

New Testament Evangelism

Isaiah 1 for Today

by Ian Hodge

In the last couple of issues of *F.A.C.S. Report* we looked at evangelism in the New Testament era from the episode of Paul while he was in Greece. We saw several things that connected evangelism with Old Testament Christianity. Amongst these were the fact that the great apostle reasoned with his audience "from the Scriptures." These Scriptures were obviously the Old Testament Scriptures, since the New Testament portion of the Bible as we know it was not available to St Paul at the time.

However, it seemed appropriate while thinking through these aspects of evangelism to consider the evangelistic methods that are illustrated in the Old Testament to see what differences, if any, might appear. This short commentary on Isaiah chapter 1 is an example of what the prophets of old, God's spokesmen in their generation, delivered to the people. While there are many examples we could use, this chapter is one of great interest for those who are serious about evangelism.

Before considering the passage in detail, though, it is also appropriate to make sure we understand what it is that we're trying to do when we evangelize. The goal must be kept in mind, for without this object clearly in view, our activities can be incorrectly focused and not help us achieve our ambition.

For some, evangelism means simply getting people to say "yes to Jesus," whatever that might mean. Others are encouraging people to accept Christ as Saviour, give up drinking, smoking and dancing, and spend the rest of their leisure time at prayer meetings, Bible studies, Sunday School, and two worship services on Sunday. In the former case Christianity is reduced to a vagueness which borders on existentialism, while in the latter instance, Christianity is made to revolve around the institutional church. Both are clearly wrong.

The focus of the biblical evangelists, however, appears to be elsewhere. Throughout the Scriptures those whose task it was to speak to the unsaved brought an *ethical* message. It was a notice that God was a righteous God, that disobedience to any thing that He commanded amounted to treason, and treason meant eternal punishment and separation from God, in the long run.

Within the context of this message it was also made plain that in man's revolt against God there was absolutely nothing he could do to save himself from the wrath of God. It was God Himself, therefore, who was not only held forth as Judge, but also as man's only Saviour. This salvation was available to all those who, through faith, believed they rightly deserved God's wrath for their sinfulness, who were determined no longer to live as rebels but as obedient children of the Living God. The word often used in the Bible to describe this change of lifestyle is repentance, veering away from one thing and turning to something else. This "something else" is always

defined as the commandments of God, since man's revolt is ethical in that he wants to make up his own rules and regulations.

Thus, while we must never forget that the salvation that the Lord Jesus Christ obtained is the primary ingredient in evangelism, it does not appear to be the primary focus of evangelism. The focus must be on ethics, on man's actions, on his rebellion against the moral standards of justice and righteousness that God has set forth in the whole of the Scriptures. Without this focus, the meaning of the atoning work of Jesus loses its real significance, and sinful man will soon redefine Christ and the Cross in a way so that he can continue with his revolt against God.

With this in mind, consider how one Old Testament prophet evangelized the people of his day.

Vv. 1-3. The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, <and> Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: "I have nourished and brought up children, And they have rebelled against Me; The ox knows its owner And the donkey its master's crib; <But> Israel does not know, My people do not consider."

It is often a mistake to think that the words of Scripture only apply to God's chosen people, Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament. But, as St Paul reminds us in Romans chapter one, *all* people know that God exists. They all know, in the depths of their soul, that they are the offspring of God. He has made them, and they cannot escape this fact without annihilating themselves; then, even in hell, they will remember forever that they are the creation of Almighty God.

In language that would today be considered impolite in many circles, however, the prophet Isaiah, speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, implies that the people of his day are more ignorant than the dumbest of animals. The ox and the donkey know and recognise their owners; but people today no longer wish to recognise they are the creation of the living God. Remember who the prophet is speaking to here. It is not the gentiles, those who are outside the faith, that the prophet is calling ignorant. Rather it is the covenant people of God, those who should know better.

On the surface this does not appear to be a way to get people's attention. Some would clearly consider these words an insult, and immediately determine to listen to no more of this insolent prophet. But God has his purposes, and His message is suited to His purposes. True it may be that language such as this might turn some people away from listening to the full message of the prophet, but this message is designed to achieve God's purposes, not to save every person from the fires of hell (Proverbs 16:4). There will be some who

Notice too some of the specific things listed as good: seeking justice, rebuking oppressors, defending the weak and those, such as widows, who, through the circumstances of life, find themselves in need of assistance. These words should ring loudly in our ears today, for around us we find great injustices and yet the people of God are failing to speak out about them. The media are frequently reporting incidences of great injustice: a person wrongly charged and jailed for a crime that they did not commit; a father who cannot get custody of a child being abused by a former spouse; a wife who is being beaten by an abusive husband, yet the courts fail to deal adequately with the offender.

