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# The New Evangelization and Theological Renewal

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# The New Evangelization and Theological Renewal

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Rev. Avery Dulles, S.J. is the Laurence J. McGinley Professor of Religion and Society at Fordham University. This paper was presented at Sacred Heart University on July 18, 1995 as the keynote address at the conference The New Evangelization and the Renewal of Catholic Theology, sponsored by the Center for Theological Renewal.

EVERY DULLES, S.J.

*The New Evangelization and Theological Renewal*

It might seem paradoxical, to say the least, to describe the Catholic Church as "evangelical" – a term that is commonly taken to be practically synonymous with "Protestant" or with a particular kind of Protestant. In Germany the word *evangelisch* rather than *protestantisch* is the preferred designation for Protestant churches. In the English-speaking world, evangelicalism stems from the great revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It indicates an intense personal faith in Jesus Christ as savior and an assured sense of being saved by that faith. The term suggests an individualistic and biblically centered piety, such as that found in churches stemming from, or deeply affected by, the great revivals – notably Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal. The Episcopal Church has an evangelical wing. A common characteristic of evangelical churches is their strong missionary spirit.

Catholicism, by contrast, has put the accent elsewhere, on the corporate and traditional features of Christianity. The Catholic Church has been the Church of organization, dogma, and sacraments. While always sponsoring missionary activity, the Catholic Church has relied chiefly on religious orders to perform this task. They were expected not so much to spread the gospel as to plant the Church in countries where it had as yet no roots.

With Vatican II a major shift took place. The Catholic Church became in a true sense evangelical. The Council spoke frequently of the gospel (in Latin, *evangelium*, 157 times) and of evangelization (31 times). It taught that every Christian had a responsibility to evangelize. Paul VI followed this up in many ways. He took the name of Paul in honor of the apostle of the \_\_\_\_\_

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Gentiles and engaged in long apostolic journeys to distant continents.

At the climax of his pontificate he called a meeting of the synod of bishops to deal with the question of evangelization, and from materials supplied by that synod he composed his great apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii nuntiandi* ("Evangelization in the Modern World," 1975). In this exhortation he described evangelization as the deepest identity of the Church, which exists, as he put it, in order to evangelize.

John Paul II has carried this evangelical shift yet further. Summarizing the main orientation of his pontificate, he declared in Mexico City on May 6, 1990: "The Lord and master of history and of our destinies, has wished my pontificate to be that of a pilgrim pope of evangelization, walking down the roads of the world, bringing to all peoples the message of salvation."

Since 1983 John Paul II has repeatedly called for the commitment of all the Church's energies to a new evangelization. As the third millennium of Christianity approaches, it is more urgent than ever, he holds, to demonstrate the importance of the Christian message for all the peoples of the world and to revitalize Christian faith in parts of the world where it has become feeble or inert.

Evangelization is not and never has been easy. Today we tend to blame the prevalent culture for our lack of success. We denounce its individualism, secularism, relativism, hedonism, and other vices, which do indeed render the environment unfriendly to the proclamation of the gospel. But we too easily overlook the deep religious hunger that continues to stir in the hearts of contemporary men and women. Discontented with a civilization of gadgets and entertainment, many are looking for some overarching meaning in life. For all its worldliness, the United States remains a remarkably religious nation — a nation, as G.K. Chesterton once said, with the soul of a church. Many evangelically oriented sects and churches — Mormons, Adventists, Pentecostals, and Southern Baptists, for example — are winning enormous numbers of converts. One wonders why, with all the official encouragement given to evangelization by Vatican II and the recent popes, Catholics are for the most part ready to leave the task to Protestants, some of whom are overtly hostile to Catholicism.

The reluctance of Catholics to evangelize has many roots, historical, sociological, cultural, and political. In this lecture I shall restrict my attention to the theological roots. Catholic theology, in my opinion, still lags behind the evangelical shift that has taken place on

the level of the Church's pastoral leadership. The program of evangelization calls for a renewal of Catholic theology, so that it may contribute to, rather than retard, the evangelical effort.

In seeking the right principles for an evangelically oriented theology that is fully consonant with Catholic Christianity, we could not do better than to look to the New Testament. The Gospels, the Acts, and the letters of Paul are permeated by such a theology. The New Testament understands the Church as an expansive community, divinely commissioned to extend to all peoples the saving message of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the content and the principal bearer of the gospel. Dwelling in the hearts of those who are baptized into his body, and actively present in their preaching and testimony, he inwardly moves and assists the faithful to carry on his work. In biblical terms the gospel may be described as the saving power of the risen Christ, exercised in and through the Church by means of word, sacrament, and personal witness.

