

## *Evangelism: Then and Now*

This brief article is based on my short discourse on Acts 2:41-47 entitled ‘The Early Church & Evangelism’.<sup>1</sup>

Here are the relevant words from Acts 2:

Those who received his [that is, Peter’s] word were baptised [that is, dipped, plunged, immersed in water], and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

The day of Pentecost was unique. Even so, while certain things that happened on that auspicious occasion belonged to the very early days of the gospel, and I, for one, do not expect to see them repeated, nevertheless, other aspects of the day showed abiding principles which are directly applicable to us. More than that, those principles are mandatory for us. Indeed, that is one of the main reasons why the Spirit moved Luke to record the day’s events in Scripture.

Here, in short compass, we have a succinct account of the early church and evangelism; or, to put it the other way, evangelism and the early church. By ‘evangelism’, I mean the advance of the gospel in the world in the conversion of sinners.

Evangelism *and* the early church, I said. Words are important; small words are often the most important.<sup>2</sup> I did

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<sup>1</sup> The discourse may be found on my pages on sermonaudio and YouTube, and on my webpage (davidhjgay.com).

<sup>2</sup> Donald Barnhouse: ‘In studying the word of God, we must never underestimate the importance of little words’ (Donald G.Barnhouse: ‘The Meaning of the Term “Baptism”’, in Herbert

not say evangelism *in* the early church. As far as I can see, the New Testament is silent on evangelism within the *ekklēsia*. Evangelism in those days took place *outside* the church. Startling as it may sound to many, it is the case.<sup>3</sup>

We are all very familiar with the thrilling story of the day of Pentecost. Out of a clear blue sky, the Holy Spirit came upon a handful of obscure, nervous, timid, doubting believers, and so stirred them that they began to speak. They could do nothing else. A crowd rapidly gathered. The Spirit then moved Peter – an unschooled (Acts 4:13) fisherman – to preach. And how! He did not stop at a mere recital of facts. He did not read prepared notes. No! He really preached Christ; that is, he freely proclaimed him, exalted him, pointed the crowd to him, uplifted him. He bluntly confronted his hearers with their sin, spelling out their personal responsibility for the crucifixion of Christ. By the Spirit, the apostle's preaching was convincing, convicting, piercing. So much so, many cried out in their anxiety to know what they should do. Without the slightest hesitation, Peter commanded them to repent and openly profess their repentance by being baptised – that is dipped, plunged, immersed in water – assuring them that all who did so would be saved, forgiven of all their sins. He went on pleading with the crowd, urging them again and again to repent and be baptised: 'With many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them' (Acts 2:40). About three thousand did believe – they 'received his word' – they did repent, and they were baptised, and in this way they were added to the band of believers.

What marked this glorious event? It was nothing but a demonstration of the absolute sovereignty of God; it was entirely spontaneous; it was effective in the conversion of

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F.Stevenson (ed.): *The Ministry of Keswick*, Second series, Marshall Morgan and Scott, London, 1964, p157).

<sup>3</sup> I will return to this. See my *The Evangelical Dilemma: Evangelistic Addresses (Apostolic and Modern) Compared*.

sinner simply and entirely because of the power of the Spirit. It was not a church ‘service’. There was no human scheme, no plan, no programme. It was, from first to last, a sovereign, spontaneous intervention by the Spirit who used obscure, untutored believers to bring about a glorious awakening in the conversion of sinners by the preaching of the gospel.

What happened next?

The believers – both old and new – immediately settled into the fullest enjoyment of their *ekklēsia* life; that is, ‘they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers’. Indeed, they were occupied with *ekklēsia* life; I might say they were preoccupied, utterly taken up, with it: ‘they devoted themselves to’ it!<sup>4</sup>

The question that I want to raise is this: How did they continue to evangelise?

On this occasion, we don’t know – we are not told. But what we are told is that ‘the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved’; once again, we see the sovereignty of God in action. And everything points to this spread of the gospel as a side effect of the *ekklēsia* life of the believers, something additional to it: the believers were devoted to *ekklēsia* life, fully active in it, ‘and the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved’.