Nothing signifies the radical weakness of the modern church as these incidences. When the Bible tells us how we should treat murderers or rapists, Christians remain silent while they are merely jailed for a time then let loose again in society. When the Bible commands a thief to repay what he stole, Christians remain silent while the victim of theft is further penalised by being taxed to keep the thief in modest comfort in a modern prison.

However, it is not only the number of incidences on which Christians are silent that should concern us. What is also a major concern is that when the Christians do voice their concerns on infrequent occasions, they fail to bring the Biblical solution to the problem. Any solution is better than the Biblical one, it seems. Like the Pharisees of old, too many Christians tithe mint, anise, and cummin, but neglect the weightier matters of the law. By this attitude God's commandments to a sinful and rebellious world are rendered inoperative. Truly, we are very much more in rebellion against God's commandments than we care to admit on most occasions.

The words of the prophet, though, should ring loudly in our ears: "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight."

Vv. 18-20. "Come now, and let us reason together," Says the LORD, "Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool. If you are willing and obedient, You shall eat the good of the land; But if you refuse and rebel, You shall be devoured by the sword"; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

While we must be careful to maintain that our salvation is not earned by what we do, it is just as certain that our salvation is impossible without a change in our actions. Changing our lifestyle is not an option when we accept Christ as our Saviour. It is an essential ingredient of what it means to become a Christian.

Too much modern teaching implies that there is no connection between faith and action. This, however, is not the teaching of Scripture. Faith and action are inextricably linked, this is why we must show our faith by our actions. "But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?" (James 2:20).

Vv. 21-23. *How the faithful city has become a harlot! It was full of justice; Righteousness lodged in it, But now murderers. Your silver has become dross, Your wine mixed with water. Your princes <are> rebellious, And companions of thieves; Everyone loves bribes, And follows after rewards. They do not defend the fatherless, Nor does the cause of the widow come before them.*

Now comes an indictment from the throne of heaven itself. Sin is not something abstract: it comes down to specific acts. God now lists the charges against the people. Whether this list is an exhaustive catalogue of their sins or just a representative inventory, we are not told. But we can be certain, given the nature of some of these items, that it truly represents a very bad state of affairs.

Righteousness was once in existence, but now the social system is noted for its murderers. It indicates the state of things that both silver and wine are diluted with inferior materials, yet clearly people think their wine is unadulterated and their silver 99.99% fine. The rulers are rebels; they prefer the companionship of thieves rather than the company of

God-fearing upright citizens. Everyone, apparently, is corrupt, accepting bribes. Bribery usually goes hand in hand with the perversion of justice. Rewards are more important than righteousness, while the plight of the poor and the defenceless is simply ignored.

If ever there was a description of the modern world this is it. We look back in our history and see periods of greater righteousness, when the law of God was held in far higher esteem than it is today. Truly it could be said that in so far as our laws were based on the Bible our cities and towns once had righteousness lodging in them.

In this passage there is an interesting comment which can be used as an indicator to show just how low our understanding is of God's law. When we hear the charge of bribery coming from the prophet we immediately think of corruption in high places, and there is certainly some grounds for this. But the most common form of bribery in the modern world is that offered to the people by the politicians. "Vote for us and in return we will provide cradle to grave security." This is the promise of the modern political state, a clear example of bribery if ever there was one. It is a bribe that is unfortunately too readily offered and too effortlessly accepted by the voters who hope to gain thereby something at the expense of their neighbour. This modern form of bribery, however, is mixed with theft, immoral confiscation of people's wealth to give to others, thereby compounding the seriousness of the offence.

This only illustrates what most of us know to be only too true: No longer does the Bible form the basis for our laws and standards in human affairs. It has been replaced by another authority; a false god has replaced the true and the living God. The result is not increased righteousness but an increase in lawlessness, and a breakdown in civilization. We cannot walk the streets at night without fear as did our parents and our grandparents. No longer do we dare leave home with the doors and windows unlocked, knowing that our worldly possessions would be safe. Wickedness has replaced righteousness, and we are commanded here to do something about it. Perhaps, then, it is time we stopped *talking* about the problems and got to work to *do* something about them. And what we are to do is to seek justice, righteousness, and mercy. We should become concerned about the weightier matters of the law so that we not only tithe our mint, our anise, and our cummin, but that we also ensure that righteousness and holiness become our focal point. This is the point of the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 23:23:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier < matters > of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone."

Vv. 24-26. *Therefore the Lord says, The LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel, "Ah, I will rid Myself of My adversaries, And take vengeance on My enemies. I will turn My hand against you, And thoroughly purge away your dross, And take away all your alloy. I will restore your judges as at the first, And your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city."*

The people of God in the Old Covenant were under obligation to keep the terms of the covenant. Those terms are set forth in the law of God in its entirety, but summarised in the Ten Commandments.

