

EVANGELISM AND THE FIVE MARKS OF MISSION

Jonathan Draper

Abstract: Mission and evangelism need an incarnational basis and focus to have meaning today. That means taking the world as God's world seriously: through and in which we come to know of God and through which the Holy Spirit works. Mission and evangelism that are not incarnational are not really Christian. Evangelism is not a 'proclaiming'; our 'proclamation' is the way we live our lives. The good news of God's love for the world in Christ is for everyone, but that does not mean it is the same for everyone. The good news is diverse. Being the Body of Christ in the world is how we do evangelism. The good news, therefore, is about how love is lived in this place and this time, and not about sin and death and despair. Love forms a bridge between our faith as Christians and the rest of the world that is God's.

Keywords: MISSION, EVANGELISM, FIVE MARKS OF MISSION, INCARNATION, PROCLAMATION, KINGDOM, SALVATION, METANOIA

The Five Marks of Mission, as expressed on the Anglican Communion's website, are 'an important statement on mission. They express the Anglican Communion's common commitment to, and understanding of, God's holistic and integral mission'. As set out in 1984, and as slightly revised in 2012, the Five Marks are:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom;
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers;
- To respond to human need by loving service;

To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation;
To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.¹

Interpreting the Five Marks is a bit like interpreting the scriptures: meaning is often in the eye of the beholder. I think it was the great nineteenth-century German church historian Adolph von Harnack who once observed that as we look down the well of history in search of the real, authentic or historical Jesus we often only see our own reflection; this may be true of ideas like ‘evangelism’ and ‘mission’ too, not least as we look at the Five Marks of Mission. This is probably a useful warning to us all not to pretend that we know the mind of God fully.

The world in which we live now is arguably more different from the one during which the Five Marks were developed, 35 years ago, than that world was from the world of the 1950s, 35 years earlier. I think this is true politically, socially, scientifically, morally, economically and individually. In the 1950s, we were just coming to understand what a gene was; now we are able to edit genes and are looking at the possibility of creating life. In 1984 we were still fighting the Cold War; now we grapple with political instability everywhere, the worldwide threat of terrorism and the growing dominance of China as a global player. The nature of what we mean by family has now changed out of all recognition from the 1950s, or even the 1980s. The means by which we communicate today mean that everyone has a voice and no one knows what is true; today Donald Trump tweets and world markets go into decline as quick as an algorithm can make them. We look to do our mission and evangelism in a world very different from the one in which the Five Marks were developed.

In order to make sense of the Five Marks of Mission today, and see them as still useful for understanding and reclaiming evangelism as a Christian activity, I think we need to go back to some theological basics. After all, we need to be clear about *what* we’re trying to communicate

1. Anglican Communion, <https://anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>.

as well as *how* that communication takes place. And I think that we need to start with that which makes the Christian faith most distinctive, the idea that is supposed to change everything, and that is the idea of incarnation; our theology and our evangelism need to be incarnational. Stephen Sykes wrote, in somewhat dry language: 'Incarnation may be spoken of as the foundation of the church and incarnational theology as the foundation of theology'.²

In the specific context of mission and evangelism, which is at least a part of what the church is for, I want to suggest the importance of being incarnational not just in the sense that faith must be lived out in the real world to be real, though that is obviously important, but incarnational in the sense that it takes the Christian's understanding of God, and Christ and even mission and evangelism, out of the Church and out of the merely spiritual, and into the world, the material world that God loves and inhabits, and the only context for knowing anything we have: we are material, embodied creatures. So, this is not just a theological point, it is an epistemological point too; it's about how we know about God. The world is not just the object of God's love but is also the place and means by which we come to know something, perhaps anything, of God and what God demands of us, for we are a part of that world and have no means of knowing anything outside it. Incarnation means that the world is not separate from God; it is in and through the world that we come to know anything about God at all. Incarnation means that the spiritual and the material are one; incarnation means that the church not only has things to offer the world, but the world has things to offer the church for it is the place in which God is present and active already: there is, in that sense, no 'mission field', there is only the one world in which we live, and move, and have our being. Mission or evangelism that is not incarnational, therefore, is not, in my view, even Christian, and it's in that theological, epistemological and spiritual context that I'd like us to think about the Five Marks of Mission.

2. Stephen Sykes, 'The Incarnation as the Foundation of the Church', in M. Goulder (ed.), *Incarnation and Myth* (London: SCM Press, 1979), p. 127.

As we consider the Five Marks of Mission and their place and purpose in a contemporary understanding of mission and evangelism, the most important place to begin is by trying to unpick the two main parts of the very first Mark, for it sets the scene for all the rest: what does it mean to 'proclaim', and what is 'the Good News of the Kingdom'?

