

The Theologian And The Evangelist

—
Haddon W. Robinson*

In 1966 a World Congress on Evangelism was held in Berlin, West Germany. While the honorary chairman of that gathering was evangelist Billy Graham, the acting chairman was Carl F. H. Henry, the noted American theologian and editor of *Christianity Today*.

At the opening session of the Congress, Henry introduced Graham to the delegates by saying something like this: "Several years ago, after Billy Graham graduated from Wheaton College, I urged him to go on to seminary. Fortunately, Billy did not take my advice. Had he done so, we might have lost the most effective evangelist of our generation."

While Henry, the distinguished scholar, made that comment with a touch of jest, educators sitting in the audience shifted uneasily in their seats. Theological education and evangelism have too often made an oil-and-water mix. A survey of the noted evangelists of the last two centuries reveals that few had a seminary education. Scores of earnest Christians suspect that seminary graduates have "emptied the churches by degrees," and the slip of the tongue that turns "seminary" into "cemetery" has strong Freudian overtones.

Yet this antagonism between theology and evangelism developed in recent history. Theological scholarship came under suspicion when it was infected by German criticism. During the last two hundred years the most savage attacks made on the historic Christian faith have come from professing Christians. German critics starting with Bruno Baur, fortified by the agnostic philosophy of Immanuel Kant and the idealism of Hegel, produced rationalism. These scholars wrote off evangelical Christianity as outmoded and out of step with the times. They devoted their brilliant intellects and sharpened pens to ripping apart the pages of Scripture. They took the miracles out of history, the fire out of hell, and the deity out of Jesus, and they left the Bible in shreds. The OT was dismissed as fables about a tribal god, and the NT documents were treated like old letters from a distant time stored in the attic of religion.

German criticism arose at the same time that changes took place in American theological education. Before the Revolutionary War, young men prepared for the ministry by living in the homes of older ministers. The younger and older men would study the Bible together, read theology, and discuss Church history, and then they would move about the parish visiting the sick and instructing families.

While this initial approach to theological education had the obvious advantage of keeping the theoretical and practical together, it had serious problems. Not all the older ministers could provide the breadth of training the younger pastors

*Haddon Robinson, president of Denver Seminary, delivered this ETS presidential address at the 36th annual meeting of the Society on December 12, 1984.

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needed. Gradually, Church leaders felt the need for more consistent education for the clergy, and they turned to the colleges to provide it. Seminaries emerged first as graduate schools of religion, and those who taught in them were selected because of their education. Professors in the schools were enamored with the latest scholarship that came from the Continent, and the critical views taught in the classroom filtered down through the students to the churches.

Unfortunately, seminaries were seldom held accountable to local congregations. The schools received handsome endowments from wealthy individuals or denominations and, as a result, scholars in the schools did not pay much attention to what their teaching did to the churches. If men and women in the pews felt they were drinking from a muddy stream, they were powerless to clean up the spiritual pollution.

Theologians in the seminaries often belittled evangelism. Evangelists were dismissed as unscholarly and noisy nuisances. Many in the churches, on the other side, reacted against seminaries and scholarship. In their eyes, theology appeared as both unnecessary and dangerous. Revivals under evangelists like Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, Sam Jones, Bob Jones and Billy Sunday—all theologically uneducated—brought into the Church converts who saw little need for ministers with seminary training. For them evangelism stood as the only need of the hour, and at the turn of the twentieth century Bible institutes were founded that minimized theology and put their emphasis on practical training. The rise of faith missions heightened the place of evangelism. Without doubt the Bible institutes and faith missions provided a needed correction within the Church, but often at the price of theological reflection.

What is more, members of the scholarly community had reason to suspect evangelists. Some

were little more than irresponsible sensationalists more concerned with nickels and numbers than people. When Sinclair Lewis wrote *Elmer Gantry*, he pointed to a disgraceful condition in which some evangelists manipulated their congregations and, in the name of God, fleeced them instead of feeding them. Throughout large sections of the country, people looked forward to the circus and the revival as the major community events of the year. In fact, the two had much in common. Both were held in tents, both attracted the entire community, and at times the only observable difference was that at the circus you paid for the entertainment before you entered the tent, while at the revival your money was collected on the inside. Many evangelists entered the ministry with little more than a sensational life story and ten sermons, and they kept on the move to preach them to different crowds. Education was suspect. "If a little knowledge is a dangerous thing," they reasoned, "how much more dangerous would a lot of learning be!"