The terms of the New Covenant, however, have not been changed. The modern Christian, just as much as the ancient Israelite, is under obligation to keep the laws of the covenant, as set forth in the entirety of Scripture and summarized in the Ten Commandments. This is why the words of the prophet Isaiah are just as true today as they were centuries ago when they were first spoken. This is also why the demands of the law in the New Testament era are the same as in the Old Testament period.

recognise that they deserve to be spoken to in this way. Yes, they are more ignorant than animals, and they observe that they rightly deserve all the scorn that God might pour on them through His spokesmen.

We also see in this verse God's primary charge against sinful man: revolution against the King of kings. A rebellion is under way and it is treasonous: not treason against the political state in this instance, but treason against an even Higher Authority, Almighty God.

Revolution of this kind is always in terms of authority. Men and women forsake God's authority to replace it with another, usually an authority which originates within themselves. This is the primary focus of the message, that sinful men and women forsake God's authority and substitute it with the authority of false gods and idols. Usually, these false gods permit each person to be his own god, his own ultimate authority, the final arbiter of what is right and wrong. This is why our primary focus in evangelism must be ethical, showing people just how far they have fallen short of God's perfect standards of righteousness and holiness.

V. 4. Alas, sinful nation, A people laden with iniquity, A brood of evildoers, Children who are corrupters! They have forsaken the LORD, They have provoked to anger The Holy One of Israel, They have turned away backward.

God had revealed Himself to Israel in a special way. They of all the peoples of the earth had been blessed in a very special way. Their revolt against God, therefore, was even more deserving of His anger and wrath. In this verse, we see just how far they have moved themselves from God's standards of right living: they are weighed down with iniquity, offspring of evildoers. They have abandoned God and provoked Him to anger. They have turned so far away from God that they are now walking backwards. This illustrates not a partial abandonment of God, but a full 180 degree turn; it portrays their total commitment to disobedience, to sin.

Vv. 5-9. Why should you be stricken again? You will revolt more and more. The whole head is sick, And the whole heart faints. From the sole of the foot even to the head, <There is> no soundness in it, <But> wounds and bruises and putrefying sores; They have not been closed or bound up, Or soothed with ointment. Your country <is> desolate, Your cities <are> burned with fire; Strangers devour your land in your presence; And <it is> desolate, as overthrown by strangers. So the daughter of Zion is left as a booth in a vineyard, As a hut in a garden of cucumbers, As a besieged city. Unless the LORD of hosts Had left to us a very small remnant, We would have become like Sodom, We would have been made like Gomorrah.

The prophet continues his description of the people. The people's ethical standards have become so bad that there appears to be nothing good in the people at all. They are sick "from the sole of the foot even to the head."

Notice here God's description of what is wrong. The rebellion is an act carried out by sick people. These are not healthy people; the nation is diseased, so diseased that there is no soundness in it. So diseased, in fact, that it is in need of a great Healer, one who can remove the cancerous growth and so return the nation to wholeness again. Most people will wince at the sight of a gangrenous sore, and this unsightly and sickly example is used to portray how God views sinful people.

If left to itself this unhealthy, diseased body would soon die of blood poisoning. Fortunately, however, there is a Great Physician, one who has acted to ensure the continuity of a remnant. Otherwise, argues the prophet, the whole country would have become as perverted and sinful as Sodom and Gomorrah.

Vv. 10-15. Hear the word of the LORD, You rulers of Sodom; Give ear to the law of our God, You people of Gomorrah: "To what purpose <is> the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?" Says the LORD. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams And the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, Or of lambs or goats." When you come to appear before Me, Who has

required this from your hand, To trample My courts? Bring no more futile sacrifices; Incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies; I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; They are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing <them>. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood.

Despite the rampant wickedness, clearly there is a veneer of religion. Apparently the people continue their religious exercises, such as sacrificial offerings. Even though they are rebels, sinful men and women like to pretend, to keep up appearances. In the modern world, many people maintain the appearances of true religion. They attend church, maybe only at Easter, Christmas, weddings and funerals, but still they carry out religious exercises as if they are not rebels.

This is a fitting picture of the world we live in. Man in his sin is clearly not aware of just how far he has fallen away from God. That applies to each one of us, since we too have been part of the initial rebellion of our first parents. By the grace of God, however, we are now called the children of God, just as the children of Israel of old are called the sons of God (v. 1). Even as redeemed people, however, we still have tendencies to believe our sinfulness is not as bad as some would have us believe. Too often our attitude is that it is not "me" that is the problem, but the person across the street. Maybe we think it is the politicians, the homosexuals, the criminals, "the conspirators" or another person or group that is the real problem with the world. But we think this because we have too low a view of God and His demands upon us, and too high a view of our opinion of ourselves.

