Evangelism in the North American Context

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It was May of 1985, and the pastors and elders of the Presbytery of Chiapas came to see us off. They represented some of the fastest-growing churches in the world. The president of the presbytery offered these words: "Go now as missionaries sent by the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico to the church in the United States. We understand that for some time now our sister church, the Reformed Church in America, has not been growing in its membership. Go now to them for us, and teach them how to evangelize their country the way we have learned to do it here."

The words of his commission have stayed with me. And the profound irony is worth noting. The circle is being completed. Christians throughout North America now need the perspectives and advice of our brothers and sisters from the Third World to give us new insight and urgency in bringing the gospel to our people in a new and exciting way. In this article I will introduce you to a number of Third World Christians and will show how they can help us see both the obstacles and the opportunities for evangelism in the North American context.

Obstacles

We need to consider soberly the obstacles uniquely facing us in the evangelization of North America. Clearly there is not enough space here to deal in an exhaustive way with all the major cultural issues. Rather, I want to highlight broadly some of the obstacles most often identified by Third World Christians as being especially true of our situation in North America. They tend to fall into two major categories: obstacles in our culture and obstacles in our churches.

Obstacles in Our Culture

There are certain built-in obstructions in our cultural setting which must be squarely faced, understood, dealt with, and overcome in order for the gospel to impact North America. Here I will mention only three.

No need for help from God: I remember crossing the U.S.-Mexico border in the Spring of 1983 on our way to the Reformed Church Women's
Trienniel at Hope College. In the car were two women from Chiapas who had been very active in evangelism there over the past several decades, Amelia and Rebecca. As we rode through the luxurious cities and countryside of southern Texas, they commented: "It appears that these people don't need God." I asked them what they meant. They responded that in their own situation they needed God daily in dealing with the presence of extreme poverty, the lack of physical safety, constant job insecurity, uncertainties regarding housing and food, daily family crises, and a general lack of control over their own destiny. But the people of North America don't appear to need God because insurance companies take care of accidents and other crises, unemployment compensation cares for the unemployed, and school systems look after nearly everyone's basic education. In short, health, welfare, and the pursuit of happiness are given secular answers, though they in fact entail spiritual questions.

As we rode, we talked more. Amelia went on to observe: "It appears that in this culture there is no space for God. People appear busy with family, work, recreation, social life, and the personal pursuit of wealth. Where, then, is there space for God? It appears that God is restricted to a narrow part of life which has to do with matters of illness and personal crisis." Amelia added, "It is no wonder so many people in this country seem to think they can do without God."

Having seen our culture through their eyes, I began carefully to take note of the arenas of life mentioned during congregational prayer time. Is it not true that our need for God is narrowed to matters of health and personal crisis — with a political or global issue thrown in once in a while? Whole arenas of life like food, clothing, housing, education, work, recreation, social relationships, finances, and personal moral choices — matters which are commonly subjects of prayer in other cultures — are seldom mentioned in our own prayer times.

No need for public faith: A society that narrows its need for God soon separates issues of faith from public life. In 1980 I attended the Reformed Church in America (RCA) Ecumenical Consultation in New York. While there, I spoke with an Arab Christian who emphasized this to me: "In the Middle East our religious affiliation is a public matter, highly visible, politically significant, and publicly demonstrated, Islam forces us in that direction. Though that creates severe religious, social, and political tensions, I sometimes think it is easier to deal with than this culture, where in terms of public demonstration you cannot guess the religious affiliation of many of the people around you."

What a different perspective from that of my friend Dirk, a milkman from Monnickendam, the Netherlands. I sat in his living room in 1981 and listened to him expound at length on how religious faith and religious affiliation are a matter of taste and personal preference. Influenced strongly
by a Western world-view, Dirk showed me two bottles of wine, one white and one red. "Some people like white wine, others like red," Dirk explained. "You like Reformed Christianity; my brother Hans likes the Seventh Day Adventists; I like no religion at all. You see, each individual should be free to choose whatever is his/her personal preference, and we will respect each other's choice."

