[*MJTM* 6 (2003–2005) 113-125]

TOWARDS SCHOLARLY EVANGELISTS AND EVANGELISTIC SCHOLARS: THE TEACHING OF EVANGELISM IN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARIES

John P. Bowen
Wycliffe College, Toronto

In 1984, Haddon Robinson, then President of Denver Seminary, gave an address on the topic, "The Evangelist and the Theologian."[1] He observed that evangelism and scholarship have generally been estranged during the past two hundred years, to the detriment of both. Yet, Robinson argued, the church needs both "scholarly evangelists" and "evangelistic scholars." He pointed to examples of those who had integrated the scholarly and the evangelistic modes of ministry, such as the Apostle Paul, Augustine, Jerome, John Calvin, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, William Carey and Francis Schaeffer.

In this article, I will assume that the ministry of evangelism is necessary to the life and health of the church. I will merely suggest at this point that the roots of evangelism are deep in the ministry of Jesus and the model of the apostolic church. It seems to me also that the lasting influence of scholar-evangelists like those on Robinson's list speaks of its importance.

Yet, with such distinguished forebears, it might be asked why the church no longer seems to produce leaders who are both scholarly and evangelistic. In broad strokes, Robinson lays the blame at the feet of the university-based seminary:

1. Haddon W. Robinson, "The Theologian and the Evangelist," *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28.1 (March 1985), 3-8.

> Theologians in the seminaries often belittled evangelism… Many in the churches, on the other hand, reacted against seminaries and scholarship.[2]

The issue thus raised rhetorically has been discussed by others in more scholarly fashion. David Kelsey has helpfully summarized the ongoing debate about the nature of theological education in his 1993 book, *Between Athens and Berlin*.[3] Kelsey contrasts two visions of theological education. The "Athens" model, which goes back to ancient Greece, and which was effortlessly adopted by the early church, stresses "schooling as 'character formation'."[4] In Christian terms, it is an education "whose goal is knowledge of God and, correlatively, forming persons' souls to be holy."[5]

"Berlin," on the other hand, stands for a type of theological education pioneered by Schleiermacher at the University of Berlin in the early nineteenth century. Here, theology had to justify its existence in a secular Enlightenment, research-oriented university, and it did so by arguing that theology trains people in one of the professions needed by society—the church, which exists alongside medicine and the law.[6] Charles Wood, in his 1985 discussion of theological education, *Vision and Discernment*, contends that the shape of theology has been determined ever since by the demands and expectations of "Berlin."[7] Schleiermacher's shaping of theological education into three streams, historical theology (which included the Bible), philosophical theology (which included systematic theology), and practical theology (which included the social sciences), thus located "the 'theological' character and unity of these disciplines neither in their method nor in their subject matter *per se*, but in their orientation to a particular purpose"—that purpose being to serve the wider culture.[8]

Not surprisingly, the teaching of evangelism has no place in the Berlin model. William Abraham offers a useful definition of evangelism as "that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of

2. Robinson, "The Theologian and the Evangelist," 3.

3. David Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

4. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin*, 6.

5. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin*, 11.

6. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin*, 17-18.

7. Charles M. Wood, *Vision and Discernment: An Orientation in Theological Study* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985).

8. Wood, *Vision and Discernment*, 8-12.

initiating people into the kingdom of God."[9] This goal, however, is antithetical to the goal of objectivity which is fundamental to the Berlin model. Abraham states the problem thus:

> Evangelism is seen as a sectarian issue that requires the kind of prior faith commitments that are out of place in a serious academic environment.[10]

The teaching of evangelism and indeed the practice of evangelism exist more comfortably in an Athens environment where faith commitments are understood as fundamental to life and learning. Thus teaching and training in evangelism, while generally absent from seminary curricula, were common in the Bible colleges which sprang up in the late nineteenth century specifically to provide a preparation for ministry which was free of the constraints on faith imposed by university-based seminaries.[11]

Three developments in the past fifty years have, however, brought about a new opportunity for evangelism and scholarship to grow together again. First, churches have awoken to the ways in which the marriage of church and state under Christendom hampered the integrity of its witness. Second, there has been a move towards seeing the natural locus of evangelism as the life of the local congregation. And, third, there has been an openness to consider the philosophical underpinnings of the whole theological–educational venture. I will touch briefly on the first two of these, and then look in more detail at the latter.

