PIONEERING EVANGELISM:
SEEING THE WHOLE PICTURE

Cate Williams
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INTRODUCTION

What is the point of evangelism? This isn’t an expression of exasperation, it is a real question. What is the point? What are we hoping to achieve? So often, the way evangelism is spoken about gives the impression that the ultimate point is to grow the church. We are concerned about the statistics about church attendance, so in order to reverse the trend we need to prioritise evangelism. Or perhaps we are concerned about the eternal destination of individual souls? But with less people, both in and outside the church motivated by thinking ahead in this way, we might need an alternative perspective.

In my work for Gloucester Diocese, I am concerned with the breadth of mission, from social responsibility through to evangelism. I am conscious that while I, alongside the pioneer ministers in the Diocese, integrate these things and understand mission holistically, across the church in general, social responsibility and evangelism often seem to pull in different directions. My concern in this article therefore is to explore why this might be and to suggest some ways that the Good News might be expressed that keeps social responsibility front and centre in the message that is being proclaimed.

This is less of a new project than I realised when I started. One hundred years ago, Walter Rauschenbusch wrote this: “But even today many ministers have a kind of dumb-bell system of thought, with the social gospel at one end and individual salvation at the other end, and an attenuated connection between them.”1 He advocated for a rounded system of doctrine able to hold the two together but the problem persists. There have indeed been developments in theology, notably Liberation Theology, that take this forward, however the division remains pervasive and the project needs further work. Perhaps the distinctive theology arising out of the work of pioneering will help us take significant steps forward with the work of integration.

This article begins by outlining the nature of the problem of evangelism in our contemporary context. It explores the distinctive approach of pioneer ministry as an avenue for widening our evangelistic message and some suggestions are made about avenues to explore to take this conversation forwards. This forms a part of longer research project that is exploring ‘earthed spirituality’ within the practice of pioneer ministers and will take this question into ethnographic fieldwork.

Before I proceed I should state that evangelism is being defined here as any verbal communication of an aspect of the Good News of Christ. This sits roughly in the middle of the range of definitions, which range from the broadest which claim all proclamation of the Gospel as evangelism, whether spoken or rooted in action, through to the narrowest which only uses the term when there is a specific challenge to commitment.2 I will also assume an approach which takes seriously the ethical questions associated with evangelism and is founded in positive principles of reciprocity, honesty, humility and respect.3

CHANGING CONTEXT, CHANGING LANGUAGE

Our changing context is in the background of the discussion that we need to have, in particular, the way in which our cultural realities of individualism, consumerism and post-Christendom change the way in which the same words are heard. The language that is assumed as the norm for evangelism is one inherited from a very different culture and context, in particular the Christendom context of the eighteenth century, the era of influential evangelicals such as George Whitefield and the Wesleys. Their use of language and turn of phrase were contextually appropriate, but when we use the same inherited language without regard for our changed context, we run into difficulties.

Within Christendom, church and society were conflated so that to invite an individual to take Christian discipleship seriously was also to invite them to participate in a more fully Christian way within Christendom society. The message we have inherited which has individual conversion at its heart was born within this context and had deep kingdom resonance. However, in our current context where the separation

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between church and society is significant and individualism rife, we cannot assume that the societal implications will automatically be understood.

The early evangelicals were working in an era that contained the early seeds of what became the individualism and consumerism that we know today. They contextualised the gospel successfully, in a way that was appropriate for their time. However, when we use the same language within our different context where the early seeds of individualism have become fully grown, we find that we are inadvertently proclaiming the ‘gospel’ of the individual. Philip Meadows, in discussing the early evangelical paradigm writes: “There lies within the paradigm itself the seeds of its own undoing, especially in its captivity to the individualistic bent of modernity.” 4 He discusses how easily within our own context, the invitation to personal salvation can become distorted into private spirituality, and how conversion can come to mean merely an inward journey rather than a visibly transformed life. He continues: “The danger here is that such anthropocentric goals can be attained with or without the activity of God, and made available for individual consumption with or without the summons to costly discipleship.”5 The final danger, he writes, is the temptation for churches to downplay the cost of discipleship and think merely of the effectiveness of evangelistic practices in terms of making the kind of shallow convert that might most quickly fill our churches.

