

EVANGELIZATION OF WHOLE FAMILIES

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Year: 1930

Locality: Northwest China

Case studies:

1. The approach and strategy of two single European lady missionaries.
2. The approach and strategy of the Little Flock Assembly of Chefoo, Shantung.

Objectives: Identical — to plant local churches and to engage in extensive village evangelism.

Case study 1. Two gifted and dedicated lady missionaries were sent by their missionary society to Northwest China. Their mandate was to evangelize and plant congregations in a cluster of villages. They spoke fluent Chinese; they labored faithfully and fervently. After a decade, a small congregation emerged. However, most of its members were women. Their children attended the Sunday School regularly. The visitor to this small congregation would easily detect the absence of men.

In their reports and news letters, both missionaries referred to the "hardness of hearts" that was prevalent among the men. References were made also to promising teenagers who were opposed by their parents when they sought permission for baptism.

Case study 2. In 1930 a spiritual awakening swept through the Little Flock Assembly in Shantung. Many members sold their entire possessions in order to send seventy *families* to the Northwest as "instant congregations." Another thirty *families* migrated to the Northeast. By 1944, forty new assemblies had been established, and all these were vitally involved in evangelism.

Now, in terms of dedication and doctrinal orthodoxy, both the Europeans and the Little Flock Assembly shared the same commitment and faith. But why the striking contrasts in results and in their strategies of church-planting?

Consider the case of the two single lady missionaries. Day by day, the Chinese villagers saw them establishing contacts and building the bridges of friendships with the women, usually when their husbands or fathers were out working in the fields or trading in nearby towns. Their foreignness (dubbed "red hair devils") was enough to incite cultural and racial prejudices in the minds of the villagers. But their single status was something that was socially questionable. It was a well-known fact in all Chinese society that the families constitute basic social units. These units insure security. In Confucian teaching, three of the five basic relationships have to do with family ties — father and son, older brother and

younger brothers, husband and wife. The fact that these ladies were making contacts with individual women and not having dialogues with the elders would make them appear to be foreign agents seeking to destroy the fabric of the village community. A question that would constantly crop up in the gossip and discussion of the villagers would be the fact of the missionaries' single state. Why aren't they married? Why aren't they visibly related to their parents, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts and other relatives? So when they persuaded the women or the youth to leave the religion of their forefathers, they were regarded as "family-breakers."

By contrast, the Little Flock Assembly in sending out Chinese Christian families sent out agents that were recognizable socio-cultural entities. Thus the seventy families became an effective missionary task force. It is not difficult to imagine the heads of these families sharing their faith with the elders of the villagers. The grandmothers could informally transmit the joy of following Christ and of their deliverance from demonic powers to the older women in pagan villages. The housewives in the markets could invite their counterparts to attend the services that were held each Sunday by the "instant congregations." No wonder forty new assemblies were established as a result of this approach to church-planting and evangelism.

Evangelizing families in other cultures

The strategy of evangelizing whole families is applicable not only in Chinese communities. It is also effective in other Asian communities, African villages and tribes, Latin American *barrio* and societies. Writing on the rapid spread of the Christian faith in Korea, Roy Shearer observed: "One most important factor governing how the church grew is the structure of Korean society. In Korea, we are dealing with a society based on the family, not the tribe. The family is strong even today ... The soundest way for a man to come to Christ is in the setting of his own family."

He went on to relate repeated situations when heads of families returned to their clan villages and were successful in persuading their relatives and kinsmen to "turn from idols to serve the living God." He concluded: "The Gospel flowed along the web of family relationships. This web is the transmission line for the current of the Holy Spirit that brought men and women into the church."

In her book *New Patterns for Discipling Hindus*, Miss B.V. Subbamma categorically asserted that the Hindu family might be the only social institution through which the Gospel could be transmitted and received. Not all would agree with this assertion, because there are evidences of university students who have professed faith in Christ in the great university centers of India. Some could take this step of faith because they were free from parental pressures. However, as a general rule, Miss Subbamma's observation and deduction are correct.

Evangelizing whole families is the pattern of current missionary outreach in parts of Latin America. There in the Roman Catholic culture of web-relationships, family structures are strong. Exploiting this social pattern the Chilean Pentecostals, like the Little Flock Assembly in Shantung forty years ago, dispatch *families* from among their faithful to be

agents and ambassadors of church expansion. Through these evangelizing families, many assemblies and congregations have been planted in different parts of that continent. The phenomenal growth of the Pentecostal movement in Latin America reflects the effectiveness of using families to evangelize families.

