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THE PRAYER BOOK & EVANGELISM (PART II)

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Is the historic Prayer Book an evangelistic liturgy? Can a church that uses one of the classical Prayer Books fulfill the Great Commission to "make disciples of all nations"? Though many Episcopalians and Anglicans would answer in the negative, history suggests otherwise. For the Prayer Book arose out of the rediscovery of the Gospel, and was a very effective instrument of evangelization for more than four centuries, not only in England but around the globe. The historical evidence suggests that we not dismiss quickly the merits of the Prayer Book as an evangelistic liturgy.

In order to assess the Prayer Book's evangelistic value, however, we need to consider the teaching of the Bible about evangelism. It is in Saint Matthew's Gospel that we find the best-known expression of the Church's evangelistic mission, in the "Great Commission", given by the risen Christ to the apostles: "All authority is given unto me in heaven and in earth: Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:19-20).

St. Matthew's Gospel is not the only account of the Great Commission. There is another version of it in the end of St. Mark's Gospel, also given to the apostles: "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:15, 16).

Likewise St. Luke, though here to the apostles and other disciples: "Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations: and ye are witnesses of these things" (24:46-48).

In St. John Jesus tells the disciples, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (20:22, 23).

In the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus tells the apostles, "ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria,

and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

One could vastly expand this catena with ancillary texts. These five allow us to identify flesh out the four primary aspects of this mission:

First, the goal of the mission: the mission consists in the making of disciples of all nations. The word "disciples" means literally "learners". The New Testament indicates that this learning is a training of the intellect and the will in devotion to and dependence on the Father, under the authority of Christ, and in his fellowship, which is that of the Spirit-filled Church (cf. Acts 2:41-47 which underlines the corporate and communal aspects of discipleship). Walking in the way with Christ and learning his truth are inseparable from sharing his life. The reference to "all nations" and "all the world" bespeaks the catholicity of the church's evangelistic mission, because Christ died "not for that nation only", that is, the Jews, "but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad" (John 12:52), without respect to any distinction of nature - sex, age, race, language, culture, economic or social status, and religious background.

Second, the agency of the mission: authority to evangelize is granted primarily to the apostolic ministry (thus Matthew, Mark and Acts) ordained of Christ and empowered by the gift of his Spirit. This authority should not be understood as excluding other Christians (the other disciples mentioned in John and Luke), for the mission belongs to the whole Church. (Remember the Israelite slave girl, whose testimony sent Naaman the Syrian to be healed and converted by Elisha the prophet.) Rather, this authority to make disciples is vested in the apostolic ministry, because it is their special responsibility, and to ensure that is a priority of the Church as a whole.

Third, the means by which the mission is carried out: the preaching of the gospel and the administration of baptism. These are not essentially different activities, but complementary aspects of Word and Sacrament, both of which require repentance and proclaim remission of sins in his name. Moreover, what Word and Sacrament proclaim (as signs) they also effect: those who receive the Gospel and Baptism in repentance and faith are indeed saved; those who do not are, by their own choice, damned. "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained".

Fourth: though disciple-making has a beginning point (baptism and faith in response to the preaching of the gospel), it is not a "one-time" event (a conversion experience), but an ongoing process of teaching and learning of Christ's command-ments - doctrinal, moral, spiritual, ecclesias-tical and sacramental (e.g. Matthew 5-7, John 13:34-35, 1 Corinthians 11:23-29). If the third element, the preaching of the gospel and the administration of baptism, corresponds to justifying faith, this fourth element, the teaching of Christ's command-ments, corresponds to the sanctifying works in which lively faith is expressed. Thus neither preaching for conversion by itself (the "altar call"), nor baptism by itself, nor both together, are sufficient for disciple-making: thorough catechesis - ongoing theological, moral, and spiritual formation - is also necessary.

That's the Biblical teaching about evangelism: next week we will consider how the Church has applied it, in the Prayer Book. GGD

(To be continued)

The Rev'd Gavin G Dunbar

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