

Is there biblical warrant...?

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***In Jesus' final words in the Gospels and the beginning of Acts, we have not so much a "great commission" that the early churches were meant to obey as an affirmation of what they found themselves doing. More properly, these text constitute an "evangelizing warrant." So understood, they combine with other New Testament texts to provide a solid grounding for Christian evangelism today.***

It has become all too common, when attempting to ground evangelism in the New Testament, to resort to what we have called the "great commission." The commissioning words of Jesus, variously reported at the end of each of the Gospels ([Matt. 28:16–20](#); [Mark 16:15–18](#); [Luke 24:45–49](#); [John 20:21–23](#)) and at the beginning of Acts ([1:6–8](#)), are taken to be straightforward instructions, sufficient in their clarity to provide a rationale for evangelizing, no matter what the circumstances may be in which the church finds itself. But the need for a rationale – and the kind of rationale needed – is always shaped by the church's location in the social and cultural currents of its time and place, and by its character and life within those currents.

At the present time in North America, we in the churches find ourselves in a place rapidly ceasing to be a "churched culture."<sup>1</sup> Living in a post-Christian and pluralist society has sent shock waves through the psyche of our churches, shaking loose our long-accustomed security in the heritage of Christendom. This has brought us to the point of exploring the terrain in search of an identity beyond that of being merely a "vendor of religious services" for that niche of the population that exercises the private option to seek such services. We are thrust into a search for a sense of our mission in this new time and for the meaning of being witnesses to Christ in it.

The preachments and rationales of the past that do not specifically engage these new circumstances can only fail us. The growing disjuncture between the supposed clarity of great-commission instructions and the practical behavior of large numbers of church members should alert us to this. In our situation, the instructions turn into an ever amplifying exhortation to complete the assigned task. But what follows are either soft and fuzzy responses, in which anything that can be construed as lending influence in the direction of Christ "counts," or programmed schemes for structuring us all into activities that, by their very doing, are envisioned to achieve the task.

All of this is not to suggest that the commissioning words of Jesus have no relevance. It is to say that we must come to them in a new way, questioning what lies behind our tendency to focus on them and our way of seeing them as a rationale for evangelism. In this connection, two major problems present themselves.

(1) The first problem has to do with the way we tend to use the great commission as a rationale

for evangelism. We appeal to it within a structure of thought oriented toward command and obedience. It is assumed, when we attempt to provide a biblical foundation for evangelism, that this is simply a matter of finding direct commands enjoining us to evangelize. It is further assumed that once such commands are found, evangelism is simply a matter of obedience. The presence of a command is thought to supply sufficient motivation for evangelism, and settling the issue of motivation is taken to be an adequate rationale.

This fails to ask questions about what lies beneath the command. Why was the command given? Why is it proper that, in a world with such a variety of other religious loyalties, we are thus commanded? How does the command make sense for us in Western societies today against the historical backdrop of cultural and religious imperialism? How can it be understood in a day when individual autonomy in matters of belief is asserted as a fundamental right?

More importantly, there are biblical reasons why our assumptions about a command-and-obedience rationale for evangelism ought to be questioned. In the first place, as missionary theologian Lesslie Newbigin suggests in his reflections on [Acts 1:8](#), Jesus' statement that "you shall be my witnesses" is not so much a command as it is a promise, a promise linked with that of the coming Spirit. Newbigin urges: "Please note that it is a promise, not a command. It is not: 'You must go and be witnesses'; it is 'The Holy Spirit will come, and you will be witnesses.'" There is a vast difference between these two."<sup>2</sup> It may be true that Newbigin pushes the grammatical point beyond what is warranted. But it is equally true that he has only touched lightly on a point of fundamental significance. Jesus' "prophetic promise," as Darrell Guder calls it, locates the accent in the text: Being witnesses is not our assignment; it is our identity. "When the Spirit comes to [the disciples] and gives them the gift of power, their very identity will be transformed into that of witnesses. As such, they will carry out the ministry of that witness throughout the world."<sup>3</sup>

That this is an important point is underscored by another of Newbigin's observations, this time on Paul:

*It is, is it not, a striking fact that in all his letters to the churches Paul never urges on them the duty of evangelism. He can rebuke, remind, exhort his readers about faithfulness to Christ in many matters. But he is never found exhorting them to be active in evangelism. . . . Mission, in other words, is gospel and not law; it is the overflow of a great gift; not the carrying of a great burden.<sup>4</sup>*