At times it is difficult for individualistic Westerners to realize that in many "face to face" societies religious decisions are made corporately. The individual in that particular type of society would be branded as a "traitor" and treated as an outcast if he were to embrace a new religious belief. After the Renaissance, in most Western countries, identity is expressed by the Cartesian dictum *Cogito ergo sum*: I know, therefore I am. Man as a rational individual could think out religious options for himself and is free to choose the faith that he would like to follow. This dictum does not apply in many African tribal communities. For the Africans (and for many others) the unchanging dictum is, *I participate, therefore I am*. Conformity to and participation in traditional religious rites and customs give such people their identity. So if there is to be a radical change in religious allegiance, there must be a corporate or multi-individual decision.

This is particularly true of Muslim families and communities. The one-by-one method of individual evangelism will not work in such a society. A lecturer friend of mine who teaches in the multi-racial university of Singapore once made this significant remark, "I've discovered that for most Malay students (who are nearly all Muslims) Islam consists not of belief in Allah the supreme God — it is *community*." Ambassadors for Christ in Islamic lands should cope not only with theological arguments concerning the unity and nature of God, they should consider the social and cultural associations of Muslims. Where sizable groups of Muslims had been converted their decisions were multi-individual. An excellent illustration would be that of Indonesia. During the past fifteen years, wise missionaries and national pastors had been engaging in dialogues and discussions with the elders and leaders of local Muslim communities. When these decision-makers were convinced that Christ is the only way to God and that he alone is the Savior of the world, they would return to their villages and towns, and urged all members to turn to Christ. So it was not surprising to witness whole communities being catechized and baptized together.

Such movements are termed as "people movements," and many years before the Indonesian happening, Ko Tha Byu, a remarkable Burmese evangelist, was instrumental in discipling whole Karen communities and villages to Jesus Christ. Today the Karen church is one of the strongest Christian communities in Southeast Asia.

The biblical data

When we turn to the biblical records, we shall discover that families feature prominently both as the recipients as well as the agents of salvation blessing.

To begin with, the family is regarded as divinely instituted by God (Eph. 3:15). In fact, all families owe their descent and composition from their Creator. By redemption, the church — God's own people, is de-

scribed as "the household of God" (Eph. 2:19) and the "household of faith" (Gal. 6:10).

In the Pentateuch, great stress is laid on the sanctity of marriage, the relation between children and parents, masters and slaves. This emphasis is underscored in the New Testament (see Col. 3:18-4:1; Eph. 5:22-6:9; I Pet. 2:18-3:7).

It is the family or the household that pledges its allegiance to Yahweh. Joshua as head of his own household could declare, "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Jos. 24:15). Through Joshua's predecessor Moses, Yahweh had taught His people to celebrate his mighty acts by sacred meals and festivals. It is interesting to observe that the feast of the passover (Exod. 12:3-4) was a family meal. The head of the family was to recite and reenact the great drama of Israel's deliverance at this family gathering. Throughout Israel's history, even until New Testament days, family feasts, prayer, and worship were regularly held. Thus the Jewish family became both the objects of God's grace and the visual agents of his redemptive actions. Their monotheistic faith expressed in terms of their family solidarity and religion must have created a tremendous impression on the Gentile communities. One of the results was that large numbers of Gentiles became proselytes, "associate members" of the Jewish synagogues. Jewish families made a sizable contribution to the "missionary" outreach.

by households (*kat' oikon*, Acts 2:46). The apostolic pattern for teaching was in and through family units (Acts 20:20). The first accession of a Gentile grouping to the Christian church was the family of the Roman centurion Cornelius in Caesarea (Acts 10:7,24). At Philippi, Paul led the families of Lydia and the jailer to faith in Christ and incorporation into his Church (Acts 16:15, 31-34). The "first fruits" of the great missionary apostle in Achaia were the families of Stephanas (I Cor. 16:15), Crispus and Gaius (Acts 18:8; I Cor. 1:16; Rom. 16:23). So it was clear that the early church disciplined both Jewish and Gentile communities in families.