In the way the Five Marks are presented, proclamation is the means by which we are to get across the good news of the Kingdom. Some shorten the Five Marks to five words – tell, teach, tend, transform and treasure – and this first one amounts to 'tell'. We do not, however, live in a time when proclamation – in the Oxford English dictionary sense of 'making an official announcement of something by word of mouth in a public place' – is much done, let alone just telling people something. Few people simply want to be told, or will take what anyone says, however exalted, at face value or even as important.

What is much more persuasive today, and probably always has been, are the actions by which we make incarnate the faith that we would proclaim or tell. The lives lived by individuals and communities of faith are much more likely to be heard, for good or for ill, than any words we spill into an already noisy and somewhat fractious marketplace of ideas. Indeed, from the beginning the Christian faith was known as 'the Way', a way of life rather than just a set of ideas to be proclaimed or told to, and presumably believed in by, a sceptical or even a receptive public. A proclamation, a telling, for the twenty-first century will need to be more in the way of the life we live than in any words we say.

This is particularly true when it comes to discerning what the 'good news of the Kingdom' is. First of all, this is language that I suspect connects with few today. Where kingdoms are talked about at all these days, it might be in the sense of the United Kingdom; a political and social structure that is kingdom in name only. Whatever fictions we may spin about being subjects and not citizens, about the 'sovereign', or even about the sovereign's role in the appointment of governments or even bishops, we live in a relatively modern parliamentary democracy. Talk about kingdoms, such as the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God, is culturally pretty meaningless to most people, except perhaps

those who play certain kinds of video games, or perhaps who are, like me, a fan of *Game of Thrones*.

But more important than that, what is the 'good news' we proclaim, and to whom is it good news? The good news is no longer that we are saved from a hell in which few believe by an act of bloody sacrifice of a son by a father so that we can go to a heaven few believe in either. The good news we proclaim needs to be based instead on the fundamental Christian truth that it is for and by and through love that we exist, and that our faith teaches us ways in which to live love in the world. It is, however, crucial that we remember that Christians do not possess a monopoly on love or understanding what love might be, and this is a potentially rich point of contact for us in our evangelism with the rest of the world, whether religious or not.

The good news, like the Christian faith itself, needs to be contextualised, made incarnate in this place and this time to have meaning and reality. That automatically means that the good news is also a diverse phenomenon, relevant to this place and this time, and we should not be surprised or worried that the good news looks different in different contexts: if the good news we proclaim of the love of God in Christ embodied in our lives is universal that means it's for everyone and not that it looks the same or is the same everywhere. The good news will be different in West Coast Africa and West Coast America; it will be different in Blackburn and Brixton. But these diverse expressions of the good news, when they are rooted in a properly incarnational understanding of God and the world, will have in common an understanding that love, of the sort shown and lived by Jesus of Nazareth, is the well from which the good news for us as Christians springs. And that love as lived by Jesus is that which makes our contribution to the world distinctive and worth telling people about.

This can help us make a different kind of sense of the rest of the Five Marks of Mission which can, if we are not careful, otherwise sound a bit patronising. Given that our context is a world in which the God of love we would proclaim is already at work both in and outside the household of faith, the teaching and nurture we undertake, the second Mark, is an offering to others who would know more about the faith that we live

as individuals and communities on the basis of Christ-like love. Baptism, perhaps, becomes more a rite of commitment than of passage. But importantly, those whom we would teach and nurture do not come to us as a blank sheet waiting to be filled; they also have experience and skills of lived love to bring to the table, so our teaching and nurturing – if it is to be evangelistic and incarnational – needs to be a mutual process as we, together, learn to be the body of Christ in the world.

Being the body of Christ in the world is our principal act of evangelism, and the most powerful witness we can make. One of the biggest problems we face in incarnational evangelism today is the powerful disconnect there is perceived to be between the words we speak and the actions we do: our hypocrisy is probably the biggest barrier to our witness. This is just as true of the ways in which we are perceived to be disconnected from and disinterested in the concerns and attitudes of what Christians too often dismissively describe as ‘the world’. When we are seen as less loving than those outside the household of faith, our witness is not only not heard, it is destroyed and ignored; it is no longer good news, but fake news. We have seen the powerful truth of this in the areas of gender and sexuality, in safeguarding, in our attitudes to women, in our investments, in our engagement with science and so on. Where we have been seen to be acting in love – in food banks, parish nursing, elder and social care, building communities of common cause with others, challenging injustice, living in intentionally inclusive ways, and so on – we make the kind of connection with people that can lead to a proper witness; it is, to coin a phrase, proper mutual flourishing, and evangelism of a truly incarnational kind.