Paul surely envisages that evangelism will continue to take place. He assumes it to be appropriate, given what the gospel is. But he never urges it as a duty. It may be added that neither in Paul's writings nor in any of the other New Testament documents outside the Gospels and the opening verses of Acts is there ever an appeal to Jesus' great commission. It might be argued that the reason for all this is that the churches at that time simply found themselves evangelizing spontaneously and therefore needed no exhortation in this regard. Even if this could be proved, which is doubtful, the question with which we are left is not, "How shall we motivate a contemporary church which does not evangelize spontaneously?" but, "Why is evangelizing not now happening as a matter of course?" In light of the twin promises of the Spirit's empowering and the transformation of our identity to be witnesses, the explanation must lie at a

deeper level than can be answered by some strong reminder that a command to witness has been given. Something more fundamental to the integrity of the church is at stake.

Accordingly, the first problem with an approach oriented to command-and-obedience, aimed as it is at motivating evangelistic action by a sense of duty, is that this approach mitigates the sense that somehow evangelism ought to be a spontaneous expression, produced by the Spirit and born of the overflowing joy that comes from knowing the good news. As Robert Henderson has put it, “When a person, or a congregation, understands and has experienced the joyous news of the kingdom of God, evangelization is natural and spontaneous. People cannot keep such news to themselves.”<sup>5</sup> The use of command-and-obedience as a rationale for evangelism thwarts the expectation of spontaneity, which is born of promise, not requirement.

(2) The second major problem with our use of the great commission as the principal text for establishing our evangelistic mission is that its use for this purpose is a relatively recent development. Until the advent of the “modern missionary movement” and the important stimulus provided by William Carey in 1792, this text did not play this particular role. In fact, prior to Carey’s reappropriation of the text, it had been interpreted in a way that did not urge explicit missionary obedience. The commission was understood to have been made to the first-century apostles, and they were believed to have accomplished it by going to all of the then-known world. Carey dared to challenge this notion in his tract entitled *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*. He argued that if the command to baptize and the promise of Christ’s presence are still in force, then the commission to preach to all nations must also be binding.<sup>6</sup>

Although the modern missionary movement found support in a number of texts (David Bosch identified [Acts 16:9](#); [Matt. 24:14](#); and [John 10:10](#) as crucial ones), the chief text to which it appealed is [Matthew 28:18–20](#). By the end of the nineteenth century, this became increasingly the case. Obedience to this final command of Jesus became “a kind of last line of defense” against challenges being made to the missionary cause.<sup>7</sup>

Bosch’s major contribution in his magisterial work *Transforming Mission* is that he identifies the ways in which the church’s understanding of its mission in various historical periods was shaped by the cultural currents of the period and place. He shows, for example, how [John 3:16](#) is characteristic of the patristic understanding of mission, [Luke 14:23](#) of the medieval Roman Catholic missionary efforts, and [Romans 1:16–18](#) of the Protestant Reformation period.<sup>8</sup> In the case of the modern period, for which the great commission and the emphasis on obedience constituted the heart of the missionary paradigm, the major motifs in the church’s thinking reflected the influence of the Enlightenment. The essential features of this influence include

*the undisputed primacy of reason, the separation between subject and object, the substitution of the cause–effect scheme for belief in purpose, the infatuation with progress, the unsolved tension between “fact” and “value,” the confidence that every problem and puzzle can be solved, and the idea of the emancipated, autonomous individual.*<sup>9</sup>

In summary, Bosch concludes that

*The entire Western missionary movement of the past three centuries emerged from the matrix of the Enlightenment. On the one hand, it spawned an attitude of tolerance to all people and a relativistic attitude toward belief of any kind; on the other, it gave birth to Western superiority feelings and prejudice.*<sup>10</sup>

Newbigin points out that the difficulty with post-Enlightenment use of the great commission was that the latter “could seem to validate a sort of triumphalist style of mission that accorded all too easily with the political and economic expansion of the European powers during this period, an expansion with which missions were (inevitably) so much connected.”<sup>11</sup> An easy identification of missionary endeavor with the pride of enlightenment and progress lacks the critical principle for differentiating evangelism from an activity that merely underwrites the reigning values of the North American ethos. It fails to shape an evangelism capable of distinctive witness in a pluralist environment.

At a time when the church in North America finds that its social role has changed and that it is no longer the guardian of spirit and morality for the democratic experiment and that its faith is no longer the privileged option for understanding ultimate meanings and loyalties, it is essential that it acquire a new sense of what it is to evangelize. We in the church will need a new sense of missional identity that is more than the achievement of a mandated task. And we need to develop a missional lifestyle that does not aim at conquest and cultural dominance. Any proposed biblical grounding for evangelism must address these concerns if it is to have force and relevance.

In light of the problems attending our traditional way of interpreting great commission texts, we may imagine that it would be easiest simply to dismiss them and to look elsewhere for biblical grounding. But, in the end, they must be dealt with, no matter where we begin. It is better to explore whether they may be reappropriated in a way that is both truer to their original function and more useful to our present needs.

To explore the function of the great-commission texts in the New Testament is the place to begin. Before any of these texts had been written, the earliest church was already accustomed to sharing the “good news” with people in its social world. Certainly, this custom was not disconnected from the memory of Jesus’ words, but it is far from certain that Jesus’ words functioned as a command. Could it be that Jesus’ words were intended for a different pastoral purpose?

Harry Boer concludes from his study of the early church’s evangelizing behavior, as depicted in the New Testament, that “there is no evidence that consciousness of the Great Commission constituted an element in their motivation. . . . [T]here is no ground to believe that awareness of the Great Commission played a role in launching the Church on her missionary labors.”<sup>12</sup>

Boer does not go far enough.<sup>15</sup> We must ask: If these texts did not launch the church on its missionary labors and did not provide it with conscious motivation, then what role did they play when they appeared in the Gospels and in Acts at the time they did? The central proposal of this essay is that we answer that question in this way: *In the reporting of Jesus’ final words in the Gospels and Acts we should see not a command for the early churches to obey but an affirmation of what they found themselves doing.* These texts are “evangelizing warrant,” not “great commission.” They do not mandate obedience to a mission; they validate the experience of being

engaged in mission. Evangelism is not here required but authorized.

The predictive tone in Luke's two accounts is instructive. We have already noted the promissory character of [Acts 1:8](#). In [Luke 24](#), the missional warrant comes as an anticipation of the fulfillment of things long intended and already indicated in the scriptures.

*Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise again from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" ([Luke 24:45-47](#)).*

Perceptions that, for the disciples, had been a long time coming are here expanded. The synoptic Gospels share a structure that first shows how the disciples gradually came to grasp the fact that Jesus was the Messiah. Their confession to this effect marked the turning point at which Jesus "began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" ([Matt. 16:21](#); cf. [Mark 8:31](#) and [Luke 9:22](#)). For the disciples to accept this seemed impossible, and even after the resurrection Jesus still helped them grasp this point (cf. [Luke 24:25-27](#)). Now, as Jesus underscores it again, something new is added. Once the disciples have understood that the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead, they will need to learn where all this will lead: It is written that "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations" ([Luke 24:46-47](#)).

This prediction will have been no easier for the disciples to grasp than the other points in Jesus' curriculum. It would be naive to assume that the disciples immediately understood it and went out to fulfill it. Rather, this prediction stands as the unfinished story that precipitated for Luke the writing of his sequel, Acts. Luke begins Acts with a restatement of Jesus' prediction because he intended to show how the early church learned in stages what this meant. It learned the latter as the Spirit fashioned the disciples into witnesses to the risen Christ among all the nations. Acts was written, as was the concluding part of Luke's Gospel, as a way to remind the church later in its history of Jesus' earlier prediction. The church, from its later vantage point, could remember and understand. It had lived its way into it. The memory of Jesus' prediction affirmed and authorized what became true for the church. Whatever fears or second thoughts had emerged for it, whatever distance it might have felt as a second generation of witnesses, here was the warrant inherited from Jesus. This is the way things were meant by God to be.

