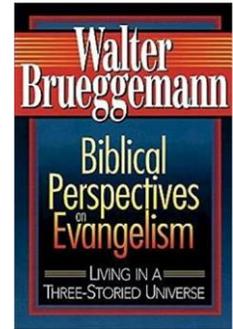


Walter Brueggemann

Biblical Perspectives on evangelism: Living in a three-storied universe

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Notes by Alison Morgan Oct 99



Written with his usual astonishing astuteness; but rather wordy.

Introduction

Evangelism in US - response to crisis in the church. Evangelism for scripture teacher (him) consists of 'attending to and participating in the transformational drama that is enacted in the biblical text itself'. The text, in turn, is 'the articulation of imaginative models of reality in which "'text-users".." are invited to participate'; it insists on being contemporary. Evangelism is 'doing the text again'.

3 storied universe - alludes to Bultmann (physical Hebrew universe) but suggests that Bible revolves around 3 focal narratives: promise to ancestors, deliverance from slavery, gift of land. Evangelism means inviting people into these stories as the definitional story of our life, and thus authorizing them to give up other stories that have shaped their lives in false or distorting ways; to tell again the old story, but in ways that impact every aspect of our contemporary life, public and personal. There is no single text that is the normative account of the 'news', but rather there are characteristic retellings. Primary constituents for evangelism are: outsiders, jaded insiders, children-becoming-adults.

1. Evangelism in 3 unfinished scenes

Wants to critique and reject popular notions of evangelism; way proposed 'is a challenge to the *epistemology* of many culture-accommodating Christians. Conversely it is a challenge as well to the *ecclesial, economic* practice of Christians who have spiritualized and privatized the gospel away from its demanding social, this-worldly dimension.' p15
Work of evangelist is to announce that events that happened in one place matter decisively in another, and that victories won in one time count decisively in another. 'The transferral of significance from one time to another, from one place to another, depends utterly on the effectiveness, trustworthiness, and artistic, imaginative capacity of the announcer' [help!]

Theological comment (and table on p39)

1st scene of evangelism is a theological conflict hidden from our eyes. It has variant tellings: good vs evil, life vs death, Yahweh vs Pharaoh, Jesus vs Satan/sin/death.

Texts: Ps 96 Yhwh vs gods; Exodus 14 (the struggle invades political reality); Isaiah 40-41 (gods of Babylon vs Yhwh; Xmas narratives (oppressive despair of empire vs messianic hope of Judaism); Bartimaeus (destruction vs life); Easter (life vs death); Romans 5-8 (life/grace vs sin/death).

2nd scene: voices of the announcers who make the dispute and the outcome available, credible and effective.

3rd scene: lived appropriation of the new reality

So, evangelism is a 3-scened drama in which each scene must be kept distinct from the others. Also, the entire drama of evangelism is definitionally unfinished, and must be done over and over again in the face of resilient evil, distortion and alienation. The church is the only community that continues to participate in this drama.

A contemporary implementation

Scene ii: the announcement. Must be concrete, uncompromising and Christological: in Jesus Christ, God has overcome the power, threat, and attraction of the power of death.

This linguistic act of proclamation is linguistically subversive. Its claims are too radical for liberals and too comprehensive for conservatives.

The language of the gospel is essentially dramatic; it requires that historical reality be presented as agonistic. It is brusque, harsh, not user-friendly.

Succinct, verbal articulation is crucial.

Scene i: 'when we move back from the second scene of the announcement to the first scene of conflict and victory, we are required to ask about the conflict in which God has emerged victorious. We must ask, where does the power of death show its terrible, powerful face in our context? Now things get sticky in making an answer. I submit that for people living in our culture and in our churches, death operates in the seductive power of consumer economics with its engines of greed; in the mesmerizing of military power and its production of fear, insecurity, anxiety, brutality, and a craving for vengeance; in the reduction of all of life, human and non-human, to a bartering of commodities, until we and our neighbors are all perceived as means and not as ends. That is, the central conflict with the gospel in our time has to do with socio-economic, political practices which bespeak theological idolatry, and idolatry which has come to exercise sovereignty over most of our life' p40. Not an accident: is the work of the power of death. 'The news grounded in God's victory is that the deathly power of commodity has no claim upon us, no legitimacy to define our life. We are free of its awesome power and claim, and are therefore free to live a different life' p41. So the announcement of victory is not innocuous; it is an act of defiance, a risk.