Given all that, we could see the remaining three Marks of Mission as descriptive, indicative, illustrative, of the ways in which we can be the body of Christ, and it is through these, and other acts, that we can effectively witness to the love of God in Christ in our world. If our evangelism is to be effective, we need to step aside from all those ways in which we think we have something that no one else has, without which there is only darkness, sin and death. Incarnational love as the basis for evangelism is meant to be good news for all and not just a select few. Guilt, and sin, and death are not the basis of our relationship

to God; love is. We tell that story through the Christ-like lives we live, as typified by acts of loving service, by seeking to transform society and confront injustice, by working for reconciliation and peace, by engaging with others in the struggle for the life of our planet.

When I was growing up as a proper fundamentalist Baptist in the USA, and we were sent out from our youth group to evangelise on the street – than which there is nothing more excruciating for an introvert like me – the great question we were to pose to those we met was some version of the question: ‘Are you saved?’ Most people, of course, simply ignored us; a few brave souls asked, ‘saved from what?’ Had I been a bit more astute then, I might have taken that question a lot more seriously, for it is a very important one; it’s the critical incarnational question. So, I’d like to end by saying something about salvation.

In Greek there is little difference between the ideas of salvation and healing. In our evangelism we do seek to offer salvation to the world in the sense of healing and wholeness, and in a world as broken, divided and fractious as ours, that is no small thing to offer. And we do it on the basis of *metanoia*, on the basis of individual and social change. We proclaim in the lives we live, embodying Christ to the world, a message of hope and hopefulness, a message of change, a message of people and a world transformed, of the principalities and powers of this world challenged; it’s a message that says that the world need not be the way it is, that there is a better way. And perhaps the most powerful way in which we can convey that message of hope is by working with all those, whatever their religious or non-religious convictions, who seek what is good for us all, which enables us to be those people who show the glory of God in a life fully alive, as St Irenaeus suggested, a life where potential is realised, where need is met, where hope is real and full – life in all its fullness.

The traditional answer we were to give in response to the question, ‘saved from what?’ had to do with sin and guilt and death and eternal punishment in unquenchable sulphurous flames of fire. It was the vision graphically presented to us at York Minster in the wonderfully named eleventh-century ‘Doomstone’, with the gaping jaws of hell, presented as a toad-like creature swallowing up the damned who were prodded to

their doom by hideous demons with pitchforks and cloven hooves. In my experience of God and the world, and in the depths of Christian love I have experienced through others, this traditional answer seems to have moved further and further away from being the truth. There is enough sin and death and despair in the world without deciding that they are the basis for our relationship with God. This is not the good news people need to see and hear from us. The good news is about love, about a love as strong as death, about a love that seeks to heal that which is broken, which seeks to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give comfort to the sick and dying, which seeks to set the oppressed free.

While the Five Marks of Mission may not communicate much to those outside the household of faith, they can stand as a useful reminder to those of us on the inside of a number of things important to a positive, incarnational understanding of evangelism:

- Our 'telling' needs be through the love we live in our lives as individuals and communities;
- The 'good news' is for everyone and is meant to be good news for them in their time and place;
- Our teaching is about mutual learning;
- The good news is about love, about a love as strong as death, about a love that seeks to heal that which is broken;
- Love forms a bridge between our faith as Christians and the rest of the world that is God's.

Jonathan Draper is General Secretary of Modern Church, and has served on the staff at Ripon College Cuddesdon, as Vicar of Putney, as Canon Theologian at York and as Dean of Exeter.

License and Permissible Use Notice

These materials are provided to you by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) in accordance with the terms of ATLA's agreements with the copyright holder or authorized distributor of the materials, as applicable. In some cases, ATLA may be the copyright holder of these materials.

You may download, print, and share these materials for your individual use as may be permitted by the applicable agreements among the copyright holder, distributors, licensors, licensees, and users of these materials (including, for example, any agreements entered into by the institution or other organization from which you obtained these materials) and in accordance with the fair use principles of United States and international copyright and other applicable laws. You may not, for example, copy or email these materials to multiple web sites or publicly post, distribute for commercial purposes, modify, or create derivative works of these materials without the copyright holder's express prior written permission.

Please contact the copyright holder if you would like to request permission to use these materials, or any part of these materials, in any manner or for any use not permitted by the agreements described above or the fair use provisions of United States and international copyright and other applicable laws. For information regarding the identity of the copyright holder, refer to the copyright information in these materials, if available, or contact ATLA at products@atla.com.

Except as otherwise specified, Copyright © 2016 American Theological Library Association.