

THE GROUND PLAN OF EVANGELISM

By the Rev. A. SKEVINGTON WOOD, B.A., Ph.D., F.R.Hist.S.
Minister of Southlands Methodist Church, York

ONE OF THE heartening signs of our times is the widespread interest displayed in the task and problems of evangelism. There may be many variations of opinion as to methods and approaches, but the fact that the subject is now an almost universal talking point represents one of the undoubted gains of the post-war years. Such a preoccupation was long overdue. Yet we must be thankful that the hour has come when evangelism is no longer what Principal James Denney used to call 'the disinterested interest of the comparative few' but is compelling the serious attention of all. 'In one lifetime the Christian must learn that being saved he is saved to serve,' writes Professor Leonard Hodgson, in his book on *The Doctrine of the Atonement*. 'The Church has needed a longer adolescence to realize its selfhood as the fellowship of forgiven sinners. If it now knows itself to be the redeemed community, has it yet fully grasped the truth that it is redeemed in order that it may give itself to the service of mankind in the name of God? For many reasons I am inclined to think that this twentieth century is the stage in the Church's history at which God wills us to take the step forward of grasping this truth.'

A noticeable and recurring feature of most modern programmes of evangelism as set out by the national churches both here in Great Britain and on the continent of Europe is the assumption that mission must needs be geared to the parochial pattern. The ground plan of evangelism is taken to be the lay-out of the parish. This is reflected in the spate of books that have been written on the subject. Many of them owe their original inspiration to the report of the Commission on Evangelism published in 1945 under the title *Towards the Conversion of England* — a landmark in the strategy of mission in this country. In its necessary insistence that the Church itself is the agent of evangelism it was inevitable that, thinking in purely domestic terms, the parish should be regarded as the basis of operations. Most Anglican literature that has appeared since then on this topic has presupposed the parochial orientation of evangelism. Dr. Joost de Blank, who wrote on *The Parish in Action* in 1954 when he was Bishop of Stepney, launches into his opening chapter with a plea for the parish. His argument is rightly founded upon the nature of evangelism itself as the continuing witness of the Church. 'In recent years,' he wrote, 'there has been any amount of talk about evangelism, as if evangelism were something that could be tacked on to the normal life of the Church. Not so! Evangelism is the normal life of the Church, and can never be an optional extra. It is of the essence of the Church, and the Church to be the Church must be permanently in a state of mission. Missions in the traditional use of that word are called from time to time, but only to reap the harvest of a seed that is faithfully and continuously sown, never as something new to which the church and its people are compelled as a strange and exceptional exercise.' From this incontrovertible premise he proceeds to press the case for the parish as the unit of evangelism. The same stress is to be discovered in the writings of Canon Southcott, Canon Lloyd and Canon Green.

The parallel movement north of the border is similarly related to the parochial system. In outlining the general principles of mission in one of its earliest publications, 'Tell Scotland' laid down first of all that 'the key to evangelism today lies with the parish or local congregation'. It is here that it must be realized that effective mission is not an occasional or sporadic effort undertaken by a specialist, but a continuous and coherent pattern of life within the local church. 'Our main concern today is not so much with planning a parish mission, as with planning a missionary parish. Special missions, Commando campaigns, house-to-house visitation carried out from time to time — these things may have their own contribution to make. But in the last resort it is the congregation living its faith which is the true agent of mission.' The pioneer and architect of 'Tell Scotland' was Tom Allan. It is not without significance that the title of his most widely influential book is *The Face of my Parish*. Once again the ground plan of evangelism is assumed to be the parochial area.

Behind Tom Allan's exposition and experimentation stands that of the French Roman Catholic priests who have expressed a similar concern and proceeded along comparable lines of strategy. The title of Allan's book is taken from George Bernanos' *The Diary of a Country Priest* and he was deeply impressed, as must be all who take the trouble to read it, by the Abbé Michonneau's *Revolution in a City Parish*.

Now it will be realized that this contemporary trend towards parochial evangelism raises real and pressing problems for the Free Churches both in England and Scotland. What is the place of the non-parochial Christian community in this developing pattern of parish mission? In many cases a Free Church, though situated centrally, serves a scattered congregation throughout an entire town or city. What is to be regarded as its 'parish' and how does it fit into any plan of united witness? Moreover, in the Methodist Church, with which I am most familiar, a minister may have charge of more than one church in differing areas, thus increasing the difficulty of his personal identification with one particular parish even where co-operation is possible. It would appear that on both sides of the border the shape of evangelism has been largely determined from the viewpoint of a national church without sufficient attempt to take into consideration the witness of the total Christian community. We may render lip-service to the ecumenical principle at the conference level without genuinely endeavouring to put it into practice where it is most required and will have the weightiest effect. An ounce of local co-operation is worth a ton of platitudinous exhortation.