This "live-and-let-live" thinking is valued highly in our North American culture, and we would probably find people inside and outside the church supporting it very strongly. In fact it is a contradiction of the very heart of the gospel which speaks of one God who created all people, one Jesus Christ with authority over all creation at whose name every knee shall one day bow, and one Spirit who convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. (See, e.g., Matt. 28, Col. 1, Rom. 5-6, Phil. 2, John 16:8)

Lesslie Newbigin has written a masterful, philosophical analysis of this phenomenon in Foolishness to the Greeks. The Western cultural world-view, Newbigin says, has created a dichotomy between two spheres, one represented by our culture, the other found in the gospel. On the one hand is the "public" sphere of scientific rationality, cause-effect explanations, observable and demonstrable facts, and truth-claims measurable by an appeal to a rational and contingent (constantly changing) universe. On the other hand, the culture has relegated religious experience to the "private" sphere of personal opinion and values, private concepts of faith, and individual choice of a religious life-style. But in fact the gospel is unavoidably public, the "spiritual" is an integral part of our history. Our message is one of hope that there is reason, purpose, and direction to our history because God is in control, and this message is public, truthful fact. The gospel must be allowed to impact, question, shape, and transform science, economics, politics, logical reasoning, and Western cultural values.¹

The individualization and privatization of religious belief in North America constitute major obstacles to the evangelization of North America. Particularly strong in culture-affirming denominations, it takes away their vitality and robs them of the urgency of communicating the gospel in our context. Our desperate fear of anything that smells of "propaganda" and "proselytism" is a direct result of the privatization of our religion. Other religious movements in our midst seem to have no such fear. We who worship the God of the universe and Jesus Christ in whom all things subsist need not fear a public demonstration of our faith.

No need for radical conversion: A third obstacle is even more pervasive and subtle. A non-Christian medical doctor in Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico, who had done extensive study in the United States, presented this issue to me. He spoke of the fact that in the United States people seem to be constantly bombarded by religious literature, radio and television
programs, and church presentations. He then spoke of the law of diminishing returns in medicine, that is, of cases of deafness caused by too much noise and blindness caused by too much light. "I believe," he said, "that religious over-kill in the United States has produced similar reactions on a personal and spiritual plane." He was pointing to a very significant obstacle which, to some extent, arises from our own evangelistic and revivalist history.

This bombardment of evangelistic preachers is especially deafening to the North American audience because they are not challenged to respond to what they hear. As O'Connell and Gallup have observed:

We boast Christianity as our faith, but many of us have not bothered to learn the basic biblical facts about this religion. Many of us dutifully attend church, but this act in itself appears to have made us no less likely than our unchurched brethren to engage in unethical behavior.

We say we are Christians, but sometimes we do not show much love toward those who do not share our particular religious perspective. We say we rejoice in the good news that Jesus brought, but we are often strangely reluctant to share the gospel with others . . . . We say we are believers, but perhaps we are only assenters.  

In other words, North American mainline religiosity has not transformed practice and, correspondingly, culture. It has been strongly culture-affirming, blurring the distinction between Christian and non-Christian and lessening the impact of conversion in the life of the individual and the church. In other cultures conversion to Jesus Christ often means a radical change in the life of the individual, a radical distinction between church and society, and a strong differentiation between those who are Christian and those who are not. These distinctions seem to aid the impact of evangelization as long as they are positively transformational rather than being so sectarian and counter-cultural that they are considered "foreign" or "irrelevant" to the surrounding culture.  

Obstacles in Our Churches

In evangelizing North America we need to be aware of obstacles found in our churches. Here we will highlight two: an unclear task and an unclear faith. These further obscure our presentation of the gospel amidst North American neo-pagan culture.

Our task is unclear: Last year a pastor from Taiwan studying at Western Theological Seminary emphasized the fact that in his perception North Americans did not seem to know what the word "evangelism"
means. He questioned how we could speak about evangelizing North America without having a clear definition of what the task was. I think his question is important. One of our greatest internal obstacles during the last several decades seems to be our lack of clarity in defining evangelism. Ever since the Fundamentalist-Modernist debates of the 1920s and 1930s a discussion has raged in North America concerning the meaning, means, and message of evangelism. And the uncertainty which the debate has produced has been severely detrimental to enthusiasm, commitment, and cooperation in the practice of evangelism, particularly among mainline denominations. The misunderstanding continues up to the present. As Darrell Guder has put it: "The term evangelism has become highly misunderstandable, precisely because of all the meanings attached to it. It creates barriers for some and awakens such concrete associations for others that discussion of it almost always requires a long process of terminological clarification."

