

Towards A Coptic Orthodox Theology of Mission

Part 1

What Is Evangelism?

By

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There are so many questions about evangelism that demand answers, such as: what are our objectives of evangelism? Are we after bringing new converts to our Coptic Orthodox Church? Or we must lead people to God? Who is the evangelist? Can we work as evangelists? Should the evangelist be an ordained person? Or could be a layman? Who is an evangelism worker?

Answering these questions, and other fundamentals ones, do not only demand deep thinking but also require going back to a profound theology of missions. In order to answer questions about evangelism correctly, we need to start establishing a Coptic Orthodox Theology of Missions that conveys a sound biblical and patristic understanding of a dynamic evangelism that could be applied in our modern time and in Western societies.

Since this work is crucial for the Coptic Orthodox evangelism, I took on myself to start searching and writing in this important area. I welcome your input and I need your prayers.

What is Evangelism?

Evangelism word is a derivative from the Greek word 'Evangelion,' which means 'Gospel.' Therefore, evangelism is the declaration of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is exactly what Jesus Himself was doing. 'preaching the gospel of the kingdom' (Matt 4:23, 9:35). When Jesus foreshadows about evangelism, He says 'And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.' (Matt24: 14).

When St. Paul wanted to describe his evangelistic work, he said 'nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.' (Acts 20: 24). Another time he described his evangelism in these words, 'from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.' (Rom 15:16).

St. Peter emphasized that evangelism and preaching is the proclaiming the gospel when he says, 'Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you.' (1Pet 1:12). Therefore, it is obvious that the work of evangelism is the declaration of the gospel.

But, this will lead us to the next question:

what is the meaning of word the 'gospel'?

The word 'gospel' means **'the good news.'** In other words, the work of an evangelist is to declare the good news. Now, let's have a look at how the bible describes the gospel:

- 1- **'Gospel of Jesus Christ'** (Mark 1:1)
- 2- **'Preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God'** (Mark 1:14)
- 3- **'To testify to the gospel of the grace of God.'** (Acts 20: 24)
- 4- **'The gospel of His Son'** (Rom 1:9).
- 5- **'Gospel of peace'** (Rom 10:15)
- 6- **'In Him you also [trusted], after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise'** (Eph 1:13)
- 7- **'The mystery of the gospel'** (Eph 6:19)
- 8- **'According to the glorious gospel' (1Tim 1:11)**

The verses mentioned above describe to us the nature of this gospel. It belongs to His Son and the kingdom of God. So, **the faithful evangelist should not preach except what is in the gospel. No one has authority to announce any news except what contained in the gospel.**

What is the Good News that an evangelist should declare?

It is the gospel that carries the grace of God. The gospel has in it a mystery and therefore it is a glorious gospel. This grace of God helps the hearers of the gospel to accept **the mystery of salvation**. There is also **'the light of the gospel** of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them' (2Cor 4:3).

We may conclude that an **evangelist should preach the gospel, and that, although the gospel may contain mysteries, that light of the gospel will shine on the hearers and the grace of God will help them to accept the gospel's message of salvation.**

However, what is happening nowadays? The evangelism and the preaching sometimes linger to offer to people not the gospel but something else, more sophisticated and elaborated message. In other words, delivering a message but not solely the gospel message. Sometimes, it talks about any subject other than **the mystery of salvation**. Some modern evangelists think the message of the gospel is not adequate. St. Paul explains the mystery behind the gospel when he said, 'for since, in the wisdom of God, **the world through wisdom did not know**

God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men' (1Cor 21-25).

Here St. Paul is insisting on using the gospel, even if it looks to some as foolishness and stumbling block, because it has the power of God. Moreover, in a different passage, he warned us from using the wisdom of the word, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the **gospel**, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.'(1Cor 1:17). There is a danger of losing the power of the cross of Christ if we try to preach the gospel with our own wisdom.

From here St. Paul takes us into another dimension that discloses the mystery of the gospel. He says, 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes' (Rom 1:16)

'For our **gospel** did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance'(1The 1:5). Therefore, when we preach the gospel, as it is, it holds power and assurance. On the contrary, when we preach the gospel in our own way, it loses power and assurance. Then, **the secret of a powerful evangelism is revealed – in teaching the gospel as it is proclaimed.**

What does the gospel proclaim?

The gospel simply proclaims a few facts:

- 1- We all have sinned, 'for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God' (Rom 3:23).
- 2- "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved' (Jon 3:16,17)
- 3- St. Paul summarized the gospel in the following verse: 'For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures' (1Cor 15:3-6).
- 4- On the cross through his blood we have our redemption. 'He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed [us] into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins' (Col 1:14).

We tend to neglect mentioning this simple, yet powerful message of the gospel in our evangelism, and even worse, in our churches. Sometimes, while we proceed to eat of His body and drink of His blood, we fail drastically to mention the meaning of this mystery on our pulpit. The sacrifice on the altar is the same sacrifice of Golgotha. It has the power of salvation and forgiveness of sins. The lamb that carries the sins of the world is the same lamb on the altar.

The secret behind the spiritual life is salvation. However, there are Orthodox Christians who seldom heard any sermon about salvation! Mainly, many Orthodox hear about His death, burial, and resurrection only during the Pasha Week, as if this mystery is only for Good Fridays. One reason for having so many churchless people in our churches is because the mystery of salvation never comes upon them. They don't know the meaning of what happened at Calvary in relation to their own salvation, and even if they know they don't live its experience.

The mystery of salvation on a personal level experience:

Unless we understand and feel the salvation on a personal level, the gospel remains a sealed book for us and we will never feel the joy of salvation. 'For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. Therefore, if anyone [is] in Christ, [he] [is] a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things [are] of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ' (2Cor 5:14-18).

St. Paul summarizes the feelings of the personal salvation and puts it greatly in this expression, 'it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the [life] which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me'(Gala 2:20).

The Church and Evangelism:

You may ask, don't we need to call people to join our faith?

To answer the question, let me describe steps that a Coptic Orthodox Evangelist may follow:

- 1- Introduce people to the gospel, as explained above
- 2- After accepting the message of the bible, now it is time to talk about the practical steps to get saved: baptism, confirmation, and communion.
- 3- Here it is good to go through a brief history of the church schism to explain how the Coptic Church stayed faithful to the faith and kept all the faith, dogma, and worship since they were delivered from the apostles until today

without a change (review *'The Legacy of the Coptic Orthodox Church'* brochure by Victor Beshir).

- 4- Take the person to an evangelistic Bible study or a spiritual meeting where the person is introduced to the Orthodox faith and practice.
- 5- If the church has the Catechumen Service then take the person to this service. Contact our Coptic Orthodox Church in Atlanta to get a copy of this service.
- 6- Prepare the person for attending the church by explaining the prayers and rites of the Divine Liturgy.
- 5- The role of the church starts here, when at a certain time the church will baptize the person.

Conclusion:

We conclude by saying, when we go to the roots: the Bible, the Fathers, the Tradition, and the history of the church, we can find answer to tough questions.

If the gospel talks about personal salvation, and the work of the evangelist is to describe it to others, shouldn't he start with himself first? We need to live the gospel. I invite you to experience repentance, dying with Christ, being buried with him in order to later on enjoy the saying *'and raised [us] up together, and made [us] sit together in the heavenly [places] in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in [His] kindness toward us in Christ Jesus'* (Eph 2:6.7).

Questions:

- 1- Mention a few verses about salvation
- 2- Can you find some verses that describe personal salvation experience?
- 3- Based on the above how should we evangelize?