The End of Christendom

The adoption of the Christian faith by the emperor Constantine in the year 313 is generally regarded as a turning point in the relationship of the church to the state. Thus began the project known as Christendom which, while it had many strengths, is widely agreed to have led to the weakening of the distinctive message and values of the Gospel. Stanley

9. William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 95.

10. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 5.

11. John G. Stackhouse, *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century: An Introduction to its Character* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 75, comments that "All Bible schools shared the same basic qualities: concern for correct doctrine, a Bible-centered curriculum, and practical training—especially in evangelism." He also gives a vivid example of how Bible colleges perceived seminaries to be destructive to faith (pp. 80-81).

Hauerwas and William Willimon are typical of writers on this subject in pointing out that the church in the world of Christendom was:

> a church that had ceased to ask itself the right questions as it went about congratulating itself for transforming the world, not noticing that in fact the world had tamed the church.[12]

Rodney Clapp illustrates the relationship of church to world in Christendom like this:

> For the better part of recorded history, the church has been the sponsor of western civilization. Like gym-shoe manufacturers who win the right to advertise their wares with the world's most famous athletes, the church has coveted its association with Western civilization.[13]

The church, he suggests, has been the chaplain on the ship of the state, offering religious services but with no influence over the direction or running of the ship; the captain has been on the bridge with the real power, deciding the direction of the vessel. Thus when Schleiermacher needed to justify the teaching of theology in the modern university, he had to do it in terms that the largely secular university understood: theology prepares pastors who will serve the needs of the state. The chaplain provides religious services, regardless of which direction the ship travels.

Now, however, Christendom is at an end. Hauerwas and Willimon suggest (somewhat tongue in cheek) that it happened in 1963, on a Sunday when the Fox Theater in Greensville, SC, opened its doors on a Sunday, and went head to head with the church.[14] Or, to return to Clapp's metaphor, the captain has decided that the chaplain is no longer needed. The question for the chaplain, of course, is: what now?

The answer coming from many quarters is an optimistic one. Hauerwas and Willimon are again typical:

> The demise of the Constantinian world view…is not a death to lament. The decline of the old, Constantinian synthesis means that…Christians

12. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 41.

13. Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 17.

14. Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 15.

> are at last free to be faithful in a way that makes being a Christian today an exciting adventure. [15]

Finally the church can recover its true calling, and can be captain of her own ship—or, rather, follow the direction of Christ, her true captain. This new freedom has many implications which will take some years to think through. One area in which rethinking has already begun is the shape of theological education.

What does a theological education look like which is shaped by the nature of theology itself, indeed by the shape of Christian faith itself, rather than by external and—many would now agree—inappropriate criteria? What should congregational leadership look like in a church whose purpose is mission to an alien world rather than chaplaincy to a semi-pagan state? I would contend that the door is now open for a reconsideration of the place of evangelism in the enterprise of theological education. It was hardly appropriate in a Christendom seminary: in a post-Christendom model, however, it can take on the role and significance it has within the faith itself.

The Church as Evangelizing Community

In recent years, thinking and writing about evangelism has moved away from an emphasis on the gifted individual evangelist and has begun to explore the role of the congregation as the place where healthy evangelism is most likely to happen.[16] It has become popular to say that people often belong before they believe, in the sense that, for many, becoming part of a Christian community often precedes actual profession of Christian faith by months or even years.

There are at least two reasons for this shift. One is pragmatic, a dissatisfaction with forms of evangelism taking place away from the community of the church, such as crusades or television preaching,

15. Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 18.

16. See, e.g., Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*; Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993); Michael Green, *Evangelism through the Local Church* (Toronto: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), George G. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999); Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); Harold J. Percy, *Good News People* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1996); and John P. Bowen, *Evangelism for "Normal" People* (Minneapolis: Augsburg–Fortress Press, 2002).

which may produce "decisions for Christ" but do not always produce baptized, committed members of Christian communities. If, however, the community is the place where the evangelism happens, then converts are already involved in a community of disciples by the time they find themselves believing. Thus congregationally-based evangelism is more likely to nurture long-term disciples than event-oriented evangelism.

