

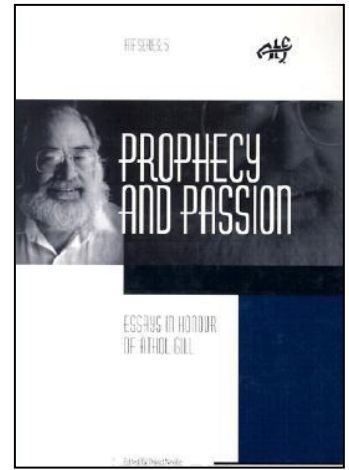
PROCLAIMING GOOD NEWS IN HARD TIMES: REFLECTIONS ON EVANGELISM AND THE BIBLE

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*Published in Prophecy and Passion: Essays in Honour of Athol Gill,
ed. by David Neville. Adelaide: Australian Theological Forum, 2002.*

We cannot avoid the fact that even our evangelistic methods, or perhaps especially our evangelistic methods, must be brought under the scrutiny of the good news.

--Athol Gill, "What is Evangelism?" (1976:7)



I am among the many who are indebted to Athol Gill's faithful advocacy for the fullness of the biblical good news. I remain deeply grateful for his theological mentoring of the First World radical discipleship movement. Because Athol was passionate about a more radically biblical understanding of the church's vocation of evangelism, I offer some reflections on that subject below, in the hope that I have reflected some of his central concerns and visions.

The theory and practice of evangelism has been at the center of the great divergence in the 20th century between liberal and conservative Protestants of the First World. At the turning of the millennia it continues to be a field of contention. Conservatives, many of whom underline the split by calling themselves *evangelicals*, have tended to emphasize "soul-winning" at all costs. Eager for spiritual conversion, they often sacrifice gospel content for outreach technique. There is generally a blissful ignorance of the bloody history of Christian imperialism, while the public relevance of the gospel is traded off in order to concentrate on private religious experience. "Decisionism instead of discipleship," Athol called this. "The idea of accepting Jesus as savior and later, perhaps, acknowledging him as Lord is totally foreign to the New Testament" (1976:6).

Conservatives tend to minimize the tension between the church's story and that of the world, in the belief that conforming the Christian message to the myths of the dominant culture will make for an easier sell. This is why so much of conservative First World Christianity fits neatly into the mold of individualism, capitalism and western chauvinism. In the U.S., too often evangelicals refuse to question the prosperous, while cheerleading for military adventurism and blessing consumerism. It is utterly predictable that churches that comfort the propertied, scapegoat the afflicted and abide by divisions of gender, race, and class *will grow*. But that is not because of evangelism; it is because of good marketing. Confusion between the two has led to such uniquely North American religious phenomena such as:

- superficially Christianized advertising slogans ("I found it!")
- promotional packages designed for easy consumption (the "four spiritual laws")
- reliance upon demographic surveys to identify consumer trends (so-called church-growth strategies)
- formulaic human relations techniques (rule #1: make people feel comfortable; rule # 2: don't ask for too much; etc).

These approaches reduce the gospel to just another commodity to be hawked.

Liberals, on the other hand, have tended to feel the weight of modernism, pluralism and post-colonialism's critique of Christendom. Doubt and ambivalence have led many mainstream churches to become confused about what story they have to tell the world. Unable or unwilling to sustain mission programs, most denominations have stagnated, content with maintenance programs that neither broaden nor deepen the local church's engagement with the world around it. Relentless secularization, however, is forcing liberal Protestantism to reevaluate its assumptions concerning cultural entitlement. Changing economic patterns have seen parishioners less willing to donate their discretionary income. Demographic trends are challenging the traditional social architecture of the church, as the old partitions of race, gender and class are increasingly contested. And the culture wars and the rise of neoconservatism have put liberalism everywhere on the defensive. The result: once dynamic inner city congregations are packing up and abandoning the urban core, once bottomless church budgets are drying up and once vast denominational bureaucracies are shriveling up. I believe these trends bode well because they are compelling liberal Protestants to reconsider the vocation of evangelism. The true motivation for this remains, however, uncertain. Does it arise from a deeper realization that we are living in hard times, and that the church and the world both desperately need to encounter some *good news*? Or is it motivated by a sense that the mainstream Protestants must regain their "market share" church membership and revenues in order to guarantee institutional survival?

To both authoritarian conservatives and diffident liberals (see Myers, 1998c) Athol proposed the way of radical discipleship. As his mentor Eduard Schweizer (1960) put it, "Discipleship is the only form in which faith in Jesus can exist." Both tendencies in the church must take a fresh look at the vocation of evangelism, for both have been compromised by the dominant capitalist ideology of marketing. But if evangelism it isn't haranguing non-Christians with threats of hell, nor religious huckstering or chauvinism, nor merely a desperate membership drive, what *is* it?

I: Grounding the Good News in the Biblical Story

The Greek word *euangelion* in first century Hellenistic society was an exclusively secular term, popularly understood to mean "favorable news" concerning the fortunes of the Roman empire. Specifically, it heralded the birth or ascension to the throne of an emperor or the news of another Roman military victory in the provinces. *Euangelion* was, in other words, imperial propaganda (Myers, 1988:121ff; see also Horsley, 1997:10ff). It is noteworthy, therefore, that the first gospel writer Mark chose this very term to describe his story about Jesus, which he titles "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (Mk 1:1). Mark also uses the term to characterize the message of Jesus: "Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of G-d" (Mk 1:14). This was an extraordinary rhetorical strategy because Mark lived in a world in which the power and the reach of the imperial media were unrivaled. Who could challenge the empire's version of reality, backed by such overwhelming political and military might? In Mark's time, most people consumed the dictates of imperial propaganda with credulity and obedience -- perhaps not unlike today, when most North Americans are transfixed by political speeches and Madison Avenue and the television news.