In Jesus person and mission are identified. His mission on earth stands in unbroken continuity with his eternal existence within the godhead. As Son he is perfectly obedient to the Father, from whom he receives all that he is and does. Sent into the world by Christ, the Church is the gathering of those who engage themselves to travel on the road marked out by him. They seek to show that he is for all humanity, as he is for the baptized, the way, the truth, and the life. Taken up into the body of Christ and directed by the Holy Spirit, Christians become bearers of the good news by their speech, their actions, and their whole mode of being. Like Jesus himself, they have an essentially missionary existence.

Building on these biblical themes, theology seeks to show the connection between the word of God and the truth that leads to salvation. As "salutary truth," the gospel rescues believers from death and gives them a share in eternal life. Taken up into the "pro-existence" of Christ the Redeemer, the Christian feels driven to declare by word and work the wonderful deeds of God. Because faith flowers into testimony, the theology of faith is inseparable from a theology of witness. All the truths of revelation draw their meaning and power from their relationship to Christ's redemptive action, which comes to expression in the gospel, the *evangelium*.

A theology that is both Catholic and evangelical differs from medieval Scholasticism and Counter Reformation apologetics. These theologies contained much that is true and permanently valid; they lent themselves well to the situation of earlier centuries, when Europe was a self-contained Christian society, but are no longer adequate for the complex global culture of our day. Medieval Scholasticism was a theology for professors and graduate students, highly speculative in its orientation. Presuming the truth of revelation and the authority of the canonical sources, it pursued subtle theoretical questions with great acumen. But, as Luther and Erasmus recognized, it did not greatly help in the business of proclaiming the gospel. The apologetically oriented theology of recent centuries, although it was more practical in orientation, was too rationalistic and ecclesiocentric to be called evangelical. The primary goal of that theology was to argue unbelievers into Catholic faith and induce a docile acceptance of "whatever the Church teaches." An evangelical theology, by contrast, seeks to reflect on the ways in which the Holy Spirit transforms the gospel into the power of salvation for all who believe.

Christian faith, understood in evangelical terms, is much more than an intellectual assent. It is a complex act involving the whole person – mind, will, and emotions. In believing I entrust myself to God as he makes himself known by his word. Faith includes a cognitive element, for it could not arise unless one were intellectually convinced that God is, has spoken, and has said what we take to be his word. But in believing I entrust myself to this God and, if I am sincere, commit myself to live according to that word. An evangelically oriented theology will explore these various dimensions of faith.

Evangelization is not complete with the first proclamation of the gospel. It is a lifelong process of letting the gospel permeate and transform all our ideas and attitudes. Theology itself is an exercise in the process of evangelization, for it seeks to draw out the implications of the gospel for our understanding of reality as a whole.

A truly Catholic form of evangelical theology will differ not only from earlier Catholic theologies but also from its Protestant counterparts. Unlike some Protestant evangelicalism, it will not be predicated on the doctrine of salvation by faith alone. It will seek to renew the entire life of believers, of the Church, and of society itself through the leaven of the gospel. Hence it will not separate word from

sacraments, or faith from works, or personal morality from social action. It will strive to regenerate the entire community of believers in the light of the gospel and to transform the larger secular society in the image of the kingdom of God.

Catholic evangelical theology will seek to distance itself from a number of crosscurrents in contemporary Catholicism. In a laudable attempt to meet the modern mind on its own terms, Catholic theology has sometimes failed to guard sufficiently against certain deviations that inhibit a vigorous program of evangelization. Seeking to avoid the alleged triumphalism of the past, some theologians have cultivated an attitude of hypercriticism and debilitating doubt, verging on defeatism. In their efforts to recognize the failures of the Church and the truth present in other faiths, they have often tended to substitute dialogue for proclamation, and have hesitated to confront their hearers with the challenge of the gospel. In this situation we need fresh theological initiatives that pick up those themes in the New Testament and classical theology that previously undergirded evangelization. I should like to illustrate this with reference to seven trends in contemporary Catholic theology that are less than friendly to evangelization.

The first of these trends, in my enumeration, is the radical separation sometimes made between faith and belief. Some assert that faith is not a special gift of grace but a universal human quality found in different forms in all religions and ideologies. In transcendental theology, saving faith is frequently depicted as an interior orientation toward an encompassing mystery — a mystery that is inseparable from human nature itself. We are told, for example, that faith can be found in persons of any religion, and even in those who believe that they must be atheists, provided that such persons are obedient to the demands of conscience. The impression is given that all who accept themselves unconditionally, without self-rejection, and thus fulfill their primordial capacity for the transcendent, have faith in a satisfactory measure.