The second reason for the shift from individual to communal is, I believe, more philosophical—the postmodern contention that truth is discovered in community. As an illustration, Stanley Grenz paraphrases postmodern philosopher Richard Rorty thus:

> Everything one can say about truth or rationality is embedded in the understanding and concepts unique to the society in which one lives… [I]t is impossible for us to rise above human communities.[17]

This point of view, though coming from a secular philosopher, should resonate for Christians. After all, most people do not come to believe in Christ through hearing abstract propositions in a relational vacuum. Christianity believes in a Word which became flesh: we come to believe because we get involved with the person of the living Christ. Thus evangelism happens best (though by no means exclusively: God is sovereign, after all), when we have the opportunity to be with other people who are seeking to know and live God's truth, and who discuss it in concrete rather than theoretical ways. When the Word is made flesh again in the community of Christ's people, people discover God's reality there.

How is this change connected to theological education? If churches are to become this kind of evangelizing communities, it is their pastors who will lead them to become so, and pastors are (in most denominations) trained in seminaries. Thus, if seminaries do not train their future pastors in evangelism, it is unlikely that the congregations they lead will ever develop a ministry of evangelism. Harold Percy speaks passionately to this issue of appropriate leadership for congregations:

> Transformational leaders have a clear conviction that God can and will work through their congregation to change lives, and that their congregation of people can be used by God to help change the world. Such vision begins with a clear vision of the evangelizing community and what that community might look like in its particular setting and circumstances.[18]

17. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 156-57.

18. Percy, *Good News People*, 82.

I hope it is not unfair to suggest that seminaries by and large do not produce this kind of "transformational leader" who can help a congregation become an evangelizing community. One way they might do so is by introducing the teaching of evangelism into the formation of future pastors.

A New Model for Theological Education

Of course, the need for training in evangelism could be addressed simply by hiring adjunct faculty to teach courses on evangelism. Many seminaries in Canada do just that. If, however, evangelism is to be an integral part of the seminary curriculum, rather than an optional appendix, a new model of theological education will have a more lasting effect. Charles Wood offers just such a paradigm. After reviewing how theological study has been understood historically, Wood proposes that "Christian theology may be defined as a critical enquiry into the validity of Christian witness."[19]

To some, the idea of "witness" is inescapably a freighted term, redolent of revival meetings and street-corner evangelists. Wood's understanding of "witness," however, is more theological and nuanced:

> "Christian witness" is meant here in a comprehensive sense, roughly equivalent to a similarly broad sense of "Christian tradition," that is, one embracing both the activity of bearing witness (or handing on the tradition) and the substance of what is borne or handed on.

The role of theology in relation to witness is thus:

> an attempt to bring witness to reflection, and to ask about its validity—its faithfulness, its truth, its aptness to its circumstances…an exercise in self-criticism, aimed at enabling those so engaged to bear more adequate witness… As such, theology is an aspect of the continuing repentance to which the church and all its members are called. [20]

The heart of theological education, then, is to reflect on the work of witness, the Bible's own witness to the work of God in history, the church's witness to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and the practices of the church as in some measure bearing witness to God's work in the lives of communities and individuals.

19. Wood, *Vision and Discernment*, 21.
20. Wood, *Vision and Discernment*, 24.

Wood argues that this "witness" can be considered according to three criteria—historical, philosophical and practical—and proposes that theological study be divided into three main disciplines according to these criteria:

1. Historical. This discipline would look at the history of God's people, in biblical times and in church history, and ask such questions as:
    a. Is a particular instance of historical witness genuine and faithful in its presentation of Christian tradition?
    b. How far is it true to the church's mandate to be a witness to God's work in Christ?

   Wood proposes that this theological discipline should take over the name "historical theology," and use the tools of historical research to consider the whole of Christian tradition. Study of the Bible would be included under this rubric.

2. Philosophical. This discipline would consider such questions as:
    a. What is witness?
    b. What may be known about God?
    c. In what sense may Jesus be said to be the "Son of God"?
    d. Is any given example of Christian witness meaningful and true?

   To describe this discipline, Wood proposes to co-opt the term "philosophical theology."