Scene iii: appropriation. The reception of the gospel has an emotional dimension. 'There may be a quick conversion, but there is no easy conversion, because conversion means to be uprooted from a fabric of meaning and security to which we are long habituated'.

Implications

The perceived dichotomy between evangelism and social action is misguided; is false distinction. If we take evangelism only, must ask what the good news is for - and conclude for an alternative obedience in the world. If we take social action only, we must ask from what source and for what end. 'Any social action which is not rooted in the news and aimed at the new ruler has no claim upon biblical warrants'. To overcome the dichotomy we need both the news and the appropriation. Church now has the hard work of finding language to override the seductive dichotomy which permits ideology to fence off zones of life from evangelical impact.

Whenever liberals shrink from the epistemological scandal of the gospel and whenever conservatives shrink from the public dimension of the language of the gospel, it is distorted.

'I submit that in our time, so-called conservatism is an attempt to reduce the danger of the Bible to confessional safety, and so-called liberalism is an attempt to avoid the dramatic system-shattering claims of the gospel.' Need for both to learn again that the utterance of the name of God is endlessly subversive, polemical and risk-taking.

Needs: firstly to recover gospel modes of discourse which are not moralistic, dogmatic, scholastic or pietistic, but dramatic. Secondly, to recover focal drama of baptism, which is a subversive act of renunciation and embrace.

2. Outsiders become insiders

The outsider is the obvious constituency for evangelism.

Takes Joshua 24 and imagines 3 people listening to it:

a) young woman from dysfunctional family. She hears a tale of a possibility whereby God breaks hopelessness, reconciles siblings, guarantees futures, gives safe land. She finds the weight of despair being lifted as she decides against that very despair. This is the first story: promise to ancestors. She hears new possibility.

b) a tired business executive, running a brickpit, earnings dependent on meeting ever increasing quotas. Narrative he hears starts reality not with empire as inevitable provider, but as deathly nemesis; and introduces new character, God. It defies docility, urges pain to be spoken, dares to break into empire, gives authority. He hears the message 'I brought you out', and perceives the possibility of non-conformity and liberation. This is the second story: deliverance from slavery. He hears departure.

c) a member of the permanent underclass, unemployed, blaming not system but self, resentful but numb. He hears promise of land, hope; hears that he is entitled, meant by God, to have and to hold, life for himself. We do not know whether violence will ensue; or just self-assertion. This is the third story: the promise of land. He hears entitlement.

Why did they need it. The woman's family situation proclaimed that the dominant truth is our shared dysfunction. The executive had been sucked into the lie that Pharaoh is ultimate and knows best. The homeless man had accepted responsibility for his hopeless lot in life.

They hear Joshua, and life is reconstrued. His work is the complete and radical redescription of all of reality...

The story of Joshua 24 is the need to put away the gods of the ancestors. Who are they? - stories which shape identity, perception or imagination. Woman puts off story of despair and puts on story of possibility; executive puts off story of docility and puts on story of departure; man puts off story of deprivation and puts on story of entitlement. The changing of the gods is the changing of stories, which is the switching of worlds.

3. Forgetters made rememberers

Second constituency for evangelism is weary, jaded insiders.
Texts are Deuteronomy 8 and Jeremiah 3.

These voices understand that for Israel everything depends on the power and availability of core memory of God as God of liberation, covenant, and land; and that well-being in the land is a likely enemy of that core memory. So we must re-engage with it. Relevance now - abundance and affluence have caused church members to be distanced in self-sufficiency from the power and cruciality of the memory so that the church suffers from amnesia. He defines insiders as most of the whole of the western church, and suggests they may be our primary agenda in evangelism. 'Gratitude has a very tough time in the midst of unlimited affluence. The reason is that when one can no longer remember a lesser, more precarious time, all present benefits appear to be not only absolute, but also self-generated, making gratitude unnecessary, impossible, even silly' p77.