Societal transformation was in fact the aim of the early evangelicals. Their evangelism was deeply connected with a desire to see society transformed in the light of the Gospel. However, as William Abraham explains, the language they used laid the foundations which led to a disconnect between individual salvation and societal transformation, with aspects of transformation dropped from the priorities towards the end of the 19th century. The result is that “there is little left but a message of sin and salvation that has relegated eschatology to the last days of history, as we can see happening in the fragile theology of D. L. Moody. Modern evangelists for the most part inherit this anthropocentric emphasis.”6

A solution to this problem, is to be explicit about the fact that kingdom rather than personal conversion is the telos or end goal of evangelism. Abraham was the first to suggest this shift of focus. In his classic 1989 text ‘the logic of Evangelism’, he wrote: “Over against those who construe evangelism as the proclamation of the gospel and against those who construe it as church growth, the thesis presented and argued here is that we should construe evangelism as primary initiation into the kingdom of God.”7 This is critical as we discuss individualism and consumerism, as the focus on kingdom automatically ensures that the gospel is communicated and received as something that is more than just about me. When received this way, as initiation into the kingdom rather than a gift for an individual to receive, then the dumb-bells referred to by Rauschenbusch are connected from the start. The societal outworking of discipleship isn’t a difficult add-on but rather a part of the Good News itself.

If we are serious about having kingdom at the heart of our evangelism, then our language as we speak of the Good News of Christ, needs to change. We need to be careful not to be subtly reinforcing the worst habits of our society as we speak about what God can do for an individual. Sadly, too much of the evangelistic literature available falls into this trap. I cannot quote specific resources without naming and shaming respected organisations so I will leave the reader to explore what is on the market. What is evident is that too much focuses on how knowing God in my life is liberating for me, but lacks a community element. Too often, there is no mention of what sin might mean other than not loving God.

Stone, writing on this approach to evangelism considers that: “One of the enormous challenges of Christian evangelism today is that in order to learn once again to bear the faithful and embodied witness to the Spirit’s creative ‘social work,’ it may have to reject as heretical the pervasive characterization of salvation as ‘a personal relationship with Jesus.’”8 This isn’t to say that our relationship with God isn’t personal, but rather that the invitation is not into a one-to-one relationship but instead into communion with all creation in God. Our language needs to reflect this: the short-hand of “a personal relationship with Jesus” is all too easily co-opted into an individualistic agenda. In addition, the fact that I am not really liberated until I have allowed my relationship with God to free me in my relationships

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4 Meadows Ancient-future, 5-6.
5 Ibid.
7 Ibid, 13.
8 Stone, Evangelism, 17.
with others and my relationship to wealth and consumerism, is rarely included within the core evangel.

A part of the difficulty we are facing is how little is known of Christianity by the people around us. When Wesley and his contemporaries were preaching, there was better knowledge about what it meant to commit to Christ. Stuart Murray has reflected extensively on the implications of post-Christendom for Christian mission. In his words: "In Western culture, until recently, the story was known and church was a familiar institution. Evangelism meant encouraging those who already knew the story to live by it and inviting those already familiar with church to participate actively."9

When the story isn't known, our short-hand presentations can be heard in very different ways to our intention. Whereas a call to repentance and to return to Christ is heard positively by someone who has a background understanding of core Christian values and is being called back to taking them seriously, it is heard very differently without that understanding and against the background of the individualism and consumerism proclaimed by our society. The unconditional love of God needs to be known before repentance and forgiveness can be received as good news. Heard without this it feels like judgement and is frequently rejected as such. On the other hand, a message that speaks about the value in an individual's life of personal relationship with Jesus, heard against the background of consumerism and individualism, easily becomes spirituality to aid personal wellbeing rather than a call to discipleship. All of this means that in our post-Christendom context, the evangelism that is needed to communicate effectively is very different from that which was appropriate within Christendom.

Finney, in exploring this question, writes: "The question many modern Christians need to face is, "Have we assumed that the good news which is rightly given to Antioch is also appropriate for Athens? Have we taken it for granted that a gospel whose content was suitable for the church is satisfactory when the message is taken out of the church?"10 He writes here of church, but might just have easily written of Christendom. Assertions of faith are heard differently when taken from a post-Christendom perspective. He continues: "Our 'church' gospel has focused on the great truths of incarnation and atonement, of human sin and salvation.