If these texts in which we discover how Jesus envisioned and anticipated the future mission of the church are present in the Gospels and Acts essentially as warrant and not command, then we may rightly search for, and expect to find, texts in the rest of the New Testament that display the ways in which such a sense of warrant took shape and root in the perceptions of the church and its leaders. We are not bound to look only for texts that bolster a sense of evangelistic duty but are free to find whatever texts respond to the questions that most press themselves on us in a pluralist environment. Is our impulse to evangelize, to announce that the reign of God is present and coming in Jesus Christ, legitimate? In a sea of opinions and proposals about the meaning and direction of things, is it proper to tell what we know about Jesus as though he is the power of creation and the word of truth? In the face of such questions, a search for warrant opens a new

way for grounding evangelism in the whole fabric of the New Testament, not just in a few command-giving passages. It enables us to approach biblical foundations from more than a motivational viewpoint and in full view of our culture's critique. It allows us to explore what warrant exists for the fact that, in the church, evangelism continues to "happen," that somehow the Holy Spirit is the instigator, and that evangelism takes place as the overflow of the gospel among people captivated by the joy of the good news.

This way of exploring the New Testament needs more thorough treatment than I can provide here. But we can trace several themes so as to indicate the potential in such an approach. These themes show the kind of rationale for evangelism that lies implicit within the emerging mission of the early church and is embedded within the warranting and predictive words of Jesus prior to his ascension. Three themes will occupy our attention: the evangelizing attitude present in the pulse of the gospel itself; the evangelists' approach to people of a variety of cultures; and the modes of articulation experienced and expected in the early churches.

(1) At the center of the message Jesus proclaimed was the announcement of the reign of God. This theme has been increasingly recovered in recent reflections on the evangelizing mission of the church.<sup>14</sup> Still, as the phrase comes into the casual parlance of the church, it picks up untested assumptions about our relationship to God's reign. On the one hand, the reign of God becomes something we "extend." Especially among those with evangelical agendas, we imagine ourselves as those responsible to spread or expand the reign of God. On the other hand, those more concerned with the social implications of the gospel tend to speak about "building" the reign of God. Mission then has to do with establishing or fashioning the reign of God on earth.

There are problems with both assumptions. In the case of the first (to extend), the reign of God is conceived to be all "in here" and the church's mission is to be its CEOs, its sales promoters to extend it out to include more and more people. In the case on the second assumption (to build), the reign of God becomes a social project that we accomplish. It is conceived to be all "out there" awaiting construction by its architects, contractors, and carpenters.

It is noteworthy, however, that neither the expression "to extend" nor "to build" is ever used in the Bible to indicate the way we should see our responsibility regarding the reign of God. We find a parable about how the kingdom extends itself ([Mark 4:30-32](#)), but it is never said that we are to extend it. We find construction imagery having to do with the building of a congregation ([1 Cor. 3:9-15](#)), but the church is never equated with the reign of God, and we are never told to go out and build it.

What, then, are the appropriate verbs to use? In the Gospels, the most repeated and emphatic verbs directing our response to the reign of God are "to receive" and "to enter." They come, at times, intertwined: "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" ([Luke 18:17](#)). These verbs represent two image clusters that, taken together, provide a portrait of the identity of a Christian community and the nature of its mission. These clusters may be summarized as follows:

The reign of God may be said to be a gift we receive. It is something given ([Luke 12:32](#)). It is something that can be possessed ([Luke 6:20](#); [Matt. 5:3](#); [Mark 10:14](#)), but because it is yet



coming, it is described as an inheritance to be possessed in the end ([Matt. 5:5; 25:34; James 2:5; I Cor. 6:9–10; 15:50](#)).

The reign of God may also be said to be a realm we enter. It meets us as God's welcome and invites us to come in. It is both a place to inhabit ([Matt. 5:19; Col. 1:13](#)) and a place yet coming that is to be inhabited ([Matt. 7:21; 25:21, 23; II Pet. 1:11](#)). People can be "not far" from it ([Mark 12:34](#)). For some, it will be "very hard" to enter ([Mark 10:23; Luke 18:24–25; Matt. 19:23–24](#)). Some, in fact, "will not" enter at all ([Matt. 5:20](#)).

In a Christian consciousness shaped by these two images, there are serious dangers. On the one hand, there is the danger of presumption in so claiming to "possess" the reign of God that it becomes ours and not God's. On the other hand, there is the danger of pride in thinking ourselves to be securely "in." But it is by means of these very images that Jesus warns of these dangers: I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it" ([Matt. 21:43](#)). "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you" ([Matt. 21:31](#)).

