anointed one of God, will come bringing Good News, which will have as its consequence the restoration of all creation in harmony with its Creator. This echoes the first covenant contained in the Old Testament, the covenant with Noah:

Genesis 9:8-16

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹"As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." ¹²God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth."

The witness we are charged with bringing is ultimately to all creation, since all creation is blessed by God and included in God's covenant. This is picked up clearly in the New Testament, for example in both Ephesians (1:3-10) and Colossians:

Colossians 1:15-20

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers-- all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

The epistles here pick up on another Isaian motif, that the coming Messiah will be the prince of shalom:

Isaiah 9:6-7

⁶For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

The Messiah is thus seen as the one to restore God's shalom, the wholeness of the relationship between God and humankind and the whole of creation, with its implications for the restoration of the relationship between human beings themselves and between human beings and the rest of creation.

This is the Good News we are called to proclaim, and thus evangelism is, as Brian Stone reminded us, a witness to God's shalom. The Good News of salvation through faith in Christ Jesus is another way of putting this – the restoration of the wholeness and harmony of creation broken through the entry of sin into the world. Only God can restore this wholeness, and the witness of the Church is to this fact, to God's saving presence. How this plays out we can see in some of the texts from the New Testament.

New Testament

We will look more at Matthew tomorrow, so we can start with Luke's mission mandate, although we can briefly compare it to Matthew. When Jesus sends out the 70 (or 72), he gives them the following instructions:

Luke 10:5-9

⁵Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' ⁶And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. ⁷Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. ⁸Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; ⁹cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'

Note the order: proclaim first God's shalom on the place, then cure the sick, and only then proclaim the news about the nearness of the Kingdom.

Matthew (10:7-8) has a different order:

⁷As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' ⁸Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

Here the proclamation comes first accompanied by the social ministry. The fact that the two gospel writers can change the order is a sign that the two are so closely interwoven that it makes no sense to separate them out at all. The work of care for the sick and the excluded is an integral part of the proclamation of the nearness of the Kingdom. Earlier, in chapter 7:24, Matthew begins the parable of the wise and foolish builders with the phrase "everyone who hears my words and does them", reminding us that the Good News is always an enacted statement. Merely saying "Lord, Lord" is not enough (Mt 7:21)

Acts of the Apostles

2:44-47

⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Note how this community lived out God's shalom, the wholeness of God's plan for creation. At the heart of this is their mutual concern and care, so that none should be without. However idealistic this picture might be, and however much it may or may not reflect the actual life of the community it has continued to inspire Christian communities as a model of what could be, because it reflects what we know in our hearts God wants us and our world to be.

Acts 6:1-7

¹ Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. ²And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, ⁴while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." ⁵What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Two points can be made about this story for our purposes today. Anything which threatens the shalom of God's people has to be dealt with by finding a way to restore that shalom. Moreover, that shalom requires the material well-being of people, as well as their spiritual well-being, since the two can only theoretically be divided. The second point is that not everyone in the community has to everything, but the community as a whole must fulfil all the tasks given it by God. This may remind us that evangelism is always ultimately a task for the whole of God's people, but that each will contribute to this in different ways.

I'd like to reflect on one other passage from Acts, the story of Paul's imprisonment in Philippi, and the reaction of the gaoler.

Acts 16:25-34

²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. ²⁷When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be

saved?" ³¹They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Again we can draw attention to two points. The first is that freedom is a gift which leads to conversion. There is the freedom of Paul and Silas, but perhaps more importantly the freedom for the gaoler, to embrace life, to encounter the goodness of people, the way in which they act to bring life and wholeness instead of death and brokenness. Secondly, the response is first to bind the wounds and secondly to be baptised. The social, humanitarian action is in a sense a necessary prerequisite for really being able to say that one believes in God and accepts Jesus as one's Saviour.

God's Shalom in the Pauline Communities

Paul himself notes in Romans 15:18

¹⁸ For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, ¹⁹ by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ.

For Paul, there is no separation between word and deed.

Throughout his letters Paul refers to the need for mutual care and concern (the restoration of God's shalom) in the communities. These statements in Paul often come in the second half of his letters, which have often been thought of as the "imperative" or "paraenetic" parts, following the "indicative" statements of the first part. In other words, because we are saved through faith in Christ Jesus whom God has sent for our salvation, we must behave in certain ways. What we say and what we do simply cannot be separated. If we do not live our proclamation, we are not saying anything. In this sense, at least, a parrot is not an evangelist.

Consider for example, Romans 12:9-21

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The desire for the restoration of God's shalom is to be an integral part of the Christian community, and this desire is not limited to the community itself but reaches beyond (as chapter 13 goes on to suggest). The witness to the world comes from the way the community lives together (as we also saw in Acts).

This is why Paul reacts harshly to the behaviour of the Corinthian community, since the various cases he responds to are all ones where the church does not give a witness of shalom, of wholeness and peace, but of conflict, of disorder, of destruction. This is made explicit in 1Cor 7:15: "It is to peace that God has called you".

The well-known image of the body in chapter 12 of 1Cor is another way of expressing this – the body operates because all the parts function in harmony. It is also important to note precisely this very material image. The community is a living organism, not some abstract spiritual concept.

