

## Heralds of Christ: Ambushed?

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There were two weeks between finishing my last interim in Atchison, Kansas and assuming duties here, and Jo Lynn and I were vacationing at a lakeside resort in east Texas. Early one morning we were sitting on the deck enjoying the beautiful setting, when a family strolled by. The woman trailing the group asked, "Do you know Jesus Christ as your personal savior?"

We both said, "Yes," partly because it's true; but mainly to get rid of her!

On a busy sidewalk a man stepped directly in front of me like an NFL linebacker and asked, "If you were to die today, where would your soul be tomorrow?"

I said, "In heaven, with Christ," partly because it's true; but mostly to get rid of him—let him move on to his next target.

I had mixed emotions about both experiences: guilt for resenting the confrontation but repulsed by its rudeness; an intrusion that seemed to reduce me to an object—a target—a notch on their gun handles. I felt ambushed. My squad walked into a real ambush in Vietnam. I don't like ambushes.

These stories represent the residue of what once was, and what still should be, a crucial ministry of the church. But what once produced solid growth and effective ministry is now a major reason for a six-decade decline of the North American church. What once was a source of attraction is now more likely to repel than attract; it does more harm than good.

Evangelism. It's a New Testament word: "euangelion." Two Greek words: 'eu,' meaning 'good,' is in our English words euphoria, euphemism, and eulogy. The other word is 'angel' ('angel' in English) meaning message or messenger. Good News or Good Message. It was the heartbeat of the church; but something happened to evangelism in the middle of the last century.

In the years immediately following WWII the American corporation emerged as an amazingly effective organizational model. It carried American business, medical science—and the church—to the highest levels of accomplishment in human history. But over a period of time that structure became focused less and less on productivity and service, and more and more on profit. I don't know how many times I heard in the 70s and 80s and 90s: "The church is a business." "The church needs to be run like a business."

In the corporate church, evangelism became the marketing and sales division. It focused more on "results" than on the message. How many sales this month? How many additions? How many baptisms? With its focus on numbers and its message on the back burner, the church began to decline, and 'Ambush Evangelism' emerged: a last gasp, desperate grasping at straws of a failed organizational structure.

Evangelism has not effectively been addressed in mainline Christianity since then, mostly a backlash against that aggressive, offensive approach (there's a Facebook page called, "Not That Kind of Christian"); and yet, nothing has replaced that offensive element. And while we've dilly-dallied around about it, the North American church is in a death spiral.

I favor reclaiming evangelism, not in order to grow the church or recruit new members, but simply in obedience to our Lord's Great Commission in MATTHEW 28:19-20 (NRSV): "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,* <sup>20</sup> *and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"

Let me be clear: there is absolutely nothing wrong with the word or the concept of evangelism. It is its distortions that lead to gross misrepresentations and stereotypes. But there is another word in the New Testament that communicates the same meaning, but without today's distortions and stereotypes. That word is in the text we first read last week:

I TIMOTHY 2:1-7 NRSV ~ *First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.* <sup>3</sup>*This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior,* <sup>4</sup>*who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.* <sup>5</sup>*For*

*there is one God;*  
*there is also one mediator between God and humankind,*  
*Christ Jesus, himself human,*  
<sup>6</sup>*who gave himself a ransom for all*—*this was attested at the right time.* <sup>7</sup>*For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.*

"*I was appointed a herald ...*" A herald is an official messenger sent with a message from or to announce the arrival of an official delegate or delegation.

This week I started thinking—sometimes that's dangerous: where else had I run across that word, "herald", in the Scriptures. It seemed familiar, but I couldn't recall specific references. So I looked through several versions on my online Bible software, typing in the word, "herald". It appears only five times; and the nine English versions I checked were inconsistent in its use. "Preacher" was the most frequent translation (five times), followed by "herald" (three times) and "proclaimer" (once). Well yellow lights were flashing on my dashboard, so I turned to the original language. The word is "κηρυξ" (ke - roox), from the root word, "κηρυγμα" (Kerygma). Depending upon the context, the word refers both to the content of a message and to the one who is sent to deliver the message.

A verse used consistently as the clearest example is Isaiah 52:7,

***How beautiful upon the mountains  
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,  
who brings good news,  
who announces salvation,***

**who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."**

Isaiah uses the word, 'euangelion;' but this verse is used consistently in commentaries when the word, "herald" is the focus. I think I can make a case that Herald is a valid alternative for evangelist, and it comes without the baggage.

So if we are to be messengers—heralds—of good news, what is the content of our message? Isaiah says it's "peace", "salvation", and "Your God reigns." In today's epistle reading Paul says it's that "*God wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth.*" (vs. 4)

A quick look at the idea of "salvation" or "to be saved." Again, this is a wonderful biblical concept that has been distorted to mean, "say the magic words so you won't go to hell when you die." In the original languages of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, salvation is a quality of becoming completely who we've been created to be: reflecting the image of God in which each of us has been created. Complete.

It describes a relationship between each of us and God, who is our creator, redeemer, and sustainer. That relationship is experienced here and now, and is promised for eternity. Salvation is the total package: it is believing and accepting the Good News, "Your God reigns," and then it is living as if we truly believe that. That's the "Good News" for which Paul—and by extension, each of us—has been appointed a Herald.

Last week I told you about Janet Bernardi who, 25 years ago wrote, "We were born in the Nixon era and have never known national trust in leadership. In fact, we have seen corrupt leadership ever since: in everything from PTL ministries to the LAPD."<sup>1</sup> She had just graduated from college. She and most of her generation is yearning for the "Good News" of which Paul—and by extension, each of us—has been appointed a Herald.

And a New York Times op/ed by David Brooks last November—twenty-four years after Janet Bernardi's book hit the shelves, "Many young people feel trapped in a system they have no faith in. A student at Notre Dame wrote: 'Because we view humanity—and thus its institutions—as corrupt and selfish, the only person we can rely upon is our self. The only way we can avoid failure, being let down, and ultimately succumbing to the chaotic world around us, therefore, is to have the means (financial security) to rely only upon ourselves.'"<sup>2</sup> They are hungry for the "Good News" of which Paul—and by extension, each of us—has been appointed a Herald.

Evangelism need not be some distorted, intimidating burden we need to avoid because we're "not that kind of Christian." It's nothing more than being a herald of good news. And we don't have to unload the whole Bible in order to be effective; in

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<sup>1</sup> William Mahedy & Janet Bernardi, *A Generation Alone* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsityPress, 1994), p. 18

<sup>2</sup> David Brooks, "How Democracies Perish," *New York Times: Opinion* (1-11-18)

fact, that probably would put us back in the category of “ambush evangelism.”

Our good news may be as simple as getting together with others in our congregation to promote and sponsor a “Trunk or Treat” event; or to sponsor a blood drive; or to work with Ida Burns Elementary School to provide warm winter coats for children... Things that show the people right here in our neighborhood that we’re just folks like them and that we care for them.

They already know we’re a church. They probably already believe in God—or, if they don’t, it may be because nobody ever demonstrated to them what God looks like. What we may be able to do through these visible, tangible activities, is build a bridge, or plant a seed, or open a door, or establish a relationship, or demonstrate empathy.

For us, the good news about being a Herald instead of setting an ambush is that we don’t have to get all obsessive about the results. We don’t have to keep score. All we have to do is announce the good news. In another letter—written before he wrote today’s letter to Timothy—Paul wrote, *“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.”* (I CORINTHIANS 3:6 NRSV) ~ PRAYER SLIDE ~