Mark and the early Christians were not pirating that Roman buzzword to advance their own agenda the way that advertisements today use patriotic language to sell cars or soda pop (see Myers, 1994:58-64). Nor were they spiritualizing this term in order to dramatize their call for an otherworldly kingdom, as if to say: 'Caesar has good news for your body, but we Christians have good news for your soul.' No, by expropriating the term *euangelion* Mark was specifically taking on the dominant culture of his time and

its version of "good news," challenging it with an alternative narrative about a decidedly non-imperial Lord. Mark was declaring a "war of myths" with the empire, pitting the Story of Jesus against that of Caesar (Myers, 1988:14ff).

The church in any age, then, must proclaim the gospel with a keen understanding that the dominant culture has its *own* version of "good news" that contends for hearts and minds. As Jim McClendon puts it

The church's story will not interpret the world to the world's satisfaction. Hence there is a temptation (no weaker word will do) for the church to deny her "counter, original, spare, strange" starting point in Abraham and Jesus and to give instead a self-account or theology that will seem true to the world on the world's own present terms. Surely, it will be said, the salvation of the world must rest on some better foundation than tales about an ancient nomad and stories of a Jewish healer? (1986:17)

Much contemporary evangelism gives in to this temptation by abandoning the anomalous character of the biblical narrative in favor of approaches that are more immediately intelligible or gratifying (read "effective") precisely because they *reproduce* rather than challenge the dominant cultural discourses.

I am convinced (with Athol) that only a deeper appropriation of the biblical story in all its contrariness can help us recover the vocation of evangelism. While scriptural treatment of this topic usually focuses on the New Testament. I suggest beginning further back. Christian understanding of the good news must be grounded firmly in the Hebrew Bible—particularly if we are going to correct the many abuses that have been perpetuated under the rubric of evangelism.

Perhaps the earliest "kerygmatic proclamation" found in the Bible is YHWH's announcement to Moses that the Israelites enslaved under Pharaoh were going to be set free and re-enfranchised in the land of Canaan:

I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes I am mindful of their sufferings. I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Ex 3:7f, JPS).

In the overall sweep of biblical narrative, this is the primal expression of good news. It defines the character of G-d, who is most often referred in Torah to as "the One who brought Israel out of Egypt" (dozens of times in Exodus, nine times each in Leviticus and Numbers, 19 times in Deuteronomy). It represents the plumline of Israelite identity throughout the Prophets and Writings. And it tethers many of the salvation motifs later renarrated in the New Testament, such as: the passage from death to life (I Cor 1:10; Heb 2:14f; I Jn 3:14), release from bondage (Gal 4:3,9, 5:1), redemption (Rom 3:24; Eph 1:7), and crossing over into new life (II Cor 5:17; Col 3:10). In what follows I propose this tradition as a kind of foundation for our understanding of evangelism. I further suggest seven aspects, anchored in this essential "gospel of Exodus," that should characterize our proclamation of liberation in Christ.

II: G-d is the Compassionate Outsider (Theological Good News)

At the core of biblical evangelization is the profoundly dialectical assertion that G-d is both "outside" the reality we know, yet also deeply and compassionately present within it as well. Traditional theological language calls this "transcendence" and "immanence," but these terms have long suffered from de-politicization. In a world of cruelty where the powerful dominate and the powerless suffer untold violations, it is good news indeed that there is a more ultimate Reality that is at once both distant from and fully present to the world of injustice. On one hand the G-d of Exodus is narrated as utterly Other, exogenous to the Egyptian cosmology. On the other hand, G-d is compassionately attentive to what is happening inside Egypt, hearing and responding to the cry of the oppressed Hebrews.

The geography of Moses' encounter with G-d illustrates this dialectic. Moses was raised in Pharaoh's court, but ventures "beyond the wilderness" (Ex 3:1)—that is, to the wild, uncolonized spaces beyond the hegemony of imperial Egypt. Yet the divine voice addresses Moses not from the distant heavens, but from a nearby bush (Ex 3:4). This G-d is "outside" the pretensions of human civilization, yet as proximate as the scrubby native flora, speaking "from within" the living biosphere. The Israelites are invited to follow Moses' footsteps, journeying *from* a civilization that represents slavery *to* a wilderness that represents freedom. There they too will have terrestrial encounters with divine grace and power—in the Sea and on a mountain, the Presence mediated through rocks and quail and clouds (Ex 14ff).

Understandably Moses wonders *who* would dare posit such a bold alternative to the only historical reality his people know (3:13). But YHWH, the "I will be who I will be" (3:14) cannot be named—and hence cannot be domesticated to the service of any political agenda, no matter how powerful, legitimate or seemingly ultimate. Only an anonymous, unconstrained G-d can propose unimagined horizons to those whose universe is named and shackled by the imperial cosmology. Yet this G-d also claims solidarity with the ancestors of Moses' people: "I am the G-d of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (3:6). G-d is both a political alien and a family intimate.

The theological content of this good news, then, is not that there *is* a god. After all, the existence of divine beings has not been doubted by most people for most of history. Rather, it was what *kind* of god YHWH is. This is the essential, dialectical, indeed mystical character of G-d: at once outside and within, unidentified with human society yet utterly identified with human suffering. When this mystery is abandoned—whether for reasons of Logic, politics or marketing—the news is no longer so good. Remote Transcendence (which ironically typified both the distant, patriarchal deity of the Puritans and the spectating cosmic Clockmaker of the Enlightenment) is of little use to those who face oppression and who struggle concretely for justice in history. On the other hand, existential Immanence (the cuddly and affirming, if hopelessly elastic Spirit-god of both Pietism and contemporary New Age spirituality) becomes so familiar within existing social arrangements that it poses little threat to those who would manage history to their own benefit.

Biblical faith embraces the mystery, insisting on a G-d who pays no heed to the dictates and designs of the State, yet who feels profound compassion for the frailty and pain of its subjects. We see this in the New Testament theologies of incarnation. Messiah Jesus is both "over" the Powers (called "savior and lord," honorific Hellenistic acclamation normally reserved for Caesar) and "under" them (born as a political refugee at the margins of history, executed as a dissident). The Word was "in the beginning," yet was "made flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:1,14)—that is, both outside and inside our history.

