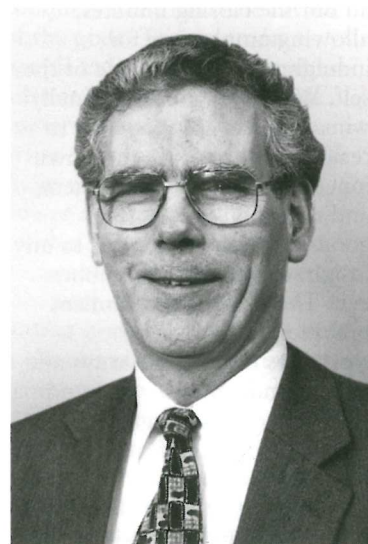


Evangelism – Myth or Reality in a Postmodern World?

By Peter Neilson



St Giles and St Gyle's are cathedral landmarks of two cultures for any resident of Edinburgh. Where the two meet the Evangelist is challenged and can challenge. Here Peter Neilson explores the relationship between the two and the need to develop a new paradigm for evangelism in light of this stark contrast.

Peter Neilson is associate minister of the parish church of St. Guthbert in Edinburgh. He has recently gained a Master in Theology degree with his dissertation entitled Nurturing Church Among the Missing Generation.

St Giles' proud Crown stands at the centre of Edinburgh with its roots deep in history and tradition, symbolising not only the place of the Christian Gospel in the Scottish nation, but the events of Protestant Reformation that shaped the Scottish psyche for four centuries so that for generations the words Scottish and Presbyterian were synonyms. Centre, power, collective memory and corporate story speak of a seeming monoculture remembered fondly by grandparents.

St Gyle's (if the temporary beatification may be allowed) is The Gyle Shopping Centre on edge-city, a cathedral of consumerism, with intersecting aisles offering a myriad of chapels of choice. In December, Christmas trees appear in the grounds, except that there are no trees, only lights on wires attached to empty poles. The image is all. De-centred, pick and mix, music and mall, commodity and carnival, surface and style offer a temporary interface for a transient generation at an intersection of roads to anywhere, a generation of the Internet where "there is no 'there' there."¹

I visit the Gyle and feel

strange. Why are all these people spending hours wandering around making choices about food and clothes and books and CDs just for the sake of it? So many decisions to be made, but about what? I feel a strange angst and deep distaste. I want to leave. I begin to understand why Baudillard says we are mobilised as consumers in a strange world of hyperreality in which melancholy is the norm and panic is the mood.²

In the cathedral of consumerism, the idol of the new culture is not on show. She is the show. Her name is Choice and she is the one absolute value. In St Gyle's she is idolised and therefore trivialised. The precious gift of human responsibility is exhausted in an orgy of pointlessness.

The idol (hebel)³ is weightless and worthless, deserving the prophet's mockery⁴. In the luxury world of hyperchoice⁵, from the mall to the Worldwide Web, the gift of choice has been stretched so thin that it has lost its capacity to carry the weight of ultimate choices of life and death, of heaven and hell.

The Evangelist reels under the impact of this pervasive illusion. The Christian Gospel is about the prior choice of God who declares himself to be "for

us" in Jesus Christ. He undercuts our pretension at autonomy by reminding his followers that "you have not chosen me; but I have chosen you ..."⁶. The notion that we can each shape our own reality is challenged and humbled by the prior choice of a God of grace, "who first loved us."

The Christian Gospel is about ultimate choices with ultimate consequences, a narrow road to life and a broad road to destruction. Its nature is about mutually exclusive options. Choices of value, lifestyle, faith and religion are not all equal. For the evangelist, it matters which choices are made, but in the slippery world of postmodernity the listener can smile politely and agree to differ, or else sip enough Christian flavouring to add to her personal spiritual cocktail.

The evangelist feels the pain of the fundamental lie of our culture, and weeps with Jeremiah that people are destroying themselves in pursuit of an illusion.⁷

Emmaus Road Evangelism

The Evangelist finds himself telling the story of the Emmaus

Road of people in pain. A couple mourn the loss of their friend, their dream and their destiny. The irony is that the one they mourn is alive at their elbow but they cannot recognise him.

In a culture that swings between shallow carnival and deep lament, we hear pain beyond words in nations traumatised and children abused, and the cry of a century that invented words like the Gulag and the Holocaust. Diana, Princess of Wales, was an icon of a suffering generation. For one extraordinary week, a hurting culture gave itself permission to weep for one who symbolised a sensitivity to their suffering. The evangelist of this generation must be among us as one who serves. Hardly an original thought, but in the minds of many an oxymoron.

Burning hearts

Back to the Emmaus Road. The Stranger on the road listens to the pain and bears the silent irony of his assumed absence from the events they describe. Only after the deep listening come the words that burn in their hearts. One weekend of life is set in the metanarrative of God's Messianic purpose. It was necessary that Messiah should suffer to enter into his glory. Messiah and Messiah's people travel the same route through suffering to resurrection.

For the postmodern traveller, lost at sea,⁸ the metanarrative comes in the context of the sensitivity of the evangelist who is prepared to be a fellow traveller, a humble interpreter of the inner landscape which mirrors the outer landscape. The evangelist does not come in judgement, but with healing and understanding. "We listen sensitively and empathetically to the cry of our age, especially for the resonance of that cry within ourselves."⁹ The metanarrative does not come as a discourse of power to kidnap the imagination of the wounded carnival goer. It comes with a gentle humility of sensitivity that offers larger hope from within the shrunken place we call Hell.¹⁰

The nomadic homelessness¹¹ of the postmodern Emmaus

travellers is met by the hospitality of Christ who changes role from stranger to guest and then as the host at the supper Table. No longer defining themselves by the rear-view mirror identity of "the post", they go to tell of their experience to others. The reality they have experienced in Emmaus has already upstaged them as the news in Jerusalem is "The Lord is Risen." Here is a reality that is not being shaped by them and a reality that is shared by others. The iron cage of self-generated worlds has been broken open by one who comes behind closed doors to bring shalom.

1. Mercer, Nick, "Postmodernity and Rationality: The Final Credits or Just a Commercial Break?" in *Mission and Meaning*, Paternoster 1995, Chapter 18.
2. Lyon, David, *Postmodernity*, Open University Press, 1994 p 36
3. Middleton J Richard and Walsh, Brian J, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*, SPCK 1995 p 132
4. Isaiah 44:9-20
5. Cheesman, Graham, *Hyperchoice: living an age of diversity*, IVP 1997
6. John 15:16
7. Jeremiah 7:19
8. Middleton and Walsh p 62: "There is no lighthouse keeper. There is no lighthouse. There is no dry land. There are only people living on rafts made from their own imaginations. And there is the sea." (quoting John Dominic Grossan)
9. Middleton and Walsh p 27
10. Lewis C S, *The Great Divorce*, Geoffrey Bles, London 1945 pp 113-4 While at the threshold of Heaven, the Teacher speaks to Lewis about Hell as being a mere crack in the ground of Heaven; "All Hell is smaller than one pebble of your world; but is smaller than one atom of this world, the Real world...Only the Greatest of all can make Himself small enough to enter Hell."
11. Middleton and Walsh p 61