Our uncertainty with regard to a definition has contributed to strong negative images on the part of the members of our churches. During the past two years I have had the opportunity of asking pastors and Western Seminary students to describe the feelings, impressions, and memories which the word "evangelism" conjures up for them. Their responses have been overwhelmingly negative. Images of manipulative techniques, of decision cards never followed up, of door-to-door intruders, of sidewalk confrontations, and of ranting TV and radio evangelists have produced a strong negative reaction to the concept of doing evangelism, and a strong deterrent to participation on the part of our pastors and church members. It has been interesting to observe during the evangelism classes taught at Western Seminary that when people are helped to get beyond those negative images to gain a positive and biblical view of evangelism they become overwhelmingly positive, participatory, and activist.

There is hope for future clarification. The beginning of a major convergence may be seen among the ecumenical movement, the Roman Catholic Church, and the conservative evangelicals. One need only compare, for example, the fine statement on evangelism issued recently by the World Council of Churches, "Mission and Evangelism — An Ecumenical Affirmation," with our own "Evangelism in Reformed Perspective: An Evangelism Manifesto," the Lausanne Covenant, and the papal exhortation, "Evangelii Nuntiandi," to see this convergence beginning to take shape.

In the spring of 1987 theologians representing the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, and the World Evangelical Fellowship met in Stuttgart, West Germany, to discuss this matter. The result was a very significant nine-page joint statement on evangelism. Quoting from Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation, the
statement affirms that,

The Church is sent into the world to call people and na-
tions to repentance, to announce the forgiveness of sin and a
new beginning in relation with God and with neighbors through
Jesus Christ. This evangelistic calling has a new urgency to-
day . . . . The proclamation of the Gospel includes an invitation
to recognize and accept in a personal decision the saving lord-
ship of Christ. It is the announcement of a personal encounter,
mediated by the Holy Spirit, with the living Christ, receiving his
forgiveness and making a personal acceptance of the call to
discipleship and a new life of service.10

One of the participants at Stuttgart was Professor David Bosch from
South Africa, who recently set forth what I consider to be one of the most
clearly articulated perspectives of this convergent view of evangelism. He
offered the following definition: "Evangelism may be defined as that di-
mension and activity of the church’s mission which seeks to offer every
person, everywhere, a valid opportunity to be directly challenged by the
gospel of explicit faith in Jesus Christ, with a view to embracing him as
Savior, becoming a living member of his community, and being enlisted in
his service of reconciliation, peace, and justice on earth."11 Bosch’s defi-
nition could possibly be accepted by people from all three perspectives —
Roman Catholic, Ecumenical, and Evangelical. If such a convergence be-
came a reality in the thinking of North American Christians as a whole, a
major internal obstacle to the evangelization of North America might be
removed.

Our faith is unclear: A few years ago Rev. Jorge Lopez, a pastor from
the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico, spent several quarters living
in Western Michigan and attending Western Theological Seminary. Upon
his return to Chiapas, he commented that he found our church members to
be weak in their knowledge of the Bible, uncommitted to the church’s
programs, and passive in their evangelistic outreach. At first I thought his
critique rather severe. But the last few years have taught me otherwise. We
seem to be suffering from a kind of biblical anorexia which my dictionary
tells me is a "loss of appetite," often due to prolonged periods of not
eating properly. Robert Bast mentions the recent Schuller Ministries/Gallup
survey as finding a general "lack of knowledge of basic biblical facts, a
lack of love toward those who do not share our religious perspective, a re-
luctance to share the good news with others, and a failure to do much
about the problems of poverty and hunger."12 The Luidens/Nemeth survey
of RCA membership demonstrated that our unique beliefs expressed in the
Standards of the Reformed Church in America are also considered un-
important by a large portion of our membership.13
It is a given fact in evangelism that you cannot share what you do not have. Lack of clarity in matters of Scripture and faith produces a lack of enthusiasm and in fact a real avoidance of personally sharing our faith. Our reluctance to participate in evangelism is obvious. Few pastors in the RCA consider their primary calling to be evangelizing the unchurched, and few members view sharing their faith to be their major spiritual activity. A look at our congregational budgets readily illustrates the low priority assigned to evangelism. Staff salaries, building maintenance, and programs for the members themselves far out-weigh the amount of time, effort and money allocated for evangelism. Major congregational programs like Bethel and Stephen’s Ministries are targeted primarily for present church members rather than the unchurched. Kenneth Chafin, a Southern Baptist pastor and dean of the Billy Graham Schools of Evangelism, put it bluntly: “The average congregation has little meaningful contact with those who are not Christian.” It seems that concern for the preservation of our history, traditions, and church life obscures our commitment to the fact that “God so loved the world (note, it does not say ‘the church’) that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16).

