Listening for the Still Speaking God: Contemplative Evangelism

from an article on Evangelism and Spiritual Formation
by Richard V. Peace, PhD

EDITED BY DAVID SCHOEN, EVANGELISM MINISTRY TEAM

Introduction

The following excerpt is from an article "Evangelism and Spiritual Formation " written by Richard Peace, PhD. in the Theology News and Notes from Fuller Theological Seminary in Fall 2004 on The Challenge of Evangelism in the 21st Century. Dr. Peace writes on Contemplative Evangelism stressing the spiritual formation necessary for evangelism ministry. He writes of both the spiritual formation necessary for forming new disciples as well as the spiritual formation necessary in the lives of evangelists.

I asked Dr. Peace, who is a United Church of Christ pastor and member, if I could use this excerpt from his article about the spiritual formation of evangelists, since his article spoke so well of evangelism and listening to the still speaking God in our lives. The only editing involved is in the last two sections where I have inserted 'still speaking' comments in parentheses.

-- David Schoen

The Spiritual Formation of Evangelists

The issue of spiritual formation extends in two directions. So far we have been discussing the formation of new believers, but evangelists themselves need formation first. In fact, I would argue that it is because we have not always attended carefully enough to issues of personal spiritual formation that evangelists have such a negative image. In our culture, evangelists are regarded as people without much personal integrity. You see this caricature in films, especially those about mass evangelists or revivalists. Films such as Elmer Gantry (1960, with Burt Lancaster) and Leap of Faith (1992, with Steve Martin) reinforce the idea that evangelists are in the business of religion and that they dupe credulous people for their own ends of money, power, and sex. Even the much more nuanced film The Apostle (1997, by Robert Duvall), raises these charges (though it moves beyond caricature to the possibility of genuine repentance, faith, and experience of the power of God). While the vast majority of men and women who engage in evangelism are people of integrity, this caricature is alive in our culture. To be honest, it has a basis in fact that keeps getting reinforced via the extravagances of certain televangelists and the public sins of others who claim to be evangelists.

The temptations for an evangelist are real. The first temptation may be to overvalue yourself, especially if you are in the public eye and having an impact on others. The next temptation may be to take advantage of others since yours is “such an important calling.” This justifies becoming upset when people fail to do what you want. It is a short step to feeling that you are due special treatment and special reward, given the rigor of your work. And then it is an easy leap to disregarding the “rules” that apply to other, lesser mortals. So the lines become blurred when it comes to sexuality, finance, and entitlement. Keep such an attitude to ministry long enough and you may even descend into a kind of world-weary lethargy that justifies days spent wasting time, only occasionally rising to preach salvation.

These temptations can be described in
another way, using the language of spiritual theology. What I have just described are manifestations of the seven deadly sins: pride, anger, vainglory, gluttony, lust, avarice, and apathy. To talk about the seven (or eight) deadly sins is to return to the world of desert spirituality. Beginning in the fourth century, men and women fled into the wilderness in response to what they considered to be the corruption of Christianity that took place after the Edict of Milan (313 c.e.) which legalized Christianity. There in the desert, they sought to lead a life based on the Great Commandment. The so-called seven deadly sins were understood to be impediments to such a life of love. Consequently, great care, discipline, and energy were given to avoiding these sins. They practiced spiritual disciplines so as not to be snared by those vices that could destroy love.

I am convinced that just the study of such a movement as desert spirituality can alert individuals to the common traps that have afflicted not just modern evangelists but men and women down through the centuries. Even better, the practice of the spiritual disciplines of desert fathers and mothers makes it far less likely that one would be caught by such passions. We must broaden our understanding of how to prepare men and women for the ministry of evangelism. Conscious effort at spiritual formation as part of one’s training to be an evangelist and as part of one’s lifestyle as an evangelist would yield a depth of spirituality that would impact positively the work of evangelism.

Evangelists tend to be activists by nature. I have in mind individuals who are engaged in proactive evangelistic ministries in church or para-church settings. Such folk often find it hard to stop and give themselves to traditional formational activities. Bible study is pragmatic: what will I preach? Prayer is intercessory: who needs to be saved and what problems are we facing in ministry? Spiritual reading is functional: what books or articles will provide illustrations or give new insights into outreach? Retreats are activities: how can we plan our next effort? Worship is energizing: I need rejuvenation from the Lord to preach with passion.

