

Present Evangelistic Efforts A Diagnosis

By George E. Failing

Evangelistic efforts have always resulted from the persuasion of the need of evangelism. In the New Testament evangelism is regarded both as a calling (Ephesians 4:11) and as a work (II Timothy 4:5). In the calling to evangelism, there are the elements of specially bestowed gifts by the Spirit and personal fitness. The work of evangelism calls for compassion and unswerving determination.

Evangelistic efforts are promoted chiefly for two purposes. First, by these efforts is sought the revival of the Church; that is, the deepening of the spiritual life of Christians and challenging them to consecrated, soul-saving efforts. Second, as differing from revivals, there is the program of evangelism which is designed for the single purpose of bringing men under conviction through the Word of God, and getting them soundly converted. This article has particular reference to efforts to reach the unsaved.

Some observed losses that bear relation to our evangelistic program may be mentioned.

(1) Some pastors have lost the evangelistic vision. Too many pastors are content with repeated Sunday evening services in which no one is saved. The vision of Sunday School evangelism is dimmed. Cottage prayer meetings, designed to reach the homes of lost ones in the community, no longer offer a real challenge.

(2) Significant results are also lacking many times in evangelistic services, with the assistance of regular evangelistic help. Many of us are not greatly disturbed by the fact that many of these attempts result in no real gain to the Church, and perhaps to the Kingdom of God.

(3) Audiences are seriously lacking when the Gospel is proclaimed. When one inquires as to why folk do not come to church it may be profitable to observe that, in the first place, the church building may be uninviting, either in external or internal appearance and proprieties. Indeed, the factor of the place does not weigh heavily when the Spirit of God is powerfully at work, but some importance must be attached to this matter in regard to the initial impression made upon the average individual. Furthermore, it may be true that church services are conducted often with lack of precision, purpose, and dignity. There can be too great familiarity, too much informality, in a service as well as too much preciseness of form.

(4) Finally, there is the loss of the reality of spiritual and eternal things, first by the church, and then by the world. Heaven becomes a word that does not incite much hope, nor hell a word that incites much fear. It is scarcely possible to expect any very serious efforts for the salvation of souls when the Church is not supremely concerned with spiritual things.

Having observed some of the losses in connection with our evangelistic program, let us proceed to observe some present trends with regard to general evangelistic appeals.

(1) There is the "business as usual" trend. No special appeals are made. It is felt that the church itself is not in a suitable condition to give any assistance in promoting vital, soul-saving ministry. Consequently, year after year

passes, while the shepherd endeavors to care for his own flock and makes no serious effort to seek the lost and straying sheep. It is sad to admit that some holiness churches are doing exceedingly little in the promotion of primary soul-saving efforts.

(2) Some feel that the effort should be made to make evangelistic meetings as big and pretentious as possible, thus endeavoring to challenge the World by making a show of strength. But certainly an evangelistic service is no occasion for display, though Christians must never yield to the temptation of putting light under a bushel. Does it not seem that the pretentious efforts in evangelism are only evidence of the extreme? Oftentimes, the small and more careful attention given to details would do far more in making such meetings succeed.

(3) The lack of a single purpose seems often to characterize present-day efforts. For example, there may not be a supreme goal in mind in scheduling the services. It is certainly all right to schedule a sacred concert, though that is not helpful in an evangelistic series. Meetings also need to be conducted for instruction in the Scriptures, for the purpose of getting the church sanctified and at work actively in the salvation of the lost, but these cannot be designed or advertised primarily as soul-saving crusades. If the meetings are to reach sinners, they should be so advertised and planned.

It would seem, likewise, that there is often the lack of a single aim in each service. No part of the service—announcements, offering, singing and music, or preaching—should detract from the purpose of the meeting. There will certainly be a variety of methods employed to impress conscience, but there must be the one aim of capturing the will for Christ.

It may also be admitted that it is difficult for the preacher to maintain a single aim in a service. Sermons must be designed to enlighten the heart and prick the conscience. The minister must not yield to the temptation to take detours into controversial areas. He must not be primarily concerned to prove his point or to please his people, but rather to convince men of sin and to present to men the great salvation.

(4) May we not likewise observe that there is often a lack of a concerted effort. Few churches gear to an all-out saving program when members, for example, may be organized into groups to assume responsibilities to invite certain folk to the services, to take a personal interest in them, and pray for them. But why this lack of a concerted effort? Two things may be mentioned. It may be the lack of a trained, effective leadership in the promotion of such an effort. It may be that the pastor was converted under such circumstances as appeared to present little organized effort, and consequently, he may not feel the need of getting every person to work at a certain place and time, to make a complete and careful coverage of those who need Christ in his community. Further, the lack of a concerted effort may be due to the fact that there has been insufficient Bible teaching. A church that is spiritually starved and unchallenged can scarcely be ready to join in a united effort for the salvation of the lost.

HOW THEY PRAYED

George Whitefield, the famous English evangelist, said: "O Lord, give me souls, or take my soul!"

Henry Martyn, a missionary, cried as he knelt on India's coral strands: "Here let me burn out for God."

David Brainerd, missionary to the North American Indians, declared: "Lord, to Thee I dedicate myself. Oh, accept of me, and let me be Thine forever. Lord, I desire nothing else; I desire nothing more." The last words in his diary, written seven days before he died, "Oh, come, Lord Jesus, come quickly. Amen."

Thomas A. Kempis said: "Give what Thou wilt, and how much Thou wilt, and when Thou wilt. Set it where Thou wilt and deal with me in all things as Thou wilt."

Dwight L. Moody implored: "Use me then, my Saviour, for whatever purpose and in whatever way Thou mayest require. Here is my poor heart, an empty vessel; fill it with Thy grace."

Martin Luther prayed thus on the night preceding his appearance before the Diet of Worms: "Do Thou, my God, stand by against all the world's wisdom and reason. Oh, do it! Thou must do it. Stand by me, Thou true, eternal God!"

John McKenzie prayed thus when as a young missionary candidate he knelt on the banks of the Lossie: "O Lord, send me to the darkest spot on earth."

Praying Hyde, a missionary to India, pleaded: "Father, give me these souls, or I die."—Defender.

(5) Finally, there seems to be a genuine dearth of spiritual evangelistic singing and music. Spiritual singing has been either the inspiration or the expression of many revivals. Paul and Silas sang at Philippi, and a revival broke out. Luther felt the need of hymns for Christians to sing, and consequently wrote many of the hymns widely used during his own evangelistic efforts. Charles Wesley certainly assumed tremendous importance by the writing and use of his hymns in the forwarding of the Wesleyan revivals. Since that day, there have been outstanding evangelistic singers such as Sankey and Alexander.

Must we not admit that good evangelistic hymns and songs have, for the most part, pre-20th century date-lines? May we not well pray that in these days God will raise up a group of consecrated hymnists, musicians, and singers, who can provide a fresh ministry of music for present-day evangelistic efforts? We do not ask for "hit of the year" tunes, that rise and fall, or words hastily assembled without depth of meaning or grace of form. But every generation has a right to hear an expression of God's eternal truth in thoughts and cadences of its own period.

The picture is not hopeless, for any true diagnosis will suggest to the thoughtful and discerning certain means of treatment. But successful evangelistic efforts are born of the Spirit. Without the insight and inspiration of the Spirit, all the wisdom of men in saving souls is but foolishness.—Wesleyan Methodist.