The obstacles we have noted above are not new, nor are they insurmountable. Neither should they discourage us. Effective evangelism is neither magic nor miraculous—but just plain hard work, and we must work to remove these obstacles in order to take advantage of the magnificent opportunities for evangelism in the North American context. Nowhere in the world are such opportunities so readily available to local congregations as they are in North America. Nowhere are there greater possibilities for impacting a culture with the gospel.

**Opportunities**

Christians from the Third World often remark about the fantastic range of evangelistic resources available to us in North America. These opportunities may be found both in the culture at large and in the church.

**Positive Cultural Receptivity**

In 1985 Robert Bellah and his associates published a very significant study which pointed to the essential role of Christianity in American culture. Basing their research on a massive five-year study of various American communities, the authors affirm that personal faith in its various expressions is essential for North American society and is sought by many as a source of meaning in their lives.
The study done by the Schuller Ministries and the Gallup Organization which we noted earlier also points to the incredible potential of evangelism in North America.

The prospect for deepening America’s spiritual commitment is far from hopeless. Virtually all Americans are, in some measure, drawn to the person of Jesus Christ.... Many believe he is the Son of God, and even many among the non-devout feel that Jesus’ life and person tell us something profound about the meaning of existence. And, remarkably, as many as 9 in 10 say that Jesus as a moral and ethical leader has had at least some impact upon their lives.

Furthermore, at least half of Americans wish their religious faith were stronger, and a perhaps surprising one fifth of non-believers say they would like to believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ....

A remarkable 4 in 10 Americans have an intuitive or experiential basis for their belief and report a dramatic religious experience.... And 7 in 10 of all survey respondents feel that their relationship with Jesus Christ is deepening.¹⁶

Christians in Third World countries do not have this kind of positive cultural background for evangelism. On the contrary, their contexts call invariably for radical encounter with other faiths which do not accept belief in Jesus Christ. Why are we not capitalizing on such remarkable receptivity?

*Freedom, Finances, and Forms for Mass Evangelism*

The general cultural receptivity looks even brighter when the freedom of proclamation found in North America coupled with the freedom of individuals to change their faith is considered. Add to this the money, people, and programs available for Christian literature, mass-media, videos, and so forth — and the possibilities skyrocket. The multimillions handled by television evangelists are not only a scandal, they also demonstrate the fantastic potential open to evangelists, pastors, and churches which wish to impact North America for Jesus Christ.

Compare that with a little radio program in Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico. For two years we were able to have a one-half hour program of Christian music and a brief sermon. What a tremendous amount of energy it took for Pascual, the brother in charge of the program, to gather the necessary money and people to cover that one-half hour! Then came the fateful day when the radio station told Pascual that the Mexican government had decreed that no radio stations in Mexico would again be allowed
to broadcast religious programs. All Protestant radio broadcasts were silenced that day and have not resumed. How well I remember Pascual lamenting the fact that the freedoms and resources available to Christians on this side of the border were not available to him or the churches on that side. “What couldn’t we do here if we had the resources and freedom available to Christians there,” he said.

Myriad Relational Bridges

In the midst of such general cultural receptivity and potential resources, a third major opportunity is being increasingly emphasized by evangelists in North America. In every community one can plot where a given congregation’s target population lies. It is to be found in the thousands of close and casual, formal and informal personal relationships which church members have with the unchurched in the community. It does not take much work to find the businesses, recreational arenas, neighborhoods, schools, and networks of friendships impacted by the members of a congregation. Here are the most fruitful bridges for evangelizing North America. It is a proven fact that about 80 percent of all new church members originally came to the church because of a previous friendship with a member of that congregation.