In contrast, classic spiritual formation is birthed in silence, shaped by the spiritual disciplines, and guided by a knowledgeable spiritual director. In other words, what I am suggesting is a whole new world of spirituality to be explored by those engaged in an evangelistic ministry. At the center of such spiritual practices is an awareness of God that the ancients called “the habitual presence of God.” This is the sort of thing Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection wrote about: the actual presence of God in the midst of the tasks of kitchen and other daily activities. Likewise, Frank Laubach, the modern missionary who did so much to promote literacy, urges us to adopt what he calls his “Game with Minutes” in which we seek to develop the habit of having God in mind each minute we are awake. Suffice it to say, the kind of evangelistic ministry that emerges from the quiet of retreat and from the prayer of contemplation is different than that which has an activist core. I am not arguing that such outreach is “better,” only that it is different and underutilized in the Protestant tradition.

Contemplative Evangelism (Encountering the Still Speaking God)

What would evangelism itself look like if it sprang from an ongoing encounter with (the Still Speaking) God? I suggest that it would mirror the results of careful listening to God: it would express directly the love of God which we are experiencing ourselves and to which we invite others. It would be evangelism that bids others to come into this space with us and seek God. It would be evangelism that urges others to notice and remember the many ways God has already been active in their lives. It would be evangelism that provides the tools for opening oneself to God through prayer, Bible study, journaling, and in the silence of listening. It would be evangelism that draws upon the rich, historical worship life of the church.

What if prayer were the central component of evangelism? By this I mean, what if the very desire to reach out to others was born in the fire of contemplative prayer
where the presence of God was so palpable that one could not help but want to share this reality with others? What if prayer then became the very vehicle of evangelism, as we invite others to pray? We would offer the space and place to pray, instruction in prayer, the structure within which to pray, companionship while praying, and a community in which to grow and continue in prayer.

This is another way of describing what I call “contemplative evangelism.”

This would be evangelism out of the silence rather than via the loud proclamation. It would be evangelism of companionship—as both evangelist and seeker reach out to God. It would be evangelism of the retreat and the small group conversation, rather than evangelism of the large meeting and forceful challenge. It would be evangelism of spiritual direction (in which the voice of God is sought) rather than evangelism of the witnessing monologue.

What I am suggesting is that by the very act of pursuing personal spiritual formation via the classical disciplines, the evangelist will find whole new ways of outreach. This kind of contemplative evangelism resonates strongly with the spiritual pursuits of men and women at the start of the 21st century. Robert Wuthnow rightly observes a fascination with the spiritual that continues to grip our nation and gives evidence of the deep desire on the part of many to find God. Contemplative evangelism connects with such people at their point of need, desire, and interest.

Blurring the line between evangelism and spiritual formation has an unexpected outcome. The gap between evangelist and seeker is eliminated. Both stand before God with the same need, namely, to respond to God and to move forward in their spiritual pilgrimages. To be sure, each is at a different point in that pilgrimage, and each is called to respond in a different way to God; however, one of the impediments to successful evangelism is eliminated. There is no longer an us/them barrier between evangelist and seeker. The us/them attitude (e.g., “I’ve got the answers. You’ve got the problems. So listen to me.”) has been counterproductive in evangelism, not surprisingly since it is counter to the way of love. Now both seeker and evangelist stand before God and respond to God. The more experienced pilgrim has valuable information, insight, and experience to share with the newly conscious seeker. And the seeker can hear this without barrier or defense in an atmosphere of mutuality. Furthermore, in the very freshness of the questions posed by the seeker, the evangelist is challenged in his or her spiritual walk.

Outcomes

In the end, what all people want—ourselves included—is to experience the reality of God. The classical spiritual exercises aim at creating spaces in which such encounters can and do take place. An evangelism that springs from such a base will draw others. And this is what evangelism is all about: creating spaces in which (the still speaking) God can be found. Our role as evangelists is to so know God that we can invite others to that knowledge; to be so experienced in how to know God that we can lead others to such experiences. At this point it ceases to be a matter of finding the right “technique” by which to do evangelism. It becomes a matter of knowing how to reach out to (the still speaking) God and inviting others to do so with you.

Rev. Dr. Richard Peace is the Robert Boyd Munger Professor of Evangelism and Spiritual Formation at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California and is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. Dr. Peace has over a hundred titles to his credit including the widely used Learning to Love trilogy of Bible studies, recently updated and reissued as small group curriculum.
For more resources on Still Speaking Witness order the brochure *God is Still Speaking Through You and Me! A Practical Guide for Witnessing to the Still Speaking God in Your Life and Congregation* from UCC Resources at (800) 537-3394. See this brochure and previous articles on Evangelism Theology and Witness on this disc.

*Permission granted to copy.*

*E-Word Volume 4.1*