Now it must not be supposed that those who are prominent in advocating parish evangelism are unaware of this issue. Indeed, Dr. de Blank, for example, feels it most keenly. The new emphasis inevitably points it up, as he himself admits. 'If we make the statement that they (that is, the Nonconformist churches) are today a greater problem than they were, it is said with no disrespect but is due directly to the rediscovery of the Church as the family of God in any locality. In the days when all the emphasis was on going to church, with a strong individualistic strain in worship and teaching, the problem was not nearly so acute. Now that we have been brought to realize that we need to "be the Church" as well as "go to church", all sorts of difficulties and frustrations arise. If we believe that the parish church should be the praying heart of a community; if we believe that the people of God in any parish should meet to plan and pray to do the Lord's work, then obviously its witness is weakened, and some of its strength drained from it, by the existence of a number of other places of worship in the same area.' But Dr. de Blank refuses to write off the Free Churches as unwanted hindrances, though he acknowledges that this is in fact the deplorable attitude of some parish priests. He concludes with admirable charity that since at least we are united in our common allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour we ought therefore to close our ranks in the face of the organized hostility to the faith and take every opportunity to work together where we can do so honestly and without compromise.

The 'Tell Scotland' movement is even more specific in its attempt to integrate the denominational churches into the parish-based plan, insofar as that is feasible. In his booklet, *The Congregational Group in Action*, sent out prior to the third phase of the campaign, in 1955, Tom Allan pleads for interdenominational co-operation, especially in visitation. He believes that within a given area — parochial or multi-parochial — a group of churches, representing differing communions, may well pool their resources of personnel and make a concerted attack upon the community. 'The power of such a campaign cannot be overestimated. The fact that it is a united mission is, in itself, of the greatest importance.' And then he quotes a statement from the British Council of Churches on the necessity for united evangelism which is highly relevant to the matter we are discussing here. It deserves to be reproduced in full: 'There must be a united evangelism for these reasons: (a) *To remove a reproach*: To stop short of united evangelism is to countenance the conclusion that Christians do not experience a unity in Christ strong enough to enable them to join in bringing Christ to men and women, and men and women to Christ. (b) *To effect an entry*: To effect an entry through the countless doors at present barred to Christianity is a task of too great magnitude for any-

thing less than a united approach. (c) *To combat inhibitions*: However ill-founded the suspicion that denominational missions are sectarian and concerned with the multiplying of their own adherents and filling their own pews, it cannot be disregarded or evaded. Where all are seen to be working together this inhibition is counteracted and the primary purpose . . . shines out unblurred. (d) *To conserve the lessons of experience*: Advocacy of united evangelism does not rest on theory: it is based on the experience of many in all denominations. There has been a release of power and a deep sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit when men and women of widely differing antecedents are united in prayer and a common evangelistic purpose.'

Now that urgent and convincing statement I take to be the Magna Charta of co-operative evangelism and it is from such a consideration as this that we should proceed to build up the policy of mission. If the conception of the parish as the unit of activity can be sustained within the wider orbit of united effort, well and good. But to the degree in which it is found to hinder or restrict such over-all co-operation, it must be abandoned or modified. There is real need nowadays to rethink the entire strategy of evangelism from the standpoint not of the parish but of the total community of committed Christians. Remarkably enough, this in fact corresponds with the original conception of the local Christian church as a parish. The term *paroikia* was employed in the secular realm to describe those who dwelt alongside the recognized citizens — either aliens living within the city or those who occupied the suburbs and hamlets beyond the boundaries. Long before the primitive Church began to organize itself on parochial lines as we understand today (this development was one of the features that emerged along with distinct episcopacy at the end of the dark 'tunnel' which runs through most of the second century), the Christian community was regarded as a *paroikia* in the sense that it represented a colony of heaven on earth. 'The *paroikia* of early days,' according to Edwin Hatch, 'was neither a parish nor a diocese, but the community of Christians living within a city or a district, regarded in relation to the non-Christian population which surrounded it.' The parish, then, was the fellowship of strangers and pilgrims in the midst of a pagan society. It could well be that if we were to reconsider the nature of the Christian parish in these terms, a solution to the problem raised in this brief excursus might appear more probable.