We will turn shortly to the collection for the saints in Jerusalem, but it is worth noting here that in Paul's version of the Council of Jerusalem, in Galatians 2:10, the one thing that he remembers as being commanded by the church gathering in Jerusalem was "that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do." There can be no proclamation of Good News that ignores the prime addressees of that Good News, the poor. And concern for the poor is again not a question of saying some prayers, but of a very real attention to them.

Perhaps this is expressed most clearly in the Pastoral Epistles, which certainly reflect the customs and practices of the Pauline communities.

1Tim 5:8-10

⁸And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. ⁹Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once; ¹⁰she must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way.

The Collection

In most of Paul's letters there is mention of the collection for the church in Jerusalem, presumably to alleviate the sufferings of that community brought about by one of the periodic failures of harvests in the region, something to which all large cities in the Empire (and indeed smaller ones too) were subject. Perhaps the important point here is to recognise that this is extending the idea of mutuality of love and care beyond the immediacy of the local community – Christian and non-Christian – to a wider degree. Again, it reminds us that shalom is all-embracing. There can be no peace which is only partial, no well-being and harmony where there is illness and discord. We can take as examples Paul's comments in the Second Letter to the Corinthians

2Cor 8:1-15

¹We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their

means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saint – ⁵and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, ⁶so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. ⁷Now as you excel in everything-- in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you-- so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. ⁸I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. ⁹For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. ¹⁰And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something-- ¹¹now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. ¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has-- not according to what one does not have. ¹³I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between ¹⁴your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. ¹⁵As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."

Note especially v.9. The reason for giving is not only to alleviate the hunger of the community in Jerusalem. It is also related to the way in which Jesus came to us (cf. Phil 2:6-11). This is not to suggest that therefore the giving is only important if it somehow has a non-material explanation, but to show again that in fact the two simply cannot be separated. Faith is not abstract or unlived, but is evidenced in particular ways of life and care for the other in her or his need.

Paul goes on to say to the Corinthians:

2Cor 9:10-15

¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; ¹²for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, ¹⁴while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Here, too, we see (v.11) that the giving of gifts for the saints will lead to thanksgiving being given to God. In other words, it has itself a clear evangelistic outcome. God is glorified by the generosity of the people of God who in their generosity show their confession of the gospel of Christ.

Other Writings

One of the key texts is the letter of James. Although this was not Luther's favourite text, and others have joined with him in finding it scarcely worthy of insertion in the canon, it has more recently been seen as a very carefully argued work which precisely seeks to lead divided communities back into unity and harmony (shalom).

Thus the kind of division between faith and work, between spiritual and material, which forms the background to the letter, is to be overcome because it is against God's shalom, God's Kingdom which is made present in and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

James reminds us, first, that "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." (James 1:17) Thus, all giving is possible, only because we have received from God already.

In words reminiscent of Matthew, he continues (1:22-25):

²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act-- they will be blessed in their doing.

To do the word is what matters, not simply to hear it. And to do the word is more than a question of speaking, but includes the care for the whole of creation. Some practical examples of this are given in the attitude to the rich and the poor which James has obviously observed in his community:

James 2:1-7

¹My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ²For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

This is where the heart of the supposed disagreement between Paul and James comes in. James writes (2:14-17)

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?" ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. ¹⁸But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

He concludes the chapter by saying (v.26) "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead."

The key verse is probably 18 – what does faith mean if it does not have any visible effect on the life of the person? And even if it means something, is there any point in it? To proclaim faith in Jesus cannot be simply a matter of announcing words, but is

always accompanied by a way of life that lives out the Good News that is proclaimed. It involves clothing and feeding those who have nothing – and, to reiterate, this was no empty rhetorical statement in NT times, but a daily threat to many. James should make us uncomfortable because he does not allow us to hide behind some notion of the spiritual that precludes actually doing anything about the world we live in. As Bonhoeffer reminded us, and also showed us in his life, discipleship is costly, grace is not cheap.

We can perhaps finish with 1 John, where the author reminds us time and again of the centrality of love. For John, this is not some sentimental idea: love is not here so much a noun as a verb, an action, something we do and, as children of God who is love, are.

1John 3:11-18

¹¹ For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. ¹²We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. ¹³Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. ¹⁴We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. ¹⁵All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. ¹⁶We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? ¹⁸Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

It is no good to speak about love and ignore those who suffer. Our words need to be enacted, lived out, expressed in all we do and are. Otherwise, they are empty.

1John 4:11.16-21

¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹⁶ So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the Day of Judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

The message we proclaim is one of love, of God's love for us which caused him to send his Son so that all who believe in him might have eternal life. Jesus came and preached in word and deed, and proclaimed the glory of the Father through the power of the Spirit in all he did and said. We are commissioned to go out and teach all he commanded us, to go out from him as he was sent out from the Father. To make disciples is to form people who will walk in the way of the Lord, doing what the Lord did.

I finish with these words from Matthew's gospel, 11:2-5, for this is how people will know that the message that we proclaim is indeed Good News for them and for all people, and for the whole of creation, and that, in Jesus, God's shalom is restored in its fullness.

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

QUESTIONS

- **What in our situation are the main causes of the breaking of God's shalom?**
- **Do you see any relation in your practice of evangelism to the prophetic tradition? If so, what? If not, why?**
- **What in our practice of evangelism helps us to build links with "the saints in Jerusalem", those in other churches and places?**