It is in the dynamic present tense of these verbs "to receive" and "to enter" that there exists the greatest potential for a new way to conceive of our evangelism. The letter to the Hebrews uses the language instructively: "For we who have believed enter that rest. . . . Strive to enter that rest" ([Heb. 4:3, 11](#)). And again, "Therefore let us be grateful [since we are] receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken" ([Heb. 12:28](#)). Here is a portrait of our conversion and its ongoing nature. We are those who, having been offered God's gift and God's welcome, daily receive and enter into the reign of God. This means that evangelism is construed in terms of companionship. We walk alongside others to whom the same gift is extended and to whom God offers the same welcome. We invite them to join us in the joy of daily receiving and entering into the reign of God. Evangelism, then, is not "to" or "at" people, it is "with" and "alongside" them. Evangelism as church growth or membership recruitment too easily serves our own personal or institutional interests. Evangelism consists rather in offering the gift of God and making welcome those whom God welcomes. The posture of invitation and initiation into a shared lifestyle then displaces the image of conquest and dominance. Evangelism in this posture is warranted by the nature of the gospel itself.<sup>15</sup>

(2) "If you wish to find the gospel, you must lose it." This loose and twisted version of Jesus' words may in fact provide the essential clue for understanding the struggle through which the church passed in its early years. At every point, the urging of the Spirit and the divinely appointed occasion of the moment pushed the church into an evangelizing beyond its understanding and challenged its assumptions about appropriate forms of belief, conversion, and worship. The first encounter for a church was with cosmopolitan Jews at Pentecost and then with Samaritans in the surrounding area. The conversions of an Ethiopian traveler, a god-fearing Roman soldier, and a diverse gentile community in Antioch brought increasing pressure to bear on a church trying to figure out what it meant for people of a diversity of cultures to become captivated by the risen Lord. Jesus was very Jewish, but the mission into which the church had been thrust began to burst the wineskins with which these Jewish Christians were accustomed. Gradually, they became convinced that this was in fact what made their mission so universal and compelling.

Paul was the figure pushed to the front of these developments. His own sense of freedom from the law led him to the affirmation: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” ([Gal. 3:28](#)). But in an important sense, Paul also believed a variation on that language: “In Christ there is both Jew and Greek, there is both slave and free, there is both male and female.” That is to say, Paul’s affirmation of the essential oneness across lines of race, culture, class, and gender depended upon his affirmation of the integrity of the varieties of culture and heritage. Paul fought for the rights of gentiles not to be forced into a Jewish mold. His experience of the grace of God was that it always moved beyond the ways in which it had thus far been grasped and embodied.

Nowhere does Paul more clearly articulate his missionary approach than in [I Corinthians 9:14–23](#). Here he affirms that we only find the gospel, we only participate in it, in our evangelism (v. 23). And evangelism consists in losing the gospel, giving it away. Paul counted it to be his greatest reward to offer the gospel free of charge (v. 18). His greatest freedom in the gospel was to make himself a slave to all (v. 19). His greatest success for the gospel was found in becoming weak (v. 22). Paul’s approach was in sharp contrast to the tendencies present in the Corinthian church at that time, tendencies not uncommon for the church in any time or place. The church there had impulses that cut the nerve of a missionary gospel and prevented them from being a missionary congregation. These people held the gospel in their grasp, in knowledge and strength. Their grip on the gospel was so tight that they refused to permit other responses to it or expressions of it. Others had to follow their particular leader (chaps. 1–3), exercise their spiritual gifts (chaps. 12–14), and share their knowledge about meat offered to idols (chap. 8). At the height of contradiction, they required that others share their freedom! In other words, the Corinthians held a monopoly on the gospel. It had become domesticated in their hands.

Mission in such circumstances becomes religious egoism. Evangelism becomes recruitment. Paul’s assertion that he offers the gospel free of charge draws the contrast. Is the gospel something required of people at the gate, or is it to be given away to people outside the gate? Are we to grasp people to the gospel, or open up the gospel to them? Does the gospel bring people to us, or does it join us to other people?

Paul’s own policy of identification with those among whom he offered the gospel free of charge opposes the tendency to restrict the gospel to a single cultural form. Of course, there is always the matter of the truth and integrity of the gospel; but this Paul preserved, while exhibiting his freedom to be enslaved to other cultural forms and styles. To those under the law he became like one under the law (although he was sure that in certain senses he was no longer “under” it). To those without God’s law, he lived as they did (although he knew that he lived under Christ’s law and dared not violate that). Paul’s cultural identification was not uncritical, but he refused the path of cultural domination and imposition. He was willing to give the gospel away to new possessors of it and to lose it to their new styles, responses, and definitions. There he expected to see it sparkle, startle, surprise, and shine.