Indeed . . . in some evangelical circles it has almost been reduced to a formula. Church people and those who were brought up in the life of the church are familiar with the words preachers use and the worldview from which they speak. . . . But that seems to cut little ice with those not brought up in Christian surroundings."11

The full implications of our post-Christendom context are drawn out by Murray: "To re-configure evangelism for post-Christendom, we must disavow some expressions of evangelism in Christendom. Disavowal involves recognising that once effective strategies are no longer appropriate, repentance for attitudes and methods that were inconsistent with the gospel and rooting out vestiges that distort evangelism today."12

This means we face the complex task of disavowing much that is widely assumed and accepted within the practice of evangelism.

This change of approach is likely to be uncomfortable as, on the surface at least, it appears to challenge core beliefs. Many Christians have been exposed to the idea that faith should be expressed in particular ways, the formula that Finney refers to, indeed the same one that was quoted in the Scripture Union tract. It takes courage to face the question.

TOWARDS A HOLISTIC EVANGEL

Having outlined the nature of the difficulty we face, the remainder of this article suggests some potential ways forwards, new ways of speaking about the Good News of Christ which are more deeply life-giving, having avoided the traps of over-contextualisation. Pioneers have been significant in beginning to develop this new faith language. The contextual approach that is at the core of this approach to ministry means that pioneers are always engaged in a dialogue between the tradition as they have received it and the concerns, questions and thought patterns of those they encounter. This means that they are facing the difficult questions expressed above and seeking a way forwards. What follows is some themes that are beginning to emerge.

MULTIFACETED

Post-Christendom evangelism is not about seeking one new theme to replace one old one. Rather, as Murray puts it, we are: “searching for multiple contact points with the gospel in a culture no longer dominated (as

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9 Stuart Murray, Post-Christendom (Bletchley: Paternoster 2004), 2.
11 Finney Emerging, 98–99.
12 Murray Post-Christendom, 227.
Christendom was) by guilt, employing the full range of New Testament imagery and learning to relate the story to contemporary angst and yearnings.”13 That means flexible conversations with an awareness of the fullness of the evangel so that gospel connections can be made with the life stories people are sharing.

Bosch shares this perspective: We cannot capture the evangel and package it in four or five “principles”. There is no universally applicable master plan for evangelism, no definitive list of truths people only have to embrace in order to be saved. We may never limit the gospel to our understanding of God and salvation. We can only witness in humble boldness and bold humility to our understanding of that gospel.14

Post-Christendom evangelism therefore is often about responsive conversation rather than a fixed message. Conversation flows and connection points are sought between life experience and the gospel.

HOLISTIC

This study has a particular focus, which is to seek those strands that support the partnership of evangelism and social responsibility and avoid association with the anti-gospel messages inherent in individualism and consumerism. We are seeking the themes which keep kingdom as the end goal rather than the salvation of the individual. Even the broadening of connection points advocated above can so easily fall into the trap of offering each individual what they need in a way which is once again held captive to individualism. There are however multiple themes that avoid this divergence. Murray considers that:

Reconfiguring evangelism will also mean rediscovering the gospel of the kingdom: liberation rather than personal fulfilment, reconciliation rather than justification, transformation rather than stability; focussing on hope rather than faith . . . Who knows what good news a church on the margins might reconsider?15

The vision he outlines which ensures that we are clear about the telos, the end goal of evangelism helps enormously. When we understand that the reason we are concerned about evangelism is ultimately because we are about the work of the kingdom of God then the rest falls into place. We are less likely to fall into the traps set by our cultural context if our goal is the kingdom of God rather than the salvation of individuals or church growth, and more likely to be motivated to participate in evangelism.

TRANSFORMATIONAL

Andrew Williams considers that the gospel: “cannot aim at satisfying rather than transforming people.”16 He discusses how peace and comfort in tragedy is a part of God’s grace, but only within the context of its being a word about the Lordship of Christ in all realms of life, then continues: “This personal response that is called for is a call to service. Jesus’ invitation to follow him is asking people whom they want to serve. Evangelism is therefore call to service – to win people to Jesus is to win their allegiance to God’s priorities.”17

The service of Christ can sometimes be expressed as if service was a burden, another thing on the to-do list for busy people, and therefore not something that can be received as good news. This perhaps is why it is so rarely front and centre in the evangel. Perhaps the metaphor that Brueggemann employs is helpful here. He writes of the invitation to participate in a different story:

Thus, I propose that evangelism is indeed to do again and again what Jews and Christians have always done, to tell “the old, old story,” but to do so in ways that impact every aspect of our contemporary life, public and personal. The stories themselves are vehicles whereby all things are made new.18

Against the background of the story of faith is the fact that we have been living life by stories which are less life-giving. He writes that: “we come with our imagination already saturated with other stories to which we have already made trusting (even if unwitting) commitment.”19 The implication for evangelism is this:

In the matrix of evangelism, we are prepared to notice that these stories we have embraced without great intentionality are not adequate. . . The reason they are less than adequate stories is that they lack the life-

14 Bosch Transforming, 420.
15 Murray, Post-Christendom, 232.
17 Ibid, 28.
19 Ibid.
giving power of holiness out beyond ourselves to which we must have access if we are to live fully human lives. This then links service of Christ to liberation as we seek to live fully human lives, something which is undoubtedly good news.