Faith, in this view, can exist without any definite set of beliefs, and hence without the gospel. The implication seems to be that there is no need to proclaim the gospel in order to bring people to faith. Anyone who accepts the inbuilt orientation of the human spirit to the nameless transcendent mystery is already an "anonymous Christian," on the

path of salvation. Salvation is seen as the fruit of self-acceptance rather than of obedience to an externally spoken or written word.

Indeed, one can easily find contemporary authors who deny that any specific beliefs can be matters of faith. Faith, they declare, has no object that can be expressed in propositions. All the articles of the creed and dogmas of the Church, and the gospel message itself, in their estimation, are human constructs rather than divinely revealed truths.

This thesis, I believe, is incompatible with a vigorous program of evangelization. We need to see again what seemed evident to the early Christians: that the gospel preached by the apostles and their fellow workers is the word of God, and must be received as such. Paul, for example, was able to write to the Thessalonians: "We thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of man but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers" (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

This Pauline teaching, which is consonant with that of the other New Testament authors and the classical theological tradition, does not require one to hold that all unevangelized peoples are consigned to eternal damnation. Indeed, the Catholic Church has repeatedly proclaimed that God puts salvation within reach of everyone. But the way in which people can be saved without hearing the gospel remains God's secret. We may conjecture that they are saved by accepting seeds of the Word (*semina Verbi*), which the divine Sower has liberally disseminated throughout the world, far and wide. But these seeds of the word do not suffice for a mature and developed faith. They are mere hints of an answer yet to be given, and cry out for completion. The gospel message concerning the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ remains the normal path to salvation. Apart from it no one can be secure from serious error or have access to the saving truth in its fullness.

Faith, therefore, is not simply the acceptance of an inner orientation of the human spirit to some kind of absolute transcendence. As Paul put it, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing comes from the preaching of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Unless we are convinced of the primacy of hearing, we shall not be of service in the present call for the Church to launch a new program of

evangelization.

The present reluctance to proclaim the gospel is intensified by a second theological deviation. Metaphysical agnosticism, typified in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, maintains that nothing speculatively true can be said about God, because the human mind can have assured knowledge only about phenomena, things that appear to the senses. Accepting this philosophical stance, some theologians conclude that revelation gives no genuine knowledge about God and the supernatural. Anything we say about God is taken to be a metaphor that symbolically reaches out to the encompassing mystery, which is incomprehensible and ineffable. Since metaphors are arbitrary and expendable, say these theologians, no one can be required to profess the articles of the Christian creed.

To overcome metaphysical agnosticism, which undermines the realism of faith, we need to retrieve the tried and true doctrine of analogy. When we speak of God as wise, loving, and just, or as existing in three persons, or as creating and redeeming the world, we are making statements that are literally though analogously true. These statements are not metaphorical, like the statements that God is a rock or a shield. The biblical metaphors, however, are themselves charged with cognitive value, and may not be arbitrarily discarded. Bound up as they are with the word of God, they are part of the sacred heritage that is to be proclaimed to all peoples.

Faith, of course, lacks the perfect clarity of direct vision. There is a sense, of course, in which God remains hidden from us so long as we are in this life. Because God dwells in inaccessible light (1 Timothy 6:16), we know him only obscurely, as reflected in the mirror of faith (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:12). But, thanks to Christ and the Holy Spirit, we do know him. Faith in the biblical and Christian sense of the word has never been a mere experience of the ineffable. Paul did speak of a mystical encounter in which he was "caught up into the third heaven" and heard things that cannot be told (2 Corinthians 12:1-4). But this was not the gospel he proposed for the faith of his communities. Convinced of the intelligibility of the Christian message, he could write: "Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel" (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

A third obstacle to evangelization is a kind of religious pragmatism that is rarely formulated in explicit statements but is implicit in much contemporary religious literature. Faith is esteemed not because it is true but because it leads to desirable effects, whether personal or social. We are told, for example, that faith leads to peace of mind, psychological balance, success in business, social progress, or liberation of the oppressed. On this view it makes little difference whether the God in whom one believes is a reality or a fiction. The saving effects are regarded as coming not from God but from belief itself.

The biblical authors and classical theologians would heartily agree that faith normally brings with it many psychological and social benefits. But these are not the heart of the matter. For them it is essential that faith be true, for it gets its saving power from its reliance on the only power that can effectively vanquish the destructive forces of sin and death. Faith, in other words, saves by reason of its object. If we were not convinced that salvation comes from the God who speaks his saving word in Christ, we could perhaps be good therapists or social engineers but not evangelists.