Paul was not unaware that there is a certain weakness in this strategy. But it is this very weakness that most validates the evangelizing mission of the church. We can be no less vulnerable than were those who brought the gospel to us and released it into our hands, or no less



vulnerable than God has been to offer the divine reign as a gift and a welcome. For us as for Paul, it is in the weakness of giving the gospel away and losing our grasp on it as its sole possessors that we participate in it most fully. As we see something in the response of another that reveals our own blind spots, we hear again its call to repentance. As we watch the gospel affirm acceptance to others with idiosyncrasies of their own, we know more deeply that we, too, share in the gospel's accepting grace. In other words, we become evangelized by those to whom we give the gospel.

To Paul's way of thinking, particularity is not alien to the missionary impulse. It is the path along which the gospel travels as each receives from another the witness of the Spirit.<sup>16</sup> The gospel, which is always expressed within the terms of some particular culture, is intended for the peoples of all the nations. A consciousness of these cultural dynamics and an approach to people that envisions giving the gospel away to them are crucial for a warranted form of evangelism in our current pluralist environment. Lamin Sanneh has put it well that "[f]or all of us pluralism can be a rock of stumbling, but for God it is the cornerstone of the universal design."<sup>17</sup>

(3) In the New Testament literature, we observe Paul and we know that we see an evangelist at work. What he says about evangelizing is complemented by the ways we see him at work. We also catch the pulse of the work of the four "evangelists" in the written Gospels they have given us. The nature of the literature is such that these will be foremost as we explore the New Testament. Yet, our perspectives will be skewed if we do not take note of the evangelists that did not write letters or gospels. It is to the specific congregations that I refer. Clues about them may be more faint, but the substructure of living congregations bearing faith, love, and hope provides the foundational witness of the first-century church.

Especially intriguing is the portrait Paul gives of the newly formed community of believers at Thessalonica. Paul wrote First Thessalonians not many months after he first visited there and they first heard the gospel. Already, Paul affirms, they have proved to be imitators of him and his companions, who brought the gospel not only in word but in power, in the Holy Spirit, with full conviction, and with personal integrity ([I Thess. 1:5–6](#)). In their willingness to believe openly, even against the pressure of direct persecution, the Thessalonians have already grown to be imitators of Jesus ([1:6](#)) and of the churches of God in Judea ([2:14](#)). In so short a time they have become examples of what believers are like ([1:7](#)); their faith – and the word of the Lord with it – has become known across their own province and the adjoining one ([1:8](#)). What has so profoundly demonstrated their faith is the visible change in their patterns on living: They have turned away from loyalty to idols, they serve a living and true God, and they live in hope, waiting for the risen Son of God to come from heaven at the time of justice ([1:9–10](#)). Of course, in the letter as a whole Paul matches these affirmations with encouragement to the Thessalonians to grow in these traits that already characterize them. All is not finished, but even at this embryonic point in the life of their church, their evangelizing quality is most evident.

It will not do to drive a wedge between actions and words and claim that Paul only affirms the lifestyle of the Thessalonians as though that were somehow sufficient. What Paul affirms about them cannot have been observed had they been a silent group. The new orientation of their lives and the hope they held must certainly have found expression in language and confession. Word and deed were bound together in the way the congregation demonstrated – in living, embodied

form – what the gospel is.

Whatever else may be said about modes of articulation appropriate to the gospel's announcement, embodiment is the essential feature of them all. Paul always invited his hearers to test his words against what they experienced him to be (e.g., [I Cor. 2:1–5](#); [II Cor. 1:12](#); [4:1–3](#); [6:3–10](#); [I Thess. 2:1–8](#)). In First Peter, the encouragement given to the churches rests on the same foundation: “Always be ready to make a defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you” ([3:15](#)). The assumption is that the presence of such a hope is an observable thing, demonstrable to public view by the community that embodies the gospel.