Disciples, too, are invited to be compassionate outsiders, to be "in the world but not of it." Historically this has been most difficult for the church to embody. But whenever this dialectic has been recovered—by the early monastic movement, for example, or by Franciscans or Anabaptists, or by Methodist abolitionists or Pentecostal street workers—Christians have brought good news to hard times. But today we see mostly polarization between "prophetic" activists trying to work from the outside in, and "pastoral" therapists trying to work from the inside out. For all the spirituality around, we are short on compassion and political imagination. The task of recovering this theological dialectic could not be more important for evangelism.

III: G-d is Sovereign (Political Good News)

"Come," says YHWH to Moses, "I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (Ex 3:10). This is good news to those trapped at the bottom of the social pyramid—and the Exodus story has functioned this way throughout history (see Walzer, 1986). But in a world of omnipotent political claims, such a summons can only originate with a genuinely alternative authority. It is because G-d dwells *apart* from the geography of empire that G-d can stand *against* it. This alternative authority lies at the heart of Mark's version of Jesus' inaugural proclamation (Mk 1:14f). On the heels to the imprisonment of the popular prophet John the Baptist by an unjust king, Jesus takes up his mentor's mantle and announces the immanence of "the Kingdom of G-d." Much has been made of this phrase by modern theologians, yet both liberals and conservatives have tended to settle for interpretations of it that are finally more existential than political (see Batstone, 1992). What is routinely ignored is its most straightforward connotation: the allusion to the ancient biblical tradition of YHWH's *actual* sovereignty over the people.

One of the distinguishing features of the Sinai covenant is its prescription for a tribal confederacy practicing a decentralized style of self-governance. Norman Gottwald has successfully argued that early Israel's experiment in "re-tribalization" as a "combined sociopolitical and religious revolution against the imperial and hierarchic tribute-imposing structures of Egyptian-dominated Canaan" (1985:284f). Ancient near eastern state formation—whether in the Egyptian, Babylonian, or Assyrian empires or smaller vassal city-states such as those in Canaan—was predicated upon the king receiving *legitimation* from the supreme deity, who participated in the coronation. But because the early Israelite traditions (rightly) equated this royal apparatus and ideology with slavery, they contended that G-d's sovereignty *precluded* kingship in the tribal confederacy. Thus, for example, Judges 8:22f reports that the warrior Gideon, victorious in his skirmishes against the Canaanites, rejected the peoples' offer to make him king: "I will not rule over you...YHWH will rule over you." Similarly, the parable of Jotham (Jud 9:7-15) ridicules the very notion that a predatory dynasty could improve upon the empirical "hetarchy" of nature, upon which the Israelite body politic is patterned.

I Samuel 8 narrates a critical turning point in the life of Israel. The people, disillusioned with their experiment in self-determination, decide to return to politics-as-usual: "Appoint for us a king to govern us, like other nations" (8:5). The tribal judge Samuel despairs at the peoples' apostasy, but YHWH consoles him: "They have not rejected you; they have rejected Me from being king over them" (8:7). YHWH then instructs Samuel to warn the people about "the ways of the king who shall reign over them." The centralization of power will entail:

- forced conscription (v 11)
- militarism and a militarized economy (12)
- State expropriation of labor and resources (13,16)
- a political economy geared to the elite (14)
- taxation (15,17)

This grim litany concludes: "And you will be his slaves." In other words, a people freed from Egypt set about recreating Pharaoh's society of domination when they choose a monarchy—a lament later echoed in the old African American proverb that "it is easier to get the people out of Egypt than to get Egypt out of the people." But the chilling moral to the story is that G-d will *not* hear the cries of those slaves who collaborate in their own oppression (v 18).

In reasserting the exclusive sovereignty of YHWH, then, Jesus was re-membering the pre-monarchic faith of Exodus Israel, with its antipathy toward the powerful. Indeed, it may be that Jesus' "nomination" of twelve disciples means to invoke the old images of "retribalization" (Mk 3: 13-19; Myers, 1988:163f). Jesus is narrated as defying political hierarchy in Word (Mk 10:41-45) and deed (Mk 15:1-5). That this represents "good news" to the people is suggested when Jesus implicitly rejects even Israel's own monarchic tradition by arguing that "Messiah is not David's son"—to which, Mark reports, the crowd responded with delight (Mk 12:35-37; *ibid*:319).

It is this radical vision of divine sovereignty in history that animated the early church to call Jesus "Lord." Karl Donfried writes:

In [I Thess] 2:12 G-d, according to the Apostle, call the Thessalonian Christians 'into his own kingdom'; in 5:3 there is a frontal attack on the *Pax et Securitas* program of the early Principate; and in the verses just preceding this attack one finds three heavily loaded political terms: *parousia*, *apantesis* and *kyrios*... When used as court language *parousia* refers to the arrival of Caesar, a king or an official. *Apantesis* refers to the citizens meeting a dignitary who is about to visit the city... The term *kyrios*, especially when used in the same context as the two preceding terms, also has a definite political sense. People in the eastern Mediterranean applied the term *kyrios* to the Roman emperors from Augustus on... All of this, coupled with the use of *euaggelion* and its possible association with the eastern ruler cult, suggests that Paul and his associates could easily be understood as violating the 'decrees of Caesar' in the most blatant manner. (1997:216f)

The early Christians, like Jesus himself, paid a high political price for their militant proclamation of G-d's sovereignty. In contrast, most of the theological discourse in First World Christianity concerning the "Lordship of Jesus" is politically domesticated—and this is *not* good news for a world controlled by unaccountable corporate and aggressive technological forces.

What we might call the inherent political suspicion of biblical evangelism must be recovered today, for despite experiments in democracy around the world, power is more than ever concentrated in the hands of the few. These few wield technological and economic power that has the capacity to destroy or fundamentally reshape life, while more people suffer at the social margins than at any other time in history. A truly "evangelical" church cannot fail to challenge these violent pretenses of omnipotence. In this sense, the integrity of the gospel in the last half century has been preserved less through

evangelical rhetoric and more through witnesses such as the confessing church under Hitler, the Civil Rights and Sanctuary movements in the U.S., and the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. As William Stringfellow (1977) understood so well, it is up to the church to interrogate, to mitigate and to refuse all claims to sovereignty made by the principalities and powers in history.

IV: G-d is on the Side of the Poor (Economic Good News)

A third characteristic of biblical evangelism is that it represents good news *for the poor*. In Exodus YHWH does not make universal declarations about the human condition nor vague promises about potential happiness. This G-d was both biased and partisan toward those who were at the bottom of the social pyramid of imperial Egypt, and offered to accompany them in radically changing their circumstances.

We see this "preferential option" (as Latin American liberation theologians call it) in Jesus' invitation to become "fishers of people" (Mk 1:17). This familiar image has long been seen by missionaries as a metaphor for the winning of souls—as if evangelism were a numbers game! The image, however, more likely alludes to the tradition of prophetic censure of the rich and powerful:

Jer 16:16: I am now sending for many fishermen, says YHWH, and they shall catch them!

Amos 4:2: YHWH has sworn by his holiness: The time is surely coming upon you [who oppress the poor and crush the needy], when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks.

Ezek 29:3f: Thus says YHWH: I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt... I will put hooks in your jaws, and make the fish of your channels stick to your scales. I will draw you up from your channels... and fling you into the wilderness.

Hab 1:14-17: You have made people like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. The enemy brings all of them up with a hook; he drags them out with his net... Is he then to keep on emptying his net, and destroying nations without mercy?

Jesus is summoning these common laborers to join him in overturning the oppressive structures of power and privilege in the world. An apt modern paraphrase would thus be more like: "Follow me and I will show you how to catch the *Big Fish!*"

Luke's version of Jesus' inaugural sermon is more explicit still: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor. G-d has sent me to proclaim release to those captive, recovery of sight to the blind and liberation to the oppressed -- the hallmarks of the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18). Jesus is citing Isaiah 61, which in turn is citing the Jubilee vision of Torah, which sought to teach Israel about its dependence upon the "divine economy of grace." The essence of Jubilee legislation was that the earth belongs to YHWH, and its fruits are given as a gift; thus the people should freely and justly distribute those fruits, instead of seeking to own and hoard them (for comprehensive overview see Kinsler, 1999 and Lowery, 2000).

The noun "Sabbath" first appears in the famous story of manna in the wilderness (Ex 16:23). This story was more than a lesson about YHWH's sustaining love. It also served as a reminder that the purpose of economic organization was for there to be enough for everyone, *not* for surplus accumulation that benefited the few (see Ex 16:15-26). It is in this context that Moses prescribes periodic Sabbath rest for

both the land and human labor. *Shabat* is both the "first" and "last" commandment in the Exodus narrative of the Covenant Code (see 31:12-17). Sabbath year legislation (Ex 23:9-12) expands this mandate and grounds it explicitly in Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt.

According to Leviticus 25, this cycle was supposed to culminate in the Jubilee, or "sabbath's sabbath" (seven times seven years). The Jubilee would be Israel's hedge against the inevitable tendency in human societies to "stratify": that is, to concentrate power and wealth in the hands of the few, creating a hierarchy with the poor at the bottom. In agrarian societies such as biblical Israel (or parts of the Third World today), the cycle of poverty began when a family fell into debt, deepened when it had to sell off its land in order to service that debt, and reached its conclusion when landless peasants could only sell their labor, becoming bond-slaves.

The Jubilee sought to dismantle such inequality by redistributing the wealth every other generation. Leviticus 25 mandates:

- releasing each community member from debt;
- returning all encumbered or forfeited land to its original owners;
- freeing all slaves;

This included a prohibition against lending money at interest to the poor (25:36f). The rationale for this unilateral restructuring of the community's wealth was not social utopianism, but to remind Israel of its identity as an Exodus people who must never reproduce an economic system of slavery (25:55). The extent to which biblical Israel abided by the Jubilee code is a matter of much scholarly debate (and in capitalist religion, much skepticism). After all, nothing could be more scorned by our economic system of meritocracy. Yet this vision is at the heart of Torah. And according to Luke, Jesus intended to renew that old Jubilee vision: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:21; see Myers, 1998a).

The Kingdom of G-d is defined explicitly in economic terms in Mark 10:17-31. The Jubilee lesson is illustrated negatively by the non-discipleship of the rich man, who will not redistribute his "many properties" to the poor (10:17-22). A refrain then asserts that the rich cannot enter the Kingdom (10:23-24). This is not a statement of discrimination; it is a characterization of the Kingdom as that place and time in which there are no rich and poor. Is such a social order of equality possible? Our refusal of that possibility is mirrored in the incredulity of the disciples, but Jesus insists that with G-d "all things" are possible (10:26f). The story concludes with a positive illustration of Jubilee by an invitation to "whosoever," which in Mark's gospel functions like a blank space in the text, challenging us to fill in our own names. We are invited to "re-communitize" our assets of land, estate and family, in order that all may participate in the abundance G-d has created (10:28ff).

The early church appears to have practiced this kind of "Sabbath economics." The most obvious example is Luke's account of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, which occasioned an experiment in wealth redistribution that echoed the manna story: assets were "distributed to any as had need" (Acts 2:45; 4:35). Central to the itinerant ministry of the apostle Paul was his appeal to the new Gentile churches to learn Sabbath economics by practicing inter-church mutual aid (II Cor 8). "It is a matter of equality," exhorts the Apostle, who then proceeds to cite the distributive imperative of the manna story (8:14f). James is perhaps most unequivocal on the subject of economic justice (Jas 5:1-6), and John the Seer envisions the divine overthrow of the imperial economy of oppression (Rev 18) and establishment of a new social order in which abundance for all is ensured (Rev 21).

Sabbath economics—if the church would only practice it—would be good news for those disenfranchised within given socioeconomic systems. The Bible recognizes that inequalities inevitably arise in “fallen” society—a realism it shares with the worldview of modern capitalism. Unlike the social Darwinism of the latter, however, the biblical vision refuses to stipulate that economic disparity is therefor a permanent or “natural” condition. Instead, G-d’s people are instructed to dismantle, on a regular basis, the fundamental patterns and structures of stratified wealth and power through communal mechanisms of economic redistribution. In the Deuteronomist’s version of Sabbath year debt release: "If there be any poor among you in the land I give you, do not harden your hearts, nor refuse to stretch out your hand to them." (Dt 15:7) The character of any society is judged by how the "least" are treated.

The preeminent challenge to the human family today is the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth and power. The United Nations reported in 1992 that income disparities between the world's richest and poorest have doubled since 1960. Today the wealthiest 20% of the world's population receives almost 83% of the world's income, while the poorest 20% receive less than 2%! Any proclamation of the gospel that refuses to reckon with these realities is both cruel and irrelevant. Our churches must experiment with and advocate for debt-relief and alternative business practices, sustainable technologies and land uses, just financial systems and trade patterns, and non addictive consumption habits. Above all, however, Christians must work with and for the poor in solidarity. As Jesus says to his community in Mk 14:7, “the poor will always be with *you*.” This passage—notoriously misunderstood and misused by preachers and politicians alike— is not about the inevitability of poverty, but about the social location of the church—a place where the poor can find good news!

V: Transformation Here and Now (Good News for History)

This brings us to the fourth characteristic of biblical evangelism: its existential demand. The G-d of Exodus offers neither a general blessing nor an indeterminate hope. YHWH makes a specific intervention in the concrete social bondage of a particular people. And along with this accompaniment come very concrete demands.

Ever since the church aligned itself with the status quo under emperor Constantine there have been two classic ways in which it has abandoned (and even suppressed) the kind of good news I've been talking about. One is to admit that while the world will indeed be transformed by G-d's justice, this will occur beyond the bounds of our own history. This is the "eschatological" avoidance. The other is to insist that this transformation only occurs in another realm. This is the "spiritualizing" (indeed docetic) avoidance, displacing radical change to some other world.

Perhaps anticipating these ancient expressions of religious equivocation, Mark has Jesus address them at the outset of his story. In the inaugural proclamation we have discussed above he says, "The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of G-d is at hand" (Mk 1:15). The language could not be more emphatic about spatial contiguity and temporal imminence: the moment for the kind of political and economic transformation spoken of above is NOW, and the place is HERE.

To be sure, this *kairos* character of the gospel has profoundly personal dimension. It means that I cannot defer its challenge to someone else. Evangelism should provoke an existential crisis for the

hearer, for it is not abstract talk about how things might be different. It is a challenge to choose, to clarify allegiances, to change *my* life, to engage *my* people. This is an area where sophisticated liberal Christians have everything to learn from those fervent evangelical traditions. The first principle of both popular education and community organizing is to encounter the people where they are in life, and to get them to see how they can have a role in changing their circumstances. What is more engaging than an "altar call"? What is more effective in involving people in a movement than to challenge personally them to make concrete choices in their lives? Augusto Boal, a practitioner of empowering popular theatre among the poor, talks about moving audiences from being "spectators" to "spec-actors." Perhaps the old revivalists have something to teach us about bringing the personal and political crisis of the gospel alive—here, now, with me.

But this personal change is not just inward, and there is nothing biblical about accepting Jesus as my *personal* Lord and Savior. Discipleship demands allegiance to Jesus, not private possession of him, and requires concrete change in social practice. To return to the example of those fishermen in the gospels, Mark tells us "they left their nets and followed Jesus" (1:18,20). This was no impulsive or temporary hiatus. In antiquity abandoning the workplace not only entailed a loss of economic security. It represented a rupture in the social status quo as well, since the world of the extended family centered around the means of livelihood. Some commentators have argued that Jesus expected an immediate end of the world and so urged others to join him in abandoning all economic and social responsibility. This is a remarkable trivialization. In fact, the verb "to leave" (Gk *aphiemi*, Mk 1:18,20) is the same verb used elsewhere in Mark to connote release from sin/debt (Mk 2:5; 11:25) or liberation from the bondage of disease (Mk 1:31).^{*} In other words, it functions as a kind of Jubilee term, as we saw above in 10:28f, in which the community of discipleship is invited to do what the rich man cannot do, namely reallocate its social and economic assets. Jesus wants more than an assent of our heart; he invites an uncompromising break with "business as usual."

A personal encounter with the gospel is *necessary*—but it is not *sufficient* in a world of structural violence and injustice. We must also enlist into the great struggle for history. Interestingly, the traditional religious ways of avoidance have now been adopted by the political Powers. Today the secular priests of the dominant order insist that any talk of fundamentally redistributing wealth or power is "utopian" (coined by Thomas More, it has long since taken on the pejorative connotation of "the place that does not exist"). The favorite acronym of contemporary international economists is TINA: "there is no alternative" to capitalist globalization. Similarly, the so-called political realists argue that history proves the law of the jungle, and we are naïve to expect better. True evangelism must challenge these adages for what they are: attempts to absolutize the current arrangements of privilege and power and to constrain the horizons of political imagination. Throughout the history of the church the holistic gospel has reignited the hopes of regular people and animated them to struggle for humanization in *their*

^{*} The linguistic association throughout the synoptic tradition between sin and debt—probably the same word in Aramaic—is typified by the Lukan version of the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive (*aphes*) us our sins (*hamartias*) as we ourselves forgive (*aphiomen*) everyone indebted (*opheilon*) to us" (Lk 11:4). A similar association can be seen in the verb *charizomai*, which means both to grant forgiveness (e.g. II Cor 2:7,10) and to release from debt (Lk 7:42f). The economic dimensions of Paul's theology of grace can be seen in his use of *charis* in II Cor 8 (see Myers, 1998b). The sociopolitical significance of these associations has been largely ignored by New Testament scholars.

world. *That* is why it is good news.

VI: Evangelism as Bad News (Repentance)

A fifth characteristic of biblical evangelism follows from the previous ones: it necessarily involves a judgment on the status quo. This stands to reason: in order to imagine liberation we must acknowledge that bondage exists. Moses, having been socialized in Pharaoh's household, had to encounter the reality of oppression (Ex 2:11-15) and dis-illusion himself of his very identity in order to be open to the summons from the burning bush. The Exodus was *not* good news from the Egyptian point of view—nor doubtless for those Hebrews who had cut a deal with their overlords. The biblical story begins by looking open-eyed at real human situations of violence and oppression. Even in the Genesis Creation account the purpose is not to speculate on the origins of the cosmos, but rather to assert the primal brokenness of human existence. The theological problem in scripture, as Jon Sobrino pointed out, is not theodicy, but anthropodicy (1978:221ff). Thus the Hebrew prophets relentlessly criticize the leaders of Israel for their practices of idolatry and injustice, and Jesus continually indicts the public order for its treatment of the marginalized. Because no society embodies G-d's standards for justice and compassion, the good news must first face the bad news squarely. Similarly, the apostle Paul predicates his gospel of salvation through Christ upon a categorical analysis of human captivity to the power of sin and death (Rom 1-8). For biblical faith, soteriology is always predicated upon hamartiology.

This is why the call to repentance is at the heart of biblical faith. This is not a moral exhortation to "be better" but an ultimatum to a historical project in which there are fatal contradictions. The verb in the New Testament means "to turn around," and is directed to people collectively, not only to individuals. It is addressed particularly to people who are convinced of their own nobility and mesmerized by their illusions of a benign past and an equally benign future—as is generally the case with North Americans. The call to repent gives us permission to acknowledge that we are on the road to self-destruction, and that we can, and must, change directions. As Karl Barth put it once, "To be saved does not mean to be a little encouraged, a little comforted, a little relieved. It means to be pulled out like a log from a burning fire."

Contemporary First World Christianity, however, has grown increasingly uncomfortable with such radical and sweeping indictments of the human condition. Discourses of denunciation tend today to be understood in terms of narcissistic shame culture: we are being told we're bad, and that's bad (on this see Fossum and Mason, 1986). Sin is equated with poor self-esteem. Much of the church, under the influence of modern therapeutic culture, focuses on affirmations of G-d's love rather than the "negativism" of judgment (Hunter, 1982).

"The vocabulary of Christian faith suffers from misunderstanding at every turn, but no one term is as badly understood in both society and church as the little word, 'sin,'" writes Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall (1995:8). Most modern critics of Christianity would concur, but for them the problem lies in churchly concepts of sin that are too severe, too absolute, and too ubiquitous -- in short, too *big*. Hall's argument, however, is that our notions of sin are too *small*. A fatal mistake is made, he contends, whenever the church switches its focus from *sin*, a matter pertaining to the human condition, to *sins*, transgressions to be catalogued and controlled. "The individualism fostered by pietistic and liberal expressions of Protestantism has greatly aggravated the tendency to identify sin with negative qualities (sins) -- specifically, negative *personal* failings" (ibid).

Conservatives have domesticated the language of sin by focusing upon personal morality while ignoring structural and historical manifestations of human alienation. Such religion continues to prosper in our social context because its essential individualism is congruent with the privatizing culture of late capitalism. Liberals, meanwhile, having assimilated into the optimistic secular myth of Progress, tend to be embarrassed by the rhetoric of sin. Even the "social gospel" of Walter Rauschenbusch and the "Christian realism" of Reinhold Niebuhr, both of which attempted to reassert the public and political character of sin, remained steeped in assumptions of national historical entitlement (on this see Dorrien, 1995).

It is not surprising, then, that in the last quarter century it has been Third World liberation theologians, working in contexts of severe human oppression and violence, who have consistently articulated an enlarged discourse of sin. Gustavo Gutierrez, for example, writes:

Sin is evident in oppressive structures...in the domination and slavery of peoples, races, and social classes. Sin appears, therefore, as the fundamental alienation, the root of a situation of injustice and exploitation. (1973:175f)

Recently Third World theologians have directed their reflections on sin specifically toward the First World church. The "Road to Damascus" Kairos document, for example, denounces "the sin of idolatry... that serves the total war being waged against the people, leading to the death and destruction of our communities" (Brown, 1990:125). But such pointed appeals from the Third World have made relatively little impact upon the prosperous children of Progress.

The reason such discourses have been so unwelcome is that repentance calls for *dis-continuity* with the dominant culture, whereas the greatest social value for the privileged is *continuity*. From their perspective the system works: it has no fundamental flaws, it perpetuates itself, it even grows and spreads. This belief is particularly essential in the maintenance of an imperial order like the Pax Americana. Assertions that we must reverse our historical momentum, therefore, are necessarily held in contempt by modernity—although *spiritualized* notions of personal contrition are tolerated. Thus repentance, a theme once taken seriously by North American Protestants in the 19th century, has been increasingly abandoned in the 20th century. Liberals found the discourse too oppositional, preferring the rhetoric of reform. Cold War neo-orthodoxy equivocated: however depraved the "free world" might be, it was not as sinful as Communism. Only evangelicalism has retained a formal discourse of repentance, but one that is highly spiritualized and individualistic. And while dispensationalism does address history, its incessant trumpeting of pessimistic "signs of the times" means not to heal that history, but to frighten people into individual conversion and to reward them with arrogant eschatological promises. Biblical calls to repentance arise from solidarity with, not escape from, historical crisis, in order to animate struggle to change historical direction.

The problem is that neither privatistic nor positivistic theologies can account for the horrors of the 20th century. And now at the cusp of the third millennium, we are full of angst and terror, and can't explain why. In his classic *Whatever Became of Sin?*, psychologist Karl Menninger caricatured "American progress":

We glowed; we gloried; we prospered; we preempted; we evicted; we extended; we consolidated; we succeeded! We shut our eyes to all that was unpleasant about these words and

these processes. We were too busy to discern the misery created everywhere, too smug to see the devastation we were wreaking, too greedy to recognize the waste and the inequity and the ugliness and the immorality... Suddenly we awoke from our pleasant dreams with a fearful realization that *something was wrong* (1973:4f).