3. Practical. This discipline would look at questions of Christian witness in human society, and ask such questions as:
    a. How did Jesus' witness impact the society of his day?
    b. How did the apostles take the gospel to the Gentile world?
    c. How do cross-cultural missions operate today?

   It may also be asked whether Christian witness is, in any given circumstance, appropriate. Is it a fitting enactment of witness for the cul-tural context in which it is performed?

   This field of study Wood terms "practical theology." It would use the scholarly tools of the human sciences, such as sociology, psychology and anthropology, in considering questions such as these.

Wood's paradigm is helpful as we think about training in evangelism because of the privileged position he gives to the concept of "witness," which is, after all, a central component in all evangelism. Indeed, he suggests that the aim of studying theology is "enabling those so engaged to bear more adequate witness."[21] It is true that Wood makes "witness" mean "everything the church is and does as the church"[22]—whether liturgical worship or social service, professional ministry or political involvement—and in a sense he is right to do so since any authentically churchly activity inevitably bears witness to the reality of the Kingdom of God.

Nevertheless, in the New Testament the word "martyria" (witness) refers most frequently to evangelistic witness. For example, of thirty uses of the word "martyria" in the Johannine writings, twenty-seven of them are dominated by the specific sense of "evangelistic witness to the nature and significance of Christ."[23] Thus any system of theological education which puts the concept of witness at the centre is by implication opening the door to the subject of evangelism.

If Wood's model of theological education were to be adopted, seminary work would come to include significant theological reflection on evangelism, not as an academic embarrassment, or a cultural aberration from the true task of theology, but as a basic aspect of witness, theology's fundamental driving force. The three main components of theological education, in Wood's vision—historical, philosophical and practical—could readily be applied to the subject of evangelism:

1. In studying the historical aspect of witness, for instance, theology would ask:
    a. How is evangelism carried out in Scripture?
    b. How does Jesus himself bear witness to the Kingdom?
    c. How has the church through the centuries followed the evangelistic mandate?
    d. What makes Christian evangelism authentic?
    e. How has the Church's evangelism been faithful to the witness of the apostles and of Jesus himself?

21. Wood, *Vision and Discernment*, 38.
22. Wood, *Vision and Discernment*, 38.
23. H. Strathmann, "μάρτυς, κτλ.," *TDNT* IV, 500.

2. Within the discipline of philosophical theology, questions would be asked of evangelism:
    a. In what sense is the message as proclaimed true?
    b. Is it legitimate for the Gospel to claim what it claims?
    c. Is it coherent and meaningful?

3. Under the rubric of what Wood calls practical theology, students would ask questions such as:
    a. What is an appropriate way to express the Gospel to this person or group, in this culture, at this time?
    b. What does evangelistic preaching look like in this culture?
    c. What is the place of the catechumenate today?
    d. What can I learn from practising evangelists?
    e. What can Christians in the West learn from evangelists in other cultures?

If Wood's model were to be adopted, and the door was thus opened to the teaching of evangelism in seminaries, the benefit would be at least two-fold. On the one hand, the teaching of evangelism would greatly benefit pastors as they prepare for congregational leadership, which in a post-Christendom world must include a sharply-defined sense of mission.

On the other hand, this model would also serve to bring the resources of theology to bear on evangelism. An evangelism that was informed by history, philosophy and social sciences (to name Wood's three disciplines) would be a very different phenomenon from that which we presently experience—richer, broader, more historically aware, more culturally sensitive, more theologically nuanced—indeed, to use Wood's own criteria, more faithful, true and appropriate. Then the church would be faced with the exciting prospect of a new generation of scholarly evangelists and evangelistic scholars.

Two Examples

Is this more than a theoretical ideal? Two contemporary evangelists illustrate the possibility of evangelism and theological education enriching one another: the late Terry Winter and Michael Green. Unfortunately, their experience does not shed light on the systemic question of the place of evangelism in theological education, nor can they be taken as examples of how Wood's paradigm might work. The two are simply

ad hoc instances of people in the world of theological education who had a passion for evangelism and found pragmatic ways for the two to work together. Nevertheless, their example is encouraging: these two worlds are not necessarily antithetical to one another.