We are talking here about something much more substantial than the emphasis in evangelism training circles several decades ago. Then, the emphasis was more on encouraging consistent moral behavior because, otherwise, the gospel would be invalidated by violations of the accepted norms of the society everyone assumed the gospel affirms. Now, however, when such a correspondence of values no longer exists and announcing and living the gospel proposes a very different, alternate style of believing and living, demonstrating the gospel in live is not merely for the sake of keeping the way clear for a hearing of the gospel. The demonstration itself shows what the gospel is about. The congregation is the “hermeneutic of the gospel,” the only lens through which people see and interpret what the gospel is about and how it may be embraced.<sup>18</sup> Donald Posterski stresses this when he says that in our modern pluralist setting “the gospel will be perceived as a feasible alternate when those who do not know God have some positive, personal experiences with people who do know him. Modern Christians have both the privilege of and the potential for becoming spiritual meaning-makers.”<sup>19</sup>

A variety of modes of articulation of the gospel commend themselves as biblically warranted and contextually relevant today. One is the mode of the “witness,” one who testifies on the witness stand in a trial and attests to what cannot be known in any other way.<sup>20</sup> Another is the “journalist,” one who reports the public news that the reign of God is at hand.<sup>21</sup> Another model is that of “docent,” in the sense of the way museums use docents. The evangelist as docent is one who interprets the meaning of what is experienced in the world. Finally, we may add the “rhetor,” who makes the case that the gospel reveals the meaning of life and who urges the appropriate response. But it is required of all of these that they be grounded in an evangelistic commitment to a living embodiment of the gospel in tangible communities of faith, love, and hope.<sup>22</sup>

It is essential to the gospel that the gift of the reign of God and God's welcome to it not be withheld from but be genuinely offered to the world. It is essential to the church's mission that the gospel be given away to all to be embraced by them in their cultural particularity. And it is essential to the church's identity that it be a living embodiment of the gospel, demonstrating by word and deed what it means to believe and hope in the gospel. Taken together, these facets of the fabric of the New Testament link up with Jesus' warranting words to show how fundamentally valid and indispensable is the witnessing character and role of the church. The Spirit's persistent action to make the church such a witness is the confirming testimony.

## Notes

1. Cf. the use of this phrase by Kennon L. Callahan in *Effective Church Leadership* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).
2. Lesslie Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987), p. 16.
3. Darrell L. Guder, *Be My Witnesses* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), p. 32.
4. Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way*, p. 21.
5. Robert T. Henderson, *Joy to the World: Spreading the Good News of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), p. 131.
6. Cf. Harry R. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), pp. 16–18.
7. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 340–41.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 339.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 342.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 344.
11. Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way*, p. 32.
12. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions*, pp. 43–44.
13. Mortimer Arias, in his otherwise fine commentary on the varying forms of what he prefers to call the “last commission,” appears also to have missed the importance of critiquing the structure of command-and-obedience assumed in words like “commission,” “mandate,” and “task.” See Mortimer Arias and Alan Johnson, *The Great Commission: Biblical Models for Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), pp. 11–16.
14. Three books that are most helpful in this regard are Henderson, *Joy to the World*; Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); and William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989). See also *Entering the Kingdom: A Fresh Look at Conversion* ed. Monica Hill (Kent, U.K.: MARC Europe, 1984).
15. William Abraham has caught the heart of this approach in his book *The Logic of Evangelism*. He describes evangelism as “that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time” (p. 95), conceiving conversion as entry into the kingdom. Because he has seen the “enter” side but not the “receive” side, his approach may too easily identify entering the kingdom with entering the church. To keep both verbs in view would provide a corrective. For a fresh invitational approach, see Raymond Fung, *The Isaiah Vision: An Ecumenical Strategy for Congregational Evangelism* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1992).
16. It is one of the major contributions of Lesslie Newbigin that he has fashioned a theology of cultural plurality that sees in our election to be bearers of the blessing the critical feature that unites particularity and universality. This is expounded most fully as the central theme of *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978). For an exposition of his view, see George R. Hunsberger, “The Missionary Significance of the Biblical Doctrine of Election as a Foundation for a Theology of Cultural Plurality in the Missiology of J.E. Lesslie Newbigin,” Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1987.
17. Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 27. Other important books on evangelism that attempt to take

pluralism seriously include Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), and Donald C. Posterski, *Reinventing Evangelism: New Strategies for Presenting Christ in Today's World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989).

18. Cf. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pp. 222–33.

19. Posterski, *Reinventing Evangelism*, p. 32.

20. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come, An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), p. 14.

21. David Lowes Watson, “The Church as Journalist: Evangelism in the Context of the Local Church in the United States,” *International Review of Mission* LXXII (285) (1983), pp. 57–74.

22. Darrell Guder’s stress on an incarnational understanding of mission provides a valuable resource at this point. See his *Be My Witnesses*.