Indeed, our churches are increasingly reflective of the dominant culture's anxieties, as the national dream of ever-expanding political hegemony and ever-increasing economic affluence fades (Myers, 1994:3ff). The more social and economic systems are restructured at home and abroad to benefit capital—at the expense of the workplace, the neighborhood and the home—the more churches seem to retreat into an obsession with personal sins. While most middle class people now intuit that they can no longer count on upward mobility for their children, the response is scapegoating rather than self-examination. At virtually all levels of class society people channel their resentment toward those below them rather than trying to understand why wealth is concentrating above them. Similarly, social unrest is becoming ever more lethal because of the proliferation of guns on both sides of the socioeconomic gulf—yet the call is for *more* domestic armament rather than less. And despite a growing sense that our exploitation of the earth is unsustainable—as indicated by aquafir contamination, rain forest destruction, and ozone depletion—there is no serious effort to curtail the consumption that makes this exploitation both profitable and inevitable.

"The steps we have taken to quell the anxiety," writes Paul Wachtel in *The Poverty of Affluence*, "have actually exacerbated our sense of insecurity and -- by ironic logic familiar to the student of neuroses -- have thereby called forth still more of the same kind of efforts and thus still more undermining of security and still further acceleration of a one-sided and self-defeating pattern" (1989:60). We have become externally reliant upon a socioeconomic system that destroys the land, exhausts its resources and alienates and exploits human labor. And we are so internally captive to our illusions and excesses and appetites that we can no longer *imagine* the world differently. "We all live by robbing nature, but our standard of living demands that the robbery shall continue," writes Wendell Berry. "The great obstacle is simply this: the conviction that we cannot change because we are dependent upon what is wrong. But that is the addict's excuse, and we know that it will not do." (1989:19).

Is *addiction* the best description for our captivity to a way of life that is out of control (see McCormick, 1989)? If so, it is very bad news indeed. For the wages of addiction, to paraphrase the apostle Paul—with plenty of corroboration from contemporary studies of substance abuse—is death (Rom 7:23; see May, 1988). We are, in other words, captive in the "land of the free," culpable for both our own dehumanization and that of others. Our historical project has arrived at a cul-de-sac: the future is closed unless we *turn around*. Such a radical diagnosis may be anathema to First World grandiosity, but it is nevertheless constitutive of true evangelism. We Christians must love our people enough to tell them the truth.

VII: Evangelism as Tough Love (Recovery)

This brings me to the sixth characteristic of biblical evangelism: it *will* encounter resistance. While such thinking is antithetical to good marketing, scripture is clear that the message of repentance will inevitably run into fierce opposition from those who do not wish to face their pain. The extended narrative of the plagues inflicted upon an intransigent and duplicitous Pharaoh is a dramatic example. But Moses, too, balked at YHWH's proposal, doubtful of his capacity to participate in such a profound

historic movement (3:11).

The commissioning of the great prophet Isaiah is another case in point. No sooner had Isaiah volunteered his services as Yahweh's emissary than he was informed that his message would fall on deaf ears (Is 6:8-10). So representative is this text of the vocation of evangelism that Mark's Jesus cites it as the key to his famous Sower parable (Mk 4:10-12). It recognizes that people have a profound capacity to refuse to see what they do not wish to confront—in themselves and in the world. Healing cannot begin until this refusal is diagnosed, which is why impaired perception is Mark's central metaphor for our predicament. Blindness, deafness and hardness of heart are *spiritual* disabilities which characterize not just a few individuals but the human condition itself. To paraphrase Mark and Isaiah, we *see* the contradictions in our way of life but learn to live with them, and *hear* the cries of the oppressed but refuse to *understand* why the system keeps crushing them, and thus harden our heart like Pharaoh. Why? Because if we comprehended the truth of our history, we would have to "turn around" (Mk 4:12).

We know this condition today as Denial, and it is often associated with the pathology of addiction (Emeth, 1990). It is a public phenomenon in the First World, not just an individual one. "Empire," wrote historian William Appleman Williams, "is the child of an inability or an unwillingness to live within one's own means; empire as a way of life is predicated upon having more than one needs" (1980:213). If a modern metaphor for sin is addiction, then evangelism represents "tough love." It merges the prophetic and pastoral insights, understanding repentance as a *strategy of intervention* and conversion as a *process of recovery*. Recent therapeutic work has shown that the journey of recovery cannot be an exclusively *individual* one because of the *systemic* nature of addiction within families. The same must therefore be true of the systemic character of our economic-political-cultural pathologies (Schaefer, 1988). We must develop collective and long-term disciplines of "sobriety" from our compulsion to violence, greed and exploitation (see Slater, 1983).

I agree with those who see the Twelve-Step model of recovery as instructive here. While substance abuse is ubiquitous in North America, so are recovery groups. The Twelve Step movement represents perhaps the most genuinely popular spirituality around (Kurtz, 1988). It cuts across race, class and gender lines, has no centralized organization or leadership, and no institutional overhead. The Twelve steps show several important parallels to biblical evangelism (not surprising, since the Twelve Step program originated out of the "Oxford Revival" movement in the 1930s before secularizing).

First, it is a "conversionist" model. *Step One*, as essential as it is uncomfortable, is the acknowledgment that the addictive system which controls me is destructive to me and all those around me. If I want to be liberated from the nihilistic logic of that system I must:

- appeal to an alternative reality (*Steps Two and Three*);
- accept my culpability as an addict and "confess" it to others (*Steps Four and Five*);
- seek to "repent" of those practices (*Steps Six and Seven*);
- make reparation to those I have wronged (*Steps Eight and Nine*).

In this sense the Twelve-Step cosmology is "apocalyptic." That is, it recognizes that the addictive system cannot be reformed and so must be overthrown, and concedes that the power to do this must come from "outside." It aims at nothing less than revolutionary change: as the recovering addict

becomes stronger he or she invites other family members (as well as other addicts) to join in the "insurrection" against dysfunctional behavior so that the family system as a whole may be transformed.