Terry Winter (1942–1998) was an independent evangelist of Plymouth Brethren background, based in British Columbia. He had his own television show which was seen across Canada on Vision TV. Winter had a B.A. from the University of British Columbia and a Doctorate in Pastoral Theology (a predecessor of the D.Min.) from Fuller Seminary. Canon Dr. Michael Green, a New Testament scholar, has been Principal of St. John's Theological College, Nottingham, England, and Professor of Evangelism at Regent College, Vancouver. He is currently Professor of Evangelism at Wycliffe Hall in Oxford. Of his many books, perhaps the best-known are *Evangelism in the Early Church* and *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*.[24] Green has M.A.s in Classics and Theology, and a B.D. from Cambridge, an honorary D.D. from the University of Toronto, and a Lambeth D.D.[25]

In interviews I conducted for my Doctor of Ministry thesis,[26] Winter was one of the very few evangelists with whom I spoke who thought that his seminary experience had actually enhanced his evangelistic ministry. During doctoral studies at Fuller Seminary, he had in Paul Jewett a sympathetic supervisor who saw beyond the modernist dichotomy between evangelism and scholarship. In a taped interview, Winter states:

> I happened to like systematic theology, so I did my doctorate in systematic theology and evangelism… My Professor, Paul Jewett, [said,] "Terry, we want you to be a better evangelist, so let's study systematic theology with an evangelistic application. We need more systematic theologians who are evangelists or evangelists who are systematic theologians." [27]

24. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Crowborough, UK: Highland Books, 1970); *idem*, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975).

25. A British B.D. is the equivalent of a North American M.Div. A "Lambeth D.D." is the gift of the Archbishop of Canterbury. It is the equivalent of an Oxford D.D., and is considered the equivalent of an earned doctorate.

26. John P. Bowen, "Teaching Proclamation: A Model for Training Evangelistic Preachers", unpublished D.Min. thesis, McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, ON, 1996.

27. Terry Winter, telephone interview with author, tape recording, May 15, 1996.

For Jewett and Winter, healthy evangelism needed good theology. Indeed, the subjects at the heart of the evangelist's message—sin, the person of Christ, atonement, salvation, repentance, faith, discipleship—are among the most profoundly theological topics anywhere. As Robinson argues:

> What does it mean "to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ"? …Take that Biblical assertion apart and you are working with theology… Only if we understand the gospel ourselves can we hope to make it clear to others… Theology clarifies our thought, sets what Christians believe in contrast with false doctrine, and helps us make the message clear to outsiders.[28]

I am persuaded that an evangelist trained in systematic theology is likely to be a better evangelist.

Michael Green has been a pioneer in the teaching of evangelism in seminaries. In his role as seminary principal and professor of evangelism, he has always made it a practice to engage students in "real-life" evangelistic opportunities. Like Jewett, he does not see a necessary distinction between the teaching of evangelism and the teaching of more traditional academic subjects. Indeed, he described to me how, when he first went to teach at St. John's College,

> I started to do [evangelistic] missions, and…would take students off on those. When I became Principal, I'd take them off in term time and, boy! they were good at their Hebrew verbs when they got back because their motivation was so high.[29]

He continued this model of education when he was Professor of Evangelism at Regent College in the 1980s, combining classroom teaching with church-based or city-wide missions, where students would form Green's team, and participate in speaking, testifying and other evangelistic activities.

The testimonies of Green (as teacher) and Winter (as student) suggest that seminary education and training in evangelism can in fact go hand in hand, even though neither Green nor Winter was working in an institution where evangelism had been formally integrated into the curriculum in the way Wood recommends.

28. Robinson, "The Theologian and the Evangelist," 6-7.

29. Michael Green, interview with author, tape recording, Hamilton, ON, August 18, 1996.

Conclusion

For two hundred years, evangelism and scholarship have had little to do with one another. Yet the church in a post-Constantinian, postmodern world is not only in urgent need of scholarly evangelists, but is in a unique position to nurture them. Charles Wood's proposal for a witness-centred model of theological education, while radical, would give a more appropriate place to the teaching of evangelism in seminaries. Terry Winter and Michael Green, on the other hand, show that theology and evangelism can go hand in hand at the practical level. If seminaries pursue this integration, the church may once again produce scholarly evangelists and evangelistic scholars, and be the healthier for it.