Research, Data, Consultation, and Training

A pastor from Kenya was recently one of my students. He had been in the United States only a short time. One of his most telling comments had to do with the research and consulting resources which North American churches have to aid them in evangelism. “If we only had usable data to know who lives where in our country, how many there are, what needs they have, and how we can serve them. If we had such data I’m sure our church would be growing ten times faster than it is.” His church presently is growing by about 30 percent each year. I wonder what their growth rate would be if the pastor in fact had the kind of data he desired!

We have those kinds of resources at our fingertips. Church consulting and training groups like the Alban Institute, the American Institute of Church Growth, the Yokefellow Institute, the Fuller Evangelistic Association, and the Billy Graham Schools of Evangelism, are there to be tapped for consultation and research. Evangelism programs like Evangelism Explosion, Good News People, Life-Style Evangelism (Joseph Aldrich), and Night of Caring/Sharing (Paul Cedar) are but a few of the many resources available to churches. Discipleship Ministries, led by Rev. David Bruininks,
and based in Holland, Michigan, is specifically designed to train the
curch's membership in discipleship and personal evangelism. The Reverend
Robert Bast, Minister of Evangelism and Church Life, has launched "On
the Way," a program designed to equip congregations committed to evan-
gelism and growth. There is in fact no reason why a congregation which
wants to reach out to help evangelize North America cannot do so. There
are plenty of consultants willing to help. Much depends on whether the
members of a congregation are personally committed to live out their
evangelistic calling. George Hunter says it this way:

  Faithful, reproducing congregations are the laboratories
of the living God. In such churches, the God who acts in history
is showing his whole church the ways forward . . . . Through
data collection and case studies, we can discover the approaches
and methods God is blessing to reach the undisciplined, and we
may barely have scratched the surface. More reproducible prin-
ciples and strategies are waiting to be discovered in churches
already experiencing apostolic growth.18

The evangelization of North America is not optional — it is the reason
we exist, it is commanded by our Lord, and it is urgently needed for the
sake of righteousness and reconciliation. What a marvelous gift from God!
Our participation in God’s mission makes us instruments through whom
the nations of the earth may be blessed. In the final analysis evangelism is
people sharing with people the love and grace of God in the power of the
Holy Spirit. Third World Christians live this out in marvelous ways under
severe pressures. Already more than half of all Christians live in Asia,
Africa, and Latin America. Many predict that by the year 2000 the per-
centage of Christians on those continents will have risen dramatically,
while the percentage of Christians in Europe and North America will have
dwindled even further. I wonder if there is a way of responding to and
off-setting those predictions?

Well, it is now 1987 and I am left with the commission given me by
my Mexican brothers and sisters. Can we in North America learn enough
from Christians in the Third World to reverse the trends? Will we allow
them to challenge us to evangelize our neo-pagan continent? Third World
Christians labor against tremendous economic, social, political, and religi-
ous odds, and still continue to grow in the evangelization of their people.
Can we do less? Will we let them help us? I wonder.

ENDNOTES

1  See Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*
(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).


An example of a recent attempt at such clarity can be found in the April-June, 1987 “Monthly Letter on Evangelism” from the World Council of Churches. There a portion of an address given in March, 1985, by James Burtness (Professor of Systematic Theology at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minn.) is reproduced. The article reflects on Matt. 16:13-16 and states: “1. Jesus is the question” and “2. Christ is an answer.”


Written by William Brownson and Carl Kromminga, the manifesto was published by both *The Church Herald* and *The Banner* in 1977. See also “The Call to Evangelize,” *Minutes of the General Synod, RCA*, 1985, pp. 225f., which draws heavily from the “Manifesto.”


This was issued by Pope Paul VI in December, 1975 and entitled, “Evangelization in the Modern World.” Strongly reflecting the documents of Vatican Council II, it is considered by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike to be basic to present Roman Catholic understanding of evangelization. See also “Lumen Gentium,” “Unitatis Redintegratio,” and “Ad Gentes Divinitus” in *Documents of Vatican II*, A. P. Flannery, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), in loco.


Gallup and O'Connell, *op. cit.*, p. 89. Robert Bast, RCA Minister of Evangelism and Church Life also noted these incredibly positive observations in his letter on evangelism, "Good News," August, 1987.