What Moses anticipates, Jeremiah specifies (2.1-13) - people have forsaken living water for cracked cisterns of their own digging [do sth with this?]. Moses warns, Jeremiah condemns, Isaiah 51 invites to recover the memory. Nehemiah 8 is focal point of struggle of Jerusalem for its primal memory. They listen, weep, repent. 'As the empire had long required.. denial, I believe there is a pent-up sense in our technological society, pent up so deep in pretense that we ourselves do not discern the power and depth of our yearning for homecoming' p86.

'Thus I suggest a powerful correlation between *forgetting* and the outcome of *accommodation and compromise* to dominant cultural values, and *remembering* as the source of *courage, energy, and freedom* for God's will in a world organized to resist God's will' p89.

4. Beloved children become belief-ful adults

Children of believers who may or may not grow up to become 'consenting adults' [and prob won't by the sound of it..] Is faith as we have known it still available for our young, and if so on what terms? One the one hand they, like us, are seduced into a comfortable modernism that makes the sounds of humanness but never keeps its promise. On the other, to break with it will require massive support within a sustaining community. Young need adults who are crazy for them, who can mediate free grace in a sustained conversation. Then they need a coherent construct of reality, so that all the parts make sense as a whole. Both these require that the evangelical conversation with our young be profoundly and intentionally counter-nurture. Its purpose is not that they become good citizens, or moral, or productive; but that they should perceive, embrace, and enact the world according to the peculiar memory and vision of faith held by the gospel community. Conversion to Christian faith is a conversion to oddity in the world - against secular self-indulgence, legalistic communalism and market individualism. So we mustn't seek to induct children into a moral tradition. The ethical tradition we entrust to them is a powerfully Yahwistic claim, with a person, purpose, character, will at the middle of it. God is not a threat (obedience from fear) but a person who intends communion with us, who has made us so that our lives remain dissatisfied until we arrive at communion for which our lives are constituted.

[!!! DC - Pg XV-XXV...]

'The overriding question of ethics rooted in communion is, What shall we do with the *desire* which God has ordained into our lives? We have tended to think such innocent communion as an end in itself pertains only to the very young. I submit that as our young grow older, one of two things happens. On the one hand, the desire for communion is displaced, so that God-given desire is transposed into a practice of greed, ambition, or lust, i.e., a desire for control, security and possessions. Our God-given desire is practiced, but now in deep distortion and without reference to the God who gives it. One can see this displacement in a consumer society which is driven by misdirected desire for money, power, security, satiation, or gratification. Our conventional world for communion with that which does not and cannot commune is "idolatry". The young of the faith community, as they grow older, can be nurtured in a critical conversation about idolatry which is misdirected desire which may end in satiation, but never in joy' p111-112. Such ethics does issue in commands; but as the matters which God cares about. 10 commandments about our desire for communion not being distorted or misdirected. God wants neighbours, their lives, their bodies, their property, respected and treated as ends not means. The commands are simple, but invite to a difficult alternative, eschewing both self-indulgence and self-denial. Don't settle for one line commands; they are endlessly difficult and problematic.

Texts.

Ps 78.5-8 best case for evangelism of our own young.

Joel 2.28-29 envisioning a future

The present crisis of evangelism is in a great measure because the community of the church has not persuaded our own young of the power or validity of the gospel - because adults have become inarticulate about our faith. Reason for that is because the scandal of faith has become increasingly unpalatable for adults who crave easy accommodation between faith and culture. In the context of such an easy accommodation, the Christian faith is trimmed of all its radicalness, until there is very little about which to be articulate, and that very little has most often been boiled down to privatized legalism.

Conclusion

'At base, biblical faith is the assertion that God has overcome all that threatens to cheapen, enslave, or fragment our common life. Because the power of death is so resilient, this triumph of God is endlessly reiterated, reenacted, and replicated in new formats and venues. As a result of that always new victory, we are left to do our most imaginative proclamation and our most courageous appropriation' p129-30.

www.alisonmorgan.co.uk