We can go further. All the evidence (Act 2:14-41 and Acts 3 and on) leads to one conclusion: leaving aside the extraordinary signs which marked Pentecost – although, on certain occasions (Acts 8 and 10, for instance, at highly significant milestones in the spread of the gospel)<sup>5</sup> they were repeated – additions to the *ekklēsia* occurred in a similar way

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<sup>4</sup> The Greek word speaks of a steadfast, intense, continuous perseverance.

<sup>5</sup> See my *Baptist Sacramentalism: A Warning to Baptists*.

to the day of Pentecost; namely, the gospel was advanced by the sovereign, spontaneous intervention of the Spirit demonstrated in the effective preaching of the gospel, leading to the conversion of sinners. In other words, as in Acts 2:14-41, the Spirit, in his sovereignty (1 Cor. 12:4-11), made use of believers, as he gave them opportunity, to preach the gospel to the unconverted in order to bring them to salvation in Christ.

It is what we do not read that interests me. And it is at this point that the contrast with today is so stark. Hence my title: ‘Evangelism: Then and Now’.

Of course, arguing from silence carries a risk. But not in this case. For in what follows, there is not a whiff of a hint of a suggestion of anything to contradict the abundant positive evidence which supports it.<sup>6</sup>

As I have said, the believers were preoccupied with *ekklēsia* life, ‘devoted... to’ it! As the rest of the New Testament makes clear, this meant the fullest practical exercise of the priesthood of all believers under the principle of ‘members one of another’.<sup>7</sup>

The fact is, the first believers did not sinfully waste their time doing what Christ never commanded, trying to work out how to do what they had no warrant to do; namely, as so many do today, devising and refining schemes and programmes to attract pagans into *ekklēsia* life. Not a bit of it! Within the life of the assembly,<sup>8</sup> the believers nurtured

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this, see my *Dilemma*. If unbelievers did assemble with the believers in the early days, it was an oddity, unsought by the saints (1 Cor. 14:23-25). This is not to say that the gospel should not be preached within the *ekklēsia*. See the Appendix ‘Gospel Preaching in Church: Eight Reasons’ in my *Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly*. The apostolic letters – written to believers – are full of the gospel.

<sup>7</sup> See my *The Priesthood of All Believers: Slogan or Substance?*

<sup>8</sup> I think it almost certain that, with so many converts, and with the apostles all resident in Jerusalem at the time, they assembled in

themselves to the glory of God, while, as all the evidence shows, as they had opportunity *outside* the *ekklēsia* they preached the gospel to all who would give them a hearing, and did so in the power and demonstration of the Spirit (1 Cor. 1:18,23-25; 2:1-5).

In stark contrast, things are very different today; very different, indeed. The gold has become dim (Lam. 4:1). Today, evangelicals do all they can to attract the so-called unchurched into church attendance in the hope that, in the passage of time, something or another might happen to them. Such an idea never entered the heads of the first believers.

The contrast between the New Testament and today could not be greater.

### ***Conclusion***

In light of the above, I appeal to all evangelical believers – especially to elders – to get back to Scripture. We make the claim that Scripture is our authority. Let it be more than slogan!

Finally, I address any unbeliever who may be reading this: if you are being attracted into church attendance, you should understand the following vital point, and act upon it without delay: it is not church that you need; it is Christ! Church attendance will not save you. Indeed, as long as you remain unconverted, it will only add to your eternal danger. Nothing is more fatal, spiritually speaking, than religion. Only by repenting of your sin and trusting in Christ will you be saved. So trust him now. And having trusted him, be baptised (that is, dipped, plunged, immersed in water) in

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several places – homes, the temple courts, or wherever. Place, in the new covenant, is irrelevant (John 4). See my ‘The Place of “Place” in the New Covenant’. What is more, for the proper exercise of *ekklēsia* life, relative smallness of numbers is essential, and is the pattern we see repeated throughout the New Testament. See the chapter ‘Numbers and their Management’ in my *Relationship*.

obedience to him, and so assemble with your fellow-believers and fully enter in to the life of the *ekklēsia*, and, by the Spirit, play your part in it.