LIBERATIVE

We are offered freedom in Christ: it is beneficial to stop and consider what this means and whether there are more freedoms offered than freedom from guilt, for all that the latter is part of the liberation. Freedom is also offered in all aspects of life which bind us, whether physical, emotional or spiritual.

Liberation theology is in the background of this discussion and informs the work of many who are working with those for whom economic poverty is a reality. Andy Freeman expresses how it resonates within society: “This commitment to the least in society is particularly resonant for a generation growing with an increased sense of commitment to justice.” This means that there is a readiness to receive as good news insight that speaks liberation into these situations.

Leonardo Boff, as a liberation theologian writes of how the gospel rightly prioritises the poor: “This comes from the essence of God who, being life, feels attracted to those who have last life, because they are denied life by oppression. . . . No-one is for them, they are made invisible, that is why God takes their side, comes to liberate them, and they are the first beneficiaries of the new order that is the reign of God.”

Counter to the untruths of our society, this prioritisation of the poor is also liberative for those in better economic situations. When Christians can set aside society’s barriers between people, then we live free. Boff writes: “To live this dimension of love is to be free. Offense, humiliation, and violence keep us imprisoned in bitterness, and often with a spirit of revenge. Forgiveness frees us from these bonds, makes us fully free. Free to love.”

Richard Rohr shares this perspective, this time from the North American context: “Any overly protected life does not know deeply or broadly. So Jesus did not call us to the poor and to the pain just to be helpful to them, although that is wonderful too. He called us there for fundamental solidarity with the real and for the transformation of ourselves.” The result of this is liberation for all concerned: “The ones we think we are saving end up saving us and, in the process, redefine the very meaning of salvation.”

The process of liberation is not fast or easy as we are held tightly by the bindings of our cultural norms. Stone describes the process of moving into freedom in Christ as detoxification: “Given the intense and ongoing culture of conversion within which we live today, there is no reason to believe that conversion to Christianity will take place any faster. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that the process will resemble an intensive and sustained process of detoxification.”

Thus, the liberation offered in Christ is bigger and more wonderful than what is often expressed evangelism. The full message deserves to be heard.

COMMUNAL

This is one of those things that is both a calling and a blessing, but not easy in a society that doesn’t know how to do community. It is a thread running through all that has been said up to this point, with my liberation tied up with the liberation of others. We don’t do this alone, we live with others, in God. This is a radical message in an individualistic society, and once we have begun to let go of the hold our society’s narratives have on us, immensely life giving and very much good news.

Samuel Wells in his discussion of the difference between ‘being with’ and ‘doing for’ as forms of Christian service describes a community where all have something to offer, whether their starting point is that of privilege or that of disadvantage. He writes:

The abundant community believes that what we have is enough; we have the capacity to provide what we need in the face of sorrow, aging, illness, celebration, fallibility, misfortune, and joy; we organize in a context

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20 Ibid.
22 Leonardo Boff, Christianity in a Nutshell, transl Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 2013), 57.
23 Boff, Nutshell, 58.
25 Ibid.
26 Stone, Evangelism, 259.
of cooperation and satisfaction; we are responsible for one another, in that if one is not free, valued, or flourishing, none of us can be.27

HOPE-FILLED
Hope is a much needed and rarely seen commodity in 2017. In the UK we are wondering about life post-Brexit in the ongoing reality of austerity cuts to essential services; there is uncertainty about Donald Trump’s presidency; worldwide conflicts continue to devastate, and terrorism is on our doorstep. Christianity speaks hope which is beyond what can be seen, and rooted in the eternal purpose of God for the created order. Yet often we speak as if hope was merely about our eternal destination. Hope is essential good news for all, whether for a community worker dealing with the aftermath of cuts to services; someone struggling to make life work; or someone for whom life is comfortable but who is troubled by items in the news.

Stone links hope back, once again, to the debate about the end goal of evangelism. He considers that:

“Evangelism lives by hope and is essentially a restless activity, called forwards by the promise of the end of our journey together as a church and, ultimately, by the confidence that the telos of the church is the telos of the world itself. Hope punctuates the practice of evangelism in much the same way that a final punctuation mark gives meaning to an entire sentence.”

Hope runs so prominently through the gospel that sharing our faith is fundamentally about sharing the hope that is within us, bearing in mind that this hope has holistic consequences and is about so much more than the eternal destination of an individual. He writes: “While evangelism is frequently referred to as ‘faith sharing,’ it might just as appropriately be termed ‘hope sharing.’”

Hope is in one sense about the future, but also has implications for the present moment. Stone writes: “Hope is, of course, oriented towards the future - where things are headed and how they shall turn out, towards God’s love as not only the source and ground of our lives but their ultimate aim and end. Yet hope utterly transforms the present and reinterprets the past.”

Current struggles look different in the light of hope. Realities may not change in an instant, but work towards change feels worthwhile because we believe that God’s future will ultimately prevail over the disconnect we are currently experiencing.

EARTHED
‘Earthed’ is a word that can be understood in two ways, ideally held together. It can mean ‘down to earth’ rooted in the realities of life, and alternatively can mean ‘of the earth’ referring to connectedness with non-human creation. All too often the language of evangelism presumes that humanity is the only part of the created order about which God is significantly concerned. It is however both a fuller expression of Christian tradition and better news when all creation is held together in our understanding.

Meadows considers the implications for evangelism: “The promise of the gospel cannot be reduced to personal salvation, but has the cosmic scope of the Missio Dei to renew the whole of creation.” He is joined by Woods in including all of creation in the gospel vision. Woods writes: “Similarly, with affirming life we need to take a larger eco-centric perspective to avoid a narrow self-centredness that diminishes our witness.”

Boff is especially concerned to ensure that those working for the good of humanity and those working on environmental concerns are having joined up conversations. He considers that:

If all comes from the same Father and all are brothers and sisters of God, then other creatures also have God as Father and are our brothers and sisters, from the snail laboriously crossing the road, to the sun, the moon, the most distant stars; that is why there is an earthly and cosmic kinship. Human beings are not shut up in their tiny human world; they live with the great community of life and include in their love all beings of creation.

He is in many ways outlining his understanding of the evangel in this text. There is joy in here, there is life, there is good news. Why would we exclude such joys from our evangel except because we have failed to think

28 Stone, Evangelism, 56.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Meadows ancient-future, 6.
33 Boff, Nutshell, 40.
big enough? Finney puts in like this: “I believe that in our proclamation of the gospel we have too often made our wondrous God ‘too small’. The creator of the universe is more than just a Saviour, glorious though that fact is.”

The ‘earthed’ dimension enlarges our vision, offering breadth of good news.

**CONCLUSION**

The intent of this article has been to begin a conversation rather than to produce definitive answers. Threads have been drawn together from theological, missional and spiritual resources which add depth to the gospel and which need to be a part of the evangel if we are serious about renewal of the practice of evangelism. The evangel that we have inherited can too easily find itself in service to our culture’s stories of individualism and consumerism, rather than truly in service to the kingdom of God. In order to achieve the latter, the breadth of good news needs to be taken from the realm of discipleship and church life and put front and centre, within the evangel itself.

While the process involved in changing our thinking is unlikely to be easy, the potential fruit is plentiful. We will aid Christians in finding a language that has integrity within their own experience of faith; we will make stronger connections between the work of evangelism and that of social responsibility; we will be better placed to build a church which demonstrates the gospel in lived example; and we will be communicating an evangel that can be joyful received as good news.

The prevalence of language about evangelism that is profoundly caught up in modernist assumptions indicates that this is an area of church life which needs significantly more attention. As part of my ongoing work, I hope to take some of the questions raised here into ethnographic research on ‘earthed spirituality’ as expressed in pioneer ministry.

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works as ‘Mission and Evangelism Officer’ for Gloucester Diocese, encouraging and enabling pioneer ministry, social responsibility and the mission of the ‘inherited’ church. She is a Forest Church practitioner and doing some small scale pioneering in the community where she lives, gathering people together to celebrate the wildlife that shares our home.

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34 Finney, Emerging, 91.
36 Ibid.
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