A fourth enemy of evangelization is the reigning cultural relativism. In many circles today it is almost a dogma that no dogma can be valid cross-culturally. Since cultures are tied to their time and place, the Christian message, it is claimed, has to be radically reconstructed for every region and every generation. To proclaim the doctrines of the New Testament and the creeds is often denigrated as a form of cultural imperialism. In particular the dogmas of the ancient councils and of the Catholic Church are dismissed as sedimentations of a Greco-Roman culture that must be consigned to the ash-heap of history. If the old dogmas have any value, it is to stimulate us to concoct new dogmas appropriate to our own age.

In my judgment, this cultural and historical relativism is itself behind the times. It ignores the fact that the world is becoming a global village in which ideas and attitudes travel with the speed of light. Since every idea is received according to the condition of the recipient, adaptations will inevitably occur. But truth, whether in science or religion, transcends all cultural barriers. Any true statement, properly understood, is true everywhere and always. In any great religion, such as Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam, there will be constants, and indeed the very value of the religion depends upon its capacity to

transcend the fads and fashions of the day. A totally ephemeral religion might capture momentary interest but would not long hold the allegiance of its members.

Biblical and traditional Christianity has never been bound to a particular culture. In Christ there is no East nor West. He is to be worshipped by Jews and Gentiles, by barbarians and Greeks. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and his gospel is eternal.

Modern ethnology places increasing emphasis on anthropological constants, which make it possible for people to appreciate the cultural achievements of civilizations remote from their own. The writings of ancient authors such as Plato, Virgil, and Cicero are not unintelligible to modern Americans such as ourselves. Indeed, they are often more intelligible to us than the works of twentieth century philosophers such as Whitehead, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. For the same reason it is easier to proclaim the gospel in the relatively simple language of the New Testament and the early creeds than in the involved rhetoric of some contemporary theologians who offer new and original confessions of faith.

What is correct in the recent approach is the recognition that the human mind formulates revealed truth in concepts and language that are historically conditioned. The manner of expression must be adapted to different audiences, as Paul recognized when he said that he became a Jew to Jews and a Greek to Greeks in order to win them to Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23). But the truth of the gospel does not change. Paul invoked an anathema on anyone who would try to preach a different gospel than that which he had received and handed on (Galatians 1:8-9).

Connected with the cultural relativism of the day is a fifth deviation: religious pluralism. If truth is "polymorphic," in the sense that it varies from race to race and from age to age, it would seem that Christianity cannot be proclaimed in new times and places. In an extreme form this relativism leads to the conclusion that every people should have its own religion. Under the rubric of "soteriological pluralism" some modern theologians deny that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. Each religion is said to have its own way of salvation, its own myths, and very often its own savior figures. Christians may believe in Jesus as their savior provided that they are ready to allow other races to worship other savior figures, such as the

Lord Krishna and the Lord Buddha. The saving power of any such figure is thought to consist in its mythic impact on the psyche of the believer rather than the actual mediation of the person believed in.

This soteriological pluralism, which is patently antithetical to any program of evangelization, can seem very appealing in an age when we are reacting against the so-called Eurocentrism of past centuries and discovering the great and ancient religions of nonbiblical peoples. But religious pluralism is not a new proposal. The attitude was rampant in the world into which Christianity was born. If the early Christians had been willing to include Christ in the pantheon of deities worshipped by the pagans, the martyrs would never have gone to their deaths, but the pagan world would never have been converted. The Roman senator Symmachus argued that religious truth had to be approached through a variety of faiths, but his views were vigorously repudiated by theologians such as Ambrose. As Paul had already declared in his diatribe against idolatry, the pagans have many gods and many lords, but Christians acknowledge only one God, the Father of all, and one Lord, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 8:4-6). Christianity stands or falls with the affirmation that, as there is but one God, so too there is but one name under heaven by whom one can be saved (Acts 4:12); for there is only one Mediator of salvation, the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). To proclaim the gospel is necessarily to proclaim that Jesus Christ alone is Lord.

A sixth obstacle to evangelization is the false concept of freedom that pervades contemporary culture and frequently infects theologians. In the individualistic climate of our day, freedom is understood as the ability to choose whatever one pleases. Freedom of religion consequently means the capacity to choose whatever religion or lack of religion one wishes. This view has gained momentum as a reaction to situations in which the religion of the individual was made to depend almost totally upon the society into which one was born. In some countries the control of religion was handed over to the rulers of the state, according to the axiom that the religion of the ruler is that of the people: *cuius regio eius religio*.

