

Political Evangelism – the good news in the public sphere

Dave Fagg – 8th March 2010, Seeds Seminar, St Matthew's

Once upon a time, a young man in Europe was in court. His father, a wealthy textiles businessman, had taken him there because he had stolen some silk from his father's factory, sold it and used it to fund some property development. During the public hearing, he renounced his father's wealth, stripped off his clothes and strode away, naked, promising to serve 'Lady Poverty'.

A while before that, another young man led the respected people of his nation to the rubbish dump, and informed them that they were responsible for a coming catastrophe. He told that they had filled the land with innocent blood, and that in return they would experience a military siege so terrible they would turn to cannibalism of their own families to survive. As a finale, he held a clay pot above his head and smashed it – *"This pot is the house of Jerusalem and the house of Judah"*.

The first young man was Francis of Assisi, and the second young man is the prophet known as Jeremiah. They were both prefiguring and continuing one of the most common practices of Jesus, which I call *Political Evangelism*.

Definitions

I realise I am using two words which are contested - often used for many different purposes. So let me define them.

By "political", I mean:

- That which concerns power and its use
- That which concerns the public sphere
- It is always personal, but never private (secret)
- I do not mean...'party politics'

By "evangelism", I mean:

- That which concerns the good news, or the 'evangel' (GK) – the good news of God..a word used by the gospel writers to convey the message of the kingdom of God, which they had appropriated from the Caesars, who used the word 'gospel' to convey their victory in battle.
- That evangelism includes both a NO and a YES, judgement and mercy, criticism and invitation to a new life.
- Let us try to remove stereotypes of evangelism from our heads.

Political Evangelism, for the purposes of tonight is:

Acts of public witness to the good news of God and his reign

Politics and Religion

Tonight I want to explore what place political evangelism might have in the life of the church, and in the interaction of the church with the surrounding public. We are often told that "religion and politics don't mix". The witness of the Bible and Christian history says that such a viewpoint is inaccurate, and also impossible. The problem is not that religion and politics mix, it is HOW they mix.

Tonight I will focus on one element of that mix – that of publically declaring (in word and deed) the good news. There are so many others ways that Christians act politically: from letter-writing to the clothes we buy, from how we make decisions in church to how we vote. Every act and decision we make is political, because human life is about allegiance. Who will we be loyal to? is the question to which the Christian answer is "Jesus is Lord", not simply in a general sense but in a specific sense. Is

Jesus our Lord in our finances, our employment, where our kids go to school, the kind of toilet paper we buy, how we produce and eat food etc etc etc .

I don't have the whole picture, nor do I regularly do what I am going to talk about, but it's something that I think needs to be thought about in the church, and acted upon. Also, I have my own political persuasions, but this seminar is not meant to be about my particular beliefs. I think that Christians of all political persuasions should be acting publically and politically. Again, the argument is not whether doing so is warranted – the argument is about HOW we do so.

Biblical Examples of Political Evangelism

Apart from the Jeremiah example, there are plenty of biblical instances of public acts of witness:

- Moses and the plagues (Ex 9-10)
- Elijah & the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:20-40)
- Jesus illegally healing on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:9-14)
- Jesus eating illegally on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28)
- Triumphal Entry to Jerusalem (John 12:12-15)
- Acts of Apostles: constant examples of healing and preaching in public, often provoking unrest, arrest, imprisonment and sometimes death.

Let us look at 3 of them, and for each I will look at what constitutes these acts of public witness: the setting, the symbols, the showing & telling, the consequences and why they are political and evangelistic acts. (WRITE THESE ON WHITEBOARD)

1. Jeremiah 19 – the clay pot

- Setting: deliberately public – he leads the elders and senior priests to the entry of the Pothers Gate (entry to the rubbish dump)....sometimes called the Dung Gate (KJV)
- Symbol: clay pot - visual as well as verbal; acts of public witness often use symbols to convey a message
- Showing and Telling of God's judgement upon the **idolatry** and **violence** of Judah and Jerusalem:
Because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods whom neither they nor their ancestors nor the kings of Judah have known, and because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent, and gone on building the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as burnt-offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind (Jer 19:4-5)
- Consequences: Jeremiah is imprisoned and 'struck' (whipped?) in chapter 20.
- Political – pitting the powers of Judah and Jerusalem (the elders and priests) against that of God.
- Evangelism – God's judgement is always for the purpose of God's eventual mercy and restoration of Israel

2. Matthew 12: 9-14 – illegal healing

- Setting: the setting is a synagogue on the Sabbath...illegal to do any work on the Sabbath
- Symbol: the man and his withered hand is the visual method that Jesus uses to demonstrate the heartlessness of the Pharisee's way.
- Showing & Telling: Jesus commits a crime for 2 reasons: one is to heal the man, but the second is to create a counterargument about the Sabbath and what its purpose is. (see previous story of illegal eating). Ongoing battle between Jesus and the powers – "...so that they might accuse him" (v. 10b)

- Consequences – the Pharisees conspire to destroy him.
- Political – it is about who has the power to say what is legal, and an ongoing battle of myths between religious leaders and Jesus.
- Evangelism – Jesus is communicating that healing is more important than a law.

3. *John 12 – messianic battle*

This story is one of the most obvious examples of Jesus acting in public and political way. Let us look at the sequence of story:

1. Enters Jerusalem
 2. Hears the crowd's messianic myth – "King of Israel"what is a King for them? Violent, restoration of Israel. Look at Jesus reaction to this last time! (John 6:15)
 3. Decides to get a donkey
 4. Rides it, providing a countervailing myth of what it means to be Messiah
- Public: 6 days before Passover, Jerusalem is filled
 - Symbol: donkey, a ridiculing of the stallion, the usual victor's steed.
 - Showing & Telling: Jesus does no telling, but his message is clear – his kingship is different.
 - Consequences: all the people go after him!
 - Political – they want him to have power over them, to violently restore Israel
 - Evangelism – the good news of a nonviolent Lord

So, in summary, political evangelism:

- Is public – people are watching, they can see us!
- Communicates a message about God and his good news.
- Almost always in conflict with other messages in society which are taken as normative
- Uses symbols to communicate
- Consequences are inevitable, both punitive and positive.
- Nonviolent

Political Evangelism in Christian history

- Telemachus (404): intervening publically in gladiatorial contest
- Francis of Assisi (1205): disrobing to demonstrate non-attachment to possessions
- Martin Luther (1517): nailing theses to the church door
- Civil Rights movement (1960s): counter sit-ins
- Pro life (20th C): picketing abortion clinics
- Oath Keepers (20th C): taking public oaths
- Women Christian Temperance Movement (late 19th C on) : prayer inside saloons
- St Maximilian (295): refused in court to be conscripted and was executed

Political Evangelism Today

When Crown Casino was being established, a small movement existed to call attention to its degrading social effects, and the inappropriate relationship between the government and the casino owners. Each Sunday, we got together outside the site and prayed. We had a banner, and talked to people who approached us. We had T-shirts made up that communicated our message and also used the Crown Casino logo in a humorous way. We had a plenty of verbal abuse hurled at us, but also plenty of people who agreed with us.

Barriers to Political Evangelism

Acting publically and politically is difficult for all of us. There a few key barriers to Christians acting publically and politically.

1. **FEAR:**
 - This includes embarrassment, wanting to avoid criticism or abuse, and the fear of being recognised by someone who may think badly of you.
 - These things are absolutely understandable, but are also predicted by Jesus as expected consequences of following him...it may even show that we are on the right track

2. **PRIVATISM:** this is the belief that religious concerns are separate from political concerns, therefore Christians should keep their faith out of the public sphere.
 - As I showed before, faith is a matter of allegiance, and allegiance is a matter of which power we will be loyal to.
 - Christian faith is always personal, but it is never private. It is impossible to look at Jesus, and the church of Acts, and conclude that our faith is meant to be kept out of the public sphere.
 - Christian faith is not captive to party politics, but that hardly means it is nonpolitical. Again, look at the conflicts Jesus has with the powers of his day; look at the way the apostles come into conflict with the powers of their day.

3. **QUIETISM:** this is the belief that 'making a fuss' in public is unproductive, and that the general public will be alienated from Christianity by public acts of witness.
 - It is true that political evangelism will alienate people, as it will attract some people. Jesus predicted this, and demonstrated it in his own ministry. So that's not an argument against political evangelism
 - The question I would ask is – *When has our social conformity assisted the church?*
 - Nonconformism was the order of the day in the early church, and that attracted people!
 - I'm not arguing to be nonconformist unthinkingly, but for us, the church, to be our true selves, and not worry so much about what the world thinks
 - Quietism is actually a product of the Christendom worldview, in which state and church gave each other power. The church didn't want to rock the boat because it had that power. Well, now we don't have it! Let's enjoy the freedom!

4. **THE POWERS AND FAITH**
 - The most insidious reason we don't want to do Political Evangelism is that we believe that the powers of state and corporations are basically in sympathy with the aims of the church, that we are walking arm in arm, that we basically have the same idea of what a 'good' society is.
 - Now, if you believe that, then there is no reason for you to think about Political Evangelism.
 - But if we don't believe that – that is, if we believe that the aims of the community of Jesus are in conflict with the aims of political and economic powers, then we need to use every weapon in our arsenal to bring that conflict to light.

Conclusion

Public witness to God's kingdom is clear throughout the Bible and in Christian history. The questions is not whether to do it, because that has been answered, the questions are WHEN and HOW.