The second key insight of Twelve-Step is that it begins with our *own* experience of pain, oppression, culpability and responsibility. We struggle for change: here, now, me. It is true that focusing on the self as subject can degenerating into *subjectivism*. Therapeutic culture is awash with people so preoccupied with the labyrinth of personal alienation that they fail to realize its connections to social and political systems. But we can also fall into the opposite trap, placing structural problems so far from our actual lives that we are either disempowered ("What can one person do?") or rationalizing ("it is up to those in power to resolve these issues"). Empowerment insists that change can and must begin with us.

This leads to the third, and perhaps most important, aspect of the recovery process: its recognition of the necessity of an ongoing community of accountability and support to sustain resistance to the addictive system. However great our internal resistance to the process of disengagement, the external barriers are much more formidable, because the status quo always attempts to constrain fundamental challenges to the system. In the family system we know how co-dependents refuse to acknowledge their own complicity with the addict's pathology. Such "conserve-atism" is often desperate to maintain the family *ideal* (how it views itself) and *reputation* (how it is viewed in the community). How much more difficult it is for us to break with the national "family" and its myths. Loyalty to the State is demanded as fiercely as in a kinship system, and defection can carry a cost far higher than ostracism! The social and ideological mechanisms of seduction are so powerful, and the mechanisms of repression potentially vicious. As recovering addicts try to stand their ground while refusing to cooperate with old patterns, the alternative community becomes crucial as a place of understanding and identity. This is why evangelism as "tough love" will lead directly to church-building! There are no spectators or performers in a Twelve-Step group; this is a "sinners" church, and a "believers" church as well.

VIII: Evangelism and Self-Criticism

There is one final characteristic of biblical evangelism that cannot be overlooked, which has to do with the practice of proclamation. In the Exodus story, G-d calls a people already in relationship with G-d. There is an unmistakable pattern in the biblical story: the good news is always addressed *first* to the "household of faith." Instead of justifying Israel by criticizing or scapegoating the surrounding nations, the prophets held their own people to the standards of the Covenant. Jesus clearly focused his ministry on the Palestinian descendents of the Israelites, preaching in synagogues and arguing with priests and scribes, not with Roman officials. Even Paul, the "apostle to the Gentiles" always went first to the local synagogue wherever his missionary travels took him.

I believe this means that evangelism must always first be practiced in our own churches. There are several good reasons for this. If the church is a community in recovery from the addictions of the world, it is always in need of re-examining its own process. This should preclude any self-righteous lines being drawn between "the saved" and "the lost," the cause of much chauvinism and paternalism in contemporary missions. Whatever Word we proclaim to non-Christians is always a Word we ourselves stand under first. After all, if globe-trotting First World missionaries trying to "reaching the heathen" were as diligent about evangelizing their own churches, those churches might reflect more of the character of an alternative community, instead of representing merely a thinly religious version of the dominant culture. It is through our example that our proclamation becomes persuasive.

Indeed, given the history of Christian imperialism, a caveat is in order. I believe that the categorical call to repentance must be handled very carefully in cross-cultural situations. Evangelists ought never presume that G-d is absent from a given context, and that they are somehow "bringing" the gospel to the heathen. G-d's presence always precedes the missionary, which means we must affirm ways in which the Spirit is already working through the existing culture, as well as critiquing it in light of the gospel. Evangelism as *listening* has been emphasized by the "spiritual direction" school of outreach, in which one tries to discern ways in which G-d is already at work in a person even as we invite them to change. Such a listening posture ought also to characterize cross cultural missions.

The "missionary instructions" given by Mark's Jesus to the disciples are germane here. They are directed to take only the bare necessities for travel on "the Way" (6:8-11). Traveling light assures that missionaries will be dependent upon the hospitality of the people to which they go. Rendered a "stranger at home" in Mk 6:1-6, Jesus is instructing his community to learn to be "at home among strangers." The rule of thumb is simple and clear. Where the gospel is received and embraced, disciples are to remain; where it is rejected they are to move on (6:10f). This severs evangelism from any practice of domination or conquest. How different the history of the world would have been had Christian missionaries heeded these directives!

This tradition was observed, however, in the early church, whose militance in evangelism was matched by the radical non-defensiveness of its "witness" (*marturion*, from which our word martyr comes). One cannot read about the first two centuries of the church and not be impressed by the heavy price paid by those early evangelists. How is it then that in North America today lots of so-called "evangelists" get rich, but few if any are imprisoned or killed? This testifies either to the extraordinarily benevolent character of our societies or to the apostate character of the gospel we preach (I suspect the latter). I appeal to the great tradition of the early Christian martyrs not in order to argue that evangelism necessitates dramatic heroics. Rather it simply reminds us that the church was once a community that refused to compromise the gospel in spite of fierce opposition, yet did so from a position of non-power. It was not preoccupied with preserving privileges or entitlements, and insisted that the way of transformation was not through killing, but through dying, for the Kingdom. In that sense the apostolic movement is an often overlooked example of nonviolent struggle for transformation in a world that was riddled with violence.

Today our culture is brimming with greater and more lethal violence and injustice. In response, the privileged are responding with increasing defensiveness, from louder car alarms to more thoroughly gated communities to more fortified borders to more heavily armed police and military. What will be the church's "witness" to such a situation? Will we mirror the fear, the white flight, the desperate attempts to enforce old orthodoxies, the fiscal conservatism and the unwillingness to take institutional chances? Or will we recall Jesus' promise that "whosoever lose their lives for my sake and the gospel's will liberate their lives" (Mk 8:35)? Will we be a church of consolation only, or of liberation as well?

In a time of concentrating political power, who will promote the rights of self-determination, especially of the vulnerable? In a time of widening chasms between rich and poor, who will insist on our responsibility to redistribute the wealth? In a time of gender, race, and class scapegoating, who will embrace inclusion and solidarity? In a time of neighborhood and family disintegration, who will advocate that reconstruction begins with the marginalized? And in a time of profound personal and interpersonal alienation and anxiety, who will call for risk and sacrifice? I believe it can be the church—

if we can rediscover the vocation of biblical evangelism, and offer an alternative to the world's story. In a world of defensiveness, may Christians again go on the *offensive* (the double entendre is intentional) with good news for hard times.

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