Dr. Rushdoony once said, "To understand the Pharisees is to understand ourselves." These words are far too close to the truth for many of us. We read the Bible and think how Christ spoke about the Pharisees. "A brood of vipers," He called them on one occasion (Mat. 3:7). They were constantly being offended by what Jesus said about them, about God, and about Himself. Even though they were a deeply religious people, the Pharisees were the major enemies of Christ while He was on earth.

How easy it is to think that it is other people who are the problem. No! We are the problem, we are the rebels, we are the ones in need of a Saviour, and we are the ones who need to change the way we live. And if we understood better our true status, we would more readily acknowledge that these words of the prophet Isaiah apply to our modern world just as much as it applied when they were originally spoken.

God hates sin. That is the message throughout the Bible. Yet we glibly attempt to walk into the presence of God with a high view of ourselves. It is not our sacrifices that God is ultimately interested in, but our repentance and sorrow over our rebellion. Once we get the right perspective on these things, then and only then is God pleased with us.

Vv. 16-17. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow.

This is the command of God to a sinful generation. This is what we must do to make ourselves acceptable to God. We need to remind ourselves that this is not necessary for salvation, for we hold to the very important truth that man cannot save himself by making an atonement for his own sin. Only the Sinless One, Jesus Christ, could do this. Still, however, we are expected to act as rational persons, and exercise our will in favour of good rather than evil.

Note here, however, that we are given a list of things we must do. Commandments such as these are properly called laws, legal obligations, and failure to comply amounts to rebellion. We are to first *stop* doing what is evil. How often we make excuses for our sins, our weaknesses of the flesh. We continue with evil in our hearts when the command is to *halt* doing evil and replace it with doing good.

This is also why the law of God is to be the focus of our attention in evangelism. We do this not because the law can save, but because it is only as people realise the awfulness of their sin in the light of a holy God, that they fully realise why it is they are in need of Someone to save them. They are beyond hope. Self-salvation is an impossibility for the person who comprehends sin and how awful it is in the sight of God. But he can never know how sinful he is until the law shines forth in all its wondrous beauty and splendour to enlighten him, to injure him, to weaken him, to break down his stubborn self-righteous attitude, and display how pitiful he really is in the sight of God.

With this message is a message of judgement, because with the law comes a dual message: repent, stop doing evil, and seek righteousness and be saved, or continue in sin and be the recipient of God's wrath and anger, if not in this life then certainly in the next.

When people realise their inability to save themselves from their sin, when they realise that they are incapable of changing their ways, then they can turn to God, who has declared that He will restore righteousness and faithfulness.

Vv. 27-31. Zion shall be redeemed with justice, And her penitents with righteousness. The destruction of transgressors and of sinners <shall be> together, And those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed. For they shall be ashamed of the terebinth trees Which you have desired; And you shall be embarrassed because of the gardens Which you have chosen. For you shall be as a terebinth whose leaf fades, And as a garden that has no water. The strong shall be as tinder, And the work of it as a spark; Both will burn together, And no one shall quench <them>.

Finally, we have the hope that is offered to all in the gospel message. When the law is preached in all its splendour, when the righteousness of God is displayed in the law with all its grandeur, only then are we told that our helpless state is not

so helpless after all. When we come to realise that we cannot save ourselves, we are told that it is God who will save us.

Justice and righteousness will be restored, but those who fail to repent, those who continue to sin, have no cause for joy. The ultimate destruction of the sinner who continues in his sin is assured, and unless he cries out to God to save Him his devastation is certain.

Conclusion

We see in this remarkable chapter a summary of the evangelistic message so common through the Bible, Old and New Testaments. The evangelistic message is primarily an indictment from the throne of God. It brings the charge of the righteous Judge of the whole earth that He is dissatisfied with the current state of things. This revolt against Him will not continue forever, for He will not permit it to continue. Therefore, repent, stop doing evil, begin doing good. Consider justice and mercy, the weightier matters of the law. And trust in God for the atonement of our sins.

This is the evangelistic message of the Bible. Too often it is not the evangelistic message of contemporary Christians. Therefore, if we wonder why evangelism is a failure, perhaps it is time we went back to the Bible and spoke again of the law of God and how far short people have fallen from its righteous and holy standards.

May God grant us men and women who will, with the Bible in their hand, begin the urgent task of biblical evangelism to rescue a sinful world from the wrath that will certainly come — unless men and women do as commanded:

Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow.