

Is the Ministry of the Evangelist a Valid Biblical Ministry?
Evangelist Ron Comfort

If you are taking the time to read this article, you have already guessed my conclusion, knowing that I have been involved in full-time evangelism for the past thirty-four years.

I am an evangelist because God called me to be one, but I was greatly influenced for the ministry of evangelism because I went to a college that had an evangelist for its president, Dr. Bob Jones, Sr. During my college days, all across America there was a strong emphasis on the ministry and office of the evangelist. Dr. Monroe Parker was then president of Pillsbury Baptist Bible College. Charles Fuller had started Fuller Theological Seminary. Dr. Lee Roberson, who had been an evangelist, was the president of Tennessee Temple. During the 1940's, 3000 evangelists would meet yearly at Winona Lake. These were the days when God was giving real revival in local churches in many areas.

Even before the 1940's, revival was strongly emphasized in many colleges. Moody had started Moody Bible Institute, with his successor being R. A. Torrey, who in turn founded BIOLA on the West Coast. Charles Finney had been connected with Oberlin College in Ohio. So for decades, colleges were producing evangelists because of a strong emphasis on that ministry. However, in the 1960's, the emphasis began to wane. One of the reasons for my founding Ambassador Baptist College is that we might produce some young men with the call of God on their lives for the ministry of stirring revival fires around the world.

In my thinking, the office of the evangelist is validated in three ways: **Scripture**, **history**, and the **gift** itself.

In dealing with the Scriptural office of the evangelist, three Greek words need to be considered. The first of these words is *euaggelion*, a noun. This word, meaning "a bearer of good tidings", is used over fifty times in the New Testament. Secondly, *euoggeilzo*, the verb form is used seventy-seven times in the New Testament and means "to preach the Gospel."

These words give part of the purpose of the ministry of the evangelist. He is one who preaches the Gospel and is a winner of souls. The evangelist, many times, is able to win someone who has been under the sound of the Gospel for quite some time, to Christ. It has been my experience, that often I will go into a local church and preach to people who have been on the verge of salvation for a time, and those people will receive Christ during the week of meetings. On the other hand, many times I have been privileged to go into the home of a person who had been the object of prayer and witnessing over a period of time, and I have had the joy of leading that person to Christ. This is a significant part of the ministry of the evangelist.

The third Greek word to consider is *euoggelistes*, which is the title, evangelist. This word is used only three times in the New Testament. Only one man in the Bible, Philip, is called by this title. If one desires to know what the ministry of the evangelist entails, he should study Philip in the book of the Acts.

Interestingly, each time Philip is mentioned in Scripture, he is ministering in a different location. In Acts 6, he is in Jerusalem. In Acts 8:5, he is in Samaria; and in Acts 8:27, he is in the desert. In Acts 8:40, he is at Azotus. Then, Scripture says "he preached

the Gospel in all cities." Finally, in Acts 21:8 where Philip is called an evangelist, he is preaching in Caesarea. Logically, we deduce that Philip was an itinerant preacher. Being an itinerant preacher does not make one an evangelist; however, a vocational evangelist is an itinerant preacher.

Some would say that the evangelist is simply a church planter, however, that cannot be proven by the Scripture passages concerning Philip in the book of the Acts. Others would say that Philip was a missionary. We desire for our missionaries to plant churches, train nationals to pastor those churches, and then the missionary can move on to establish another.

An evangelist may help start churches, as I have had opportunity to do in the past. He may spend time on the mission field, as our team has experienced for the past many years. However, there is something beyond these two elements that distinguishes the ministry of the evangelist. Some object that Paul started churches in almost every city in which he ministered. The logical reason for that is that there were no churches in those cities. On the other hand, he not only started churches, he spent much time confirming or strengthening the churches already established. There is not much need for an evangelist to go to cities like Greenville, Chattanooga, Winston-Salem, or other cities in the "Bible belt" to establish churches; however, there is a tremendous need for the evangelist to go into these existing churches to confirm them and stir them with the need for revival.

In III John 5-9, John commends the church for taking care of the itinerant preachers, "strangers," and, in so doing, the believers became fellow-helpers to the truth. I am convinced that these "strangers" were evangelists.

The second mention of *euongelistos* is in Ephesians 4:11, where the gifts to the church are enumerated. The question here is "Which of these gifts is temporary and which is permanent?" The safe rule to follow is that gifts used for revelation or authentication of the new message is temporary. Gifts used for edification are permanent gifts. In Ephesians 2:20, the Bible states that we are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Thus, these gifts are foundational in nature and not needed for today. As "apostles" are listed, they were primarily used for revelation and authentication of the new message. However, the "prophet" was not only a foreteller, but he was also a forthteller, which is one aspect of the ministry of the evangelist. The verse states that the evangelist and pastor/teacher were given as gifts to the church to help unify the body. An evangelist has a twofold ministry: to evangelize and to edify.

Whereas John R. Rice, in his book *The Evangelist*, says that the evangelist's ministry is to be preeminent above the pastor because it is listed before the pastor, the Scripture teaches that all gifts are of equal importance. There is no lesser member of the body. The problem arises when one of the gifts is deleted or abused.

Often, my pastor has come to me, referring to my ministry as an evangelist, and said, "I don't see how you do it." On the other hand, I reply to him, "Pastor, I don't see how you do it." The truth of the matter is, each of us is gifted in a different area. I must respect his gift, as he must respect mine. Where there is mutual understanding and respect, the church is blessed.