It was equally clear that households were used as outposts of evangelism. Aquila and Priscilla used their home in Ephesus and Rome as a center for the proclamation of the Gospel (I Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:5). Congregations met in the homes of Onesiphorus (II Tim. 1:16; 4:19) and Nymphas (Col. 4:15).

Practical recommendations

Having considered the importance of families as both the recipients and agents of the Gospel from the biblical records and from various socio-cultural settings, I would like to propose that we take action on the following recommendations:

(i) The church today needs to review its evangelistic approach to communities where religious decisions are corporate matters and where families function as basic social units. It might need to emulate what leaders and members of the Spirit of Jesus Church in Japan have been doing for some years — developing *sweet potato vine* evangelism. Bishop Murai of this fast-growing Japanese church movement had always encouraged his members to cultivate contacts and relationships with families — "the vine" — as opposed to individuals — "individual fruit."

In the long run, such an approach yields considerable fruit when the whole family turns to Christ and seeks to live as his disciples in the natural framework of the home. Bishop Murai's churches are household churches, and activities are planned by families for families.

Missionaries from the West will do well to heed the words of Dr. Eugene Nida, the gifted missionary statesman and linguist: "We who do not know the meaning of clan life, since we ourselves are not members of such a society, can rarely imagine the pressure upon the individual in such an organization. We take it for granted that anyone can and should make up his own mind about what he believes and what he should do. But this is not true in all cultures, where individuals do not act on their own, but respond as members of families, clans and tribes."

What is urgently needed today is a corps of evangelists and church planters who understand family networks and ties and use these as the transmission lines for the propagation of the Good News.

(ii) Christians should make full use of family occasions for the preaching of the Gospel. Birthdays and weddings are festive events to communicate to relatives and close friends the joy of the Lord. Surprisingly, an occasion that brings relatives near and distant together in many Third World communities is the *funeral service*. Kinsmen and friends would normally turn out in full force to pay their respects to the deceased and to comfort the bereaved. Now if the bereaved were committed Christians, they could turn the funeral service into an occasion of triumph and victory. Christ had conquered death! Their loved one is now with his Lord. The joy and victory of the resurrection could be transmitted effectively at the graveside.

(iii) Christian homes should be encouraged to become outposts for evangelism to the local communities. In an age of impersonal relationships and an artificial atmosphere created by technocracy, many people, especially those living in huge industrial cities, would welcome a change of values. As members of Christian families demonstrate love by sharing and caring, and also by introducing the living Lord to their neighbors and contemporaries, more men and women will be drawn to Christ himself. House-churches and Christian fellowships in the big complexes of high-rise apartments of Buenos Aires, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Johannesburg could be bases for sustained evangelism.

(iv) Families must feature prominently in almost every form of Christian activity and evangelistic outreach. Consider Christian literature. Too much emphasis has been made on individual discipleship. There are very few books which discuss family life and family evangelism. There are many evangelical books which teach young Christians to make a firm stand against their non-Christian family, but very few which teach them to win their entire families for Christ. Christian publishers would do the Church of God invaluable service if they were to produce literature that portrays the Christian family as a corporate force for local evangelism — and when they encourage local Christian writers to instruct young believers to disciple their parents, brothers, sisters, and other relatives. In the case of discipling the older generation, young Christians would need counsel and advice as to how they could invite and involve their church elders in evangelizing their parents and grandparents.

Recently some of my co-workers who are vitally involved in student evangelism have been learning in a fresh way the need to relate student work in a family context. In the past, these workers had seen students wonderfully converted at conferences and also on campuses. However, within a matter of weeks, many of these converts "drop out." In Roman Catholic settings where family ties and traditions are strong, students who profess conversion are branded as those who have been brainwashed by heretical sects. To counter this accusation and, more important, to win the confidence of the elders, our workers would visit the homes of the new believers. A face-to-face encounter with parents had created a bridge of understanding. In the Philippines, there are cases of Christian students who through their consistent lives and through family Bible studies have led their families to a living faith in Christ Jesus.

(v) God may be calling his servants in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to a new strategy in missionary outreach. It is customary in the West to recruit a young man or a young woman and often a young couple for missionary service. Like the Little Flock in Shantung and the Chilean Pentecostals, could it be that God would have Asian families (grandparents, parents, and children) become his special messengers and envoys to communities with strong family networks? Corporate evangelism might well be the distinctive contribution that we could make to the worldwide church.