The separation of theology and evangelism proved a tragic divorce. The evangelist and the theologian are both needed today. Evangelism without sound doctrine decays into ignorant fanaticism. Theology without the goal of making converts degenerates into cold intellectualism. The result of this separation is a faith that is neither intellectually or Biblically sound nor spiritually satisfying. The people of God need to appreciate both the theologian and the evangelist.

We can observe both callings at work in two outstanding leaders of the Church in the eighteenth century. John Wesley was an evangelist. He was born into a home where, in his growing-up years, religion shaped his life. Yet it was as

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an adult that he was converted to Christ. After studying for the ministry at Oxford, Wesley traveled to the United States as a missionary to the American Indians. Discouraged with his efforts, he returned home to England. One evening Wesley was invited to attend a religious meeting at Aldersgate where he listened to the reading of Martin Luther's preface to the book of Romans. In those moments Wesley felt his heart "strangely warmed" and through that experience became truly converted.

John Wesley plunged into an exhausting evangelistic ministry. Preaching two to five sermons a day, he preached at least 40,000 sermons in his lifetime. In order to reach his countrymen with the gospel, he traveled over 250,000 miles on horseback. His ministry produced lasting effects. Not only did he change the face of religion in England but, according to Woodrow Wilson, the course of English history. He opened new religious societies, administered discipline, raised vast sums of money for the poor, founded the first tract society, and engaged in controversy for the faith. At his death he left behind 135,000 communicants and five hundred preachers for the Methodist Church.

Wesley was born in 1703. In that same year, on the other side of the Atlantic, another man was born whose life greatly affected the Church. Jonathan Edwards was a scholar. Like Wesley, he was a child of a parsonage and was the grandson of Solomon Stoddard, a noted New England Puritan minister. Edwards possessed a brilliant mind. At six he mastered Latin; at nine he wrote a treatise on materialism; at twelve he produced an essay on spiders that is still considered biologically accurate. At thirteen he entered Yale, and at seventeen he graduated with highest honors.

Many of Edwards' sermons reflect his massive intellect. He wrote works on the *Freedom of the Will* and *A History of Redemption* that rank as classics of Christian theology. Just before his death at fifty-five, Jonathan Edwards accepted the presidency of Princeton College. His scholarship left a lasting impression on America. Barrett Wendell, a Unitarian literary critic, named Edwards as one of three outstanding thinkers that the United States has produced. Yale University has republished his works in honor of his contributions.

Both John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards were gifts from God to his Church. The people of God need scholars who can think God's thoughts after him and evangelists who can proclaim that message clearly. If the Church is to carry out Christ's commission, however, we need to go beyond a simple appreciation of both. We need a band of men and women who are theological evangelists and evangelistic theologians.

John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards combined both offices. As Wesley rode his 250,000 miles on horseback, he produced grammars of English, French, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. He edited a Greek NT and made his own translation of the Bible. His sermons and journals contain the major planks of a systematic theology.

Jonathan Edwards, the scholar, became a major force in evangelism and revival. His sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," preached many times throughout New England, was the opening trumpet in the Great Awakening. His unrelenting logic, his identification with the feelings of his congregation, and his use of Scripture shook his hearers out of complacency. Through him

hundreds awoke to their desperate need of Jesus Christ.

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Throughout history, effective evangelists have studied theology and strong theologians have involved themselves in evangelism. No one would question the zeal of the apostle Paul for evangelism. Under the inspiration of God he wrote to his friends in Rome, "I speak the truth in Christ—I lie not—I am ready to be anathema from Christ—to suffer eternal punishment and lose all that really matters to me—if only my people Israel could be saved!" Yet Paul was also a splendid theologian. Think of his letters to the Romans, the Ephesians and the Galatians, and you marvel at the range and depth of his thought. His epistles written in the heat of his ministry are the quarry in which most subsequent Christian thinkers have been content to dig. In Paul theology and evangelism embraced each other. Paul became a theologian because he desired to evangelize, and theology formed the basis of his message.

Augustine, a theologian, shaped and directed Christian thought for centuries after him. But he wrote his greatest work, *The City of God*, motivated by a spirit of evangelism. When men and women despaired as they witnessed the collapse of Roman civilization, Augustine pointed them to the city whose builder and maker is God.

John Calvin stands out as one of the most successful evangelists in Church history. This brilliant theologian not only evangelized the city of Geneva and the cantons of French-speaking Switzerland; he also became an "evangelist of Europe," spreading the evangelical faith from Scotland to Transylvania. Five times during his lifetime he revised his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* to achieve a clearer, more convincing explanation of Christian theology in order that his followers could be more effective evangelists.