Euongelistos is used the third time in 11 Timothy 4:5, where Paul tells Timothy to "do the work of an evangelist." Obviously, he is not telling Timothy to leave his pastorate

for an itinerant ministry. He is the undershepherd and the overseer of the flock. Pastors need to tend the flock. Rather, Paul is telling Timothy to do the soulwinning ministry of the evangelist.

Now let's deal with the historical aspect of the evangelist and the gift itself. If the evangelist is a scriptural ministry, his ministry must be utilized in the local churches to fulfill the program of God.

Eusebius, the earliest church historian, states that those "occupying the first steps in succession from the apostles... set out on journeys from home and performed the work of evangelists and preached to such as had not yet heard the word of faith." He further tells us of "Pantaneous of Alexandria, who journeyed as far as India, being one of many evangelists of the Word ... after the manner of the apostles." The ministry of the evangelist is evidenced in the succession of the Bogomils, the Hussites, the Lollards, the Puritans, the Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists. A Hussite evangelist from Bohemia, whom we know only as "Peter," was burned at the stake in Scotland for his ministry.

Many commentators give validity to the historical credibility of the evangelist. Excell, in the *Biblical Illustrator*, says, "An evangelist was the founder of new churches, and the stimulator of existing ones." Reese states that the ministry of the apostle and the evangelist were very similar and adds that his office was "of geographical nature ... whose job was to preach the Word, sometimes in several locations..." Both Hodge and Alford note that, "Evangelists were itinerant preachers." William Taylor, in the *Beacon Bible Commentary*, equates the evangelist in the early church with contemporary vocational evangelists. Ellicott says, "They went forth to various churches in order to preach the Gospel and to perfect the work which had been begun by the apostles."

Earlier I alluded to "the itinerant preachers" in III John, where the church is commended for taking care of them, and Diotrephes is condemned for not meeting their physical needs. The commentator, Goguel, describes these men as "aposties" who were devoted to teaching and preaching in churches already in existence, rather than founding new ones. It is an exact description of the modern-day evangelist, but this was in the second and third centuries.

By the late fourth and fifth centuries, it is apparent that the practice of the roving ministry of the evangelist was firmly entrenched in the churches, according to Eusebius. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Bernard of Clairvaux, "wandered from place to place, preaching with zeal." Peter Waldo started the Waldensies through an itinerant ministry. Later, John Wycliffe and his Lollards followed the same type of ministry. With the start of the sixteenth century, the office became more pronounced.

George Whitefield crossed the Atlantic Ocean thirteen times and became the first "field preacher" since the Lollards four hundred years before. It was said, "On a clear day and the wind blowing right, he could be understood a mile away." He would preach to between five-and fifty-thousand people. Thousands were saved under his ministry.

John and Charles Wesley, through their preaching, helped save England from a blood bath at the end of the eighteenth century. John traveled more than one hundred thousand miles on horseback, preaching at least three times a day, and was responsible for starting the Methodist denomination. He appointed Francis Asbury to be

his successor. Asbury rode horseback for over 200,000 miles and preached more than 20,000 sermons. Jacob Knapp, in the first third of the nineteenth century, became the first of a long line of Baptist evangelists.

The church would not be as strong as it is today were it not for the ministry of God-called evangelists. Recently, Reader's Digest listed Rochester, New York, as one of the most desirable cities in the United States in which to live because of the revival that took place under Evangelist Charles Finney.

D.L. Moody shook two continents for God by the power of the Holy Spirit and left the legacy of Moody Bible Institute. Billy Sunday was used by God to fight the liquor industry more than other person in the history of the human race and turned cities right side up for Jesus Christ. Dr. Bob Jones, Sr. influenced a whole generation for Jesus Christ. Space would not permit me to name all of the fruit that remains today from the ministries of evangelists such as R.A. Torrey, Evan Roberts, Christmas Evans, Sam Jones, Gypsy Smith, and on to present day evangelists.

It is ludicrous to believe that the office of the evangelist is not a present day ministry, when much of what we enjoy in the church of Jesus Christ stands as a testimony to the blessings of God on this ministry.

In conclusion, the evidence of the peculiarity of the gift establishes it as a credible ministry. Several years ago, I was in Cebu City in the Philippines, and Dr. Armie Jesalva, who pastors a church of over 2500, asked me what advice I would give to a young man starting a church. I said, "I would tell him to go ask advice from Pastor Jesalva. On the other hand, if he were inquiring about the ministry of evangelism or revival work, I would be glad to give him my humble advice."

It is obvious that there are several men on the staff of Ambassador Baptist College that have the gift of a pastor, which gift I do not possess. They, in turn, also recognize that Dr. David Baughan and I have a gift that they do not possess. Blessed is the man who recognizes his gifts and his limitations. If you ever hear that Ron Comfort has begun pastoring a local church, you can conclude one of two things: Either he is mentally incompetent, or he is backslidden.

When Dr. Lee Roberson would announce upcoming evangelistic meetings with a certain evangelist, he would say, "He can do something for you that I could not do because of his God-given gift." I have heard pastors say, "I want to use another pastor for an evangelistic meeting in my church, because he has the heart of the pastor." If I need an operation, I do not want a general practitioner to operate on me. I want a surgeon—a specialist. Independent Baptists are infamous for trying to put a square peg in a round hole.

Granted, there are abuses in every area of the ministry, but if each gift was eliminated because of abuses, the body could not function.

I am encouraged by a good number of young evangelists that are on the horizon today. My advice to a pastor would be to pray about scheduling a particular evangelist. Examine what his ministry has been on a consistent basis in other local churches. If you feel that his ministry meets the need of your church, schedule him for an extended meeting. His ministry in the past will generally be what it is presently. Above

everything else, make thorough preparation for that meeting. The extent of the preparation will determine the amount of lasting results.