William Carey, the pioneer of modern overseas missions, carried the burden of Christless millions heavy on his heart. While he longed to bring the gospel to the world, his brethren operating out of a stifling theology were inclined to do nothing. For that reason Carey set himself, while still a country pastor, to learn Hebrew, Greek, Dutch, French and Italian. Then, driven by his concern for the lost, he traveled to India where he lapped up language after language exploring the richness of Indian literature and still more sharing the treasures of Christ in the gospel. Carey established a publishing house and founded a great college, the first of its kind in India and a center of theological education on the subcontinent.

Francis Schaeffer challenged the assumptions of thousands of men and women caught up in the ferment of our times. While exposing the futility of pagan philosophy, he argued for the sufficiency of Biblical truth as a foundation for life. Schaeffer, however, considered himself an evangelist whose major purpose in life lay in bringing bewildered people to a knowledge of the Savior.

Certainly there are scholars who lack spiritual fire, but that is not the fault of theology. Men and women like that would be deadly dull no matter what they did. Superficiality is not a necessary part of evangelism and, in fact, clear theology is basic to sound witness.

The first aim of an evangelist is to proclaim to the world the good news about Jesus Christ. Obviously that requires an understanding of the message. What does it mean "to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ"? Is that the same as saying, "Let Jesus come into your heart," "Open your life to Christ" or "Make Jesus Lord of your life"? If we read the sentence, "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's

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Son, cleanses us from all sin," what does that mean to the individual in the marketplace? How do you explain that truth in terms unchurched people comprehend? Take that Biblical assertion apart and you are working with theology.

Sometimes what we call deep is simply muddy. 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.

A second purpose of the evangelist is to help converts develop into mature Christians. People professing faith in Christ often do not stand because they do not grow. Only the strong meat of Christian doctrine produces healthy Christians, and we never get very far as Christians without first understanding the great truths revealed to us by God in Scripture and then in faith applying them to life.

If theology is basic to evangelism, evangelism is vital to theology. God's truth demands proclamation as well as study. If we propose to be Christians, then we must be on with Christ's business. Napoleon's lieutenants carried in their jackets, close to their hearts, a map of the world. World conquest was their purpose because it was Napoleon's purpose. For that they fought,

sacrificed, suffered and died. Christian scholarship exists to serve Christ's people in the world.

There is a story about Jerome, the scholar who translated the Scriptures into Latin. He was a theologian and philosopher, a grammarian who mastered Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Like all students Jerome loved his books. In his sleep one night he dreamed he stood before the judgment seat of Christ.

"Who are you?" said the Lord on the throne.

"Jerome, a Christian," was the reply.

"That is false," said the stern voice from the throne. "You are not a lover of Christ, but of Cicero, for where your treasure is, there your heart is also!"

Jerome awoke in a cold sweat and fell to his knees to beg forgiveness for being so in love with his manuscripts that he forgot the men and women for whom Christ died.

As much as we love books we must love Christ and people more. The evangelist needs the scholar, and the scholar needs the evangelist. Even more, the Church needs scholarly evangelists and evangelistic scholars—men and women who love God not only with heart and soul but with mind as well.

C. I. Scofield was a noted pastor in Dallas, Texas, and the original editor of the *Scofield Bible*. During the year 1918 he suffered a serious illness that gave him an opportunity to evaluate his ministry. In January of 1919 at the opening of a new year he wrote a letter to many of the Bible teachers he knew. One of those to whom he wrote was William Pettingill. This is what Scofield wrote.

Dear and Honored Brother:

You and I are Bible teachers. It is of God's grace, and it is a great gift. But near to it is a great danger.

For many months I have, through physical disability, been laid aside from all oral ministry. During this time, it has been increasingly laid upon me that I should beg the forbearance of my teaching brethren while I state in plain truth the teacher's danger.

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In a word, it is the neglect of the Gospel message to the unsaved. But, brother, *that* is the *great* message. It is sweet and needful to feed the flock of Christ, but it is to seek and save lost men and women that Jesus came, died, and rose again. It is not enough to repeat Gospel texts and say, "Come to Jesus." There is a *tender* seeking note in the gospel truly preached. How many gospel sermons did you preach in 1918? How many found salvation under your ministry? Let us make 1919 a mighty, tireless effort to save lost men.

Yours in Christ's Love,
C. I. Scofield

Let us—as members of the Evangelical Theological Society—resolve to do the same thing. If we cannot be scholarly evangelists, then by God's grace let us determine to be evangelistic scholars.

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