With the Enlightenment, the state ceased to favor any particular religion. For the past three hundred years the political and social supports for religion have been crumbling. Ideological liberals seek to carry this secularization into the whole of public life, making faith a

purely private matter to be settled in the intimacy of one's own conscience. On the theory that religion should always be a matter of personal choice, parents sometimes refrain from raising their children in a definite faith. For teachers or others to manifest their faith, or to pray in public, is today deplored as a form of proselytism. Evangelization is thus made socially unacceptable and in some circumstances illegal.

Theology should resist this privatization of religion. In the absence of favorable influences from parents, teachers, and the social environment, very few persons will find their way to a strong personal faith. Evangelization, to be sure, should not be done in an aggressive way that interferes with the religious freedom of the hearer but, when properly carried out, it can actually enhance that freedom. By presenting Christian faith as an inspiring, coherent, and credible option, it gives people the freedom to consider and adopt a faith that might otherwise elude them.

If faith were nothing more than a human opinion, and if it had no real consequences for salvation, there might be good reasons for telling people to follow their own inclination about whether they wanted to believe or not. But Christians are convinced that their faith is true, that it is revealed by God, and that God wants all men and women to come to knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:5). For this reason every believer has a duty to try to share the faith. We cannot compel people to believe, and should not try to do so, but there is every reason for helping people to come to a willing and responsible decision of faith. In the absence of truth, freedom is greatly diminished. As the Gospels tell us, the truth will make us free (John 8:32). Christ frees us from the slavery of sin and error and leads us into "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). A correct theological notion of freedom can overcome the privatist individualism that today inhibits the task of evangelization.

Closely connected with this false concept of freedom is a seventh and final aberration, an anti-authoritarianism that militates against evangelization, especially in its Catholic form. In the current climate institutions are usually objects of suspicion. Regarding the Catholic Church as a vast and highly organized institution, many of our contemporaries feel reluctant to place their trust in it. In practice, however, those who reject religious authority usually adopt some other

authority, often unconsciously and uncritically. In rejecting the authority of revealed religion, they are generally submitting to the authority of the secularist opposition, which has its own institutions and promotional organs. Because truth in religious matters is hard to come by, the choice of a faith is almost inevitably a choice among rival authorities.

The rejection of authority is more often a sign of adolescent rebellion than of maturity. As we mature, we learn to distinguish between reliable and unreliable authorities, and to make a discriminating use of authority, but not to dispense with all authority. St. Thomas says very wisely that whereas arguments from merely human authority are weaker than rational demonstrations, arguments from the authority of divine revelation give the strongest possible grounds for assent (*Summa Theologiae* 1.1.8, ad 2).

Theologians themselves are sometimes overly suspicious of ecclesiastical authority. This seems to be a hazard of their profession. Whenever a new pronouncement comes from the Holy See, theologians feel called upon to judge whether it is right or wrong. I confess that I do not think it is my function to judge the authorities whom God has set over the Church. They have the commission and the charisms to safeguard the transmission of the faith. It is for them to judge theology, not to be judged by it. As a theologian I am grateful that there is someone to correct me.

Evangelizers should not appeal, purely and simply, to the teaching authority of the Church. In an age suspicious of institutions, we shall do well to emphasize, as Paul and John did, the joy and freedom that come from a personal relationship to Christ. In comparison with Christ the ecclesiastical institutions are mere means. The spoken and written word of God can mediate faith, but faith goes out beyond the words to submit to the person of the revealer. An evangelically renewed Catholicism will seek to show that the entire apparatus of Catholicism, including the hierarchical ministry, the proclaimed word, and the sacraments, has value because and insofar as it gives more adequate and authentic access to the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ. Christ and his gospel must be proclaimed, in season and out of season. Evangelization is the primary and essential task of the Church. Those who have been successfully evangelized find their home in the Church as the place in which their relationship to Christ can be fully

lived out. Through its ministries and sacraments they have continually new access to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the living Christ.

In the last analysis it is not individual Christians nor even the Church that proclaims Christ. According to a sounder theology of evangelization, Christ proclaims the gospel through the Church and its members. The Holy Spirit is the transcendent agent of evangelization. We strive to be obedient instruments. Since we cannot cause anyone to believe, we must accompany our efforts with prayer that God will bestow the grace of faith upon those to whom the gospel message is proclaimed.

Seeing itself as addressed by the call of recent popes for a new evangelization, contemporary theology can profit from the present moment as a season of grace. Directing its critical scrutiny upon itself, theology should be alert to root out any tendencies it may have had that stand in the way of evangelization. In becoming authentically evangelical, theology can better achieve its own objective, which is to understand and serve the faith that comes through Christ and the apostles. By opening itself more fully to the word of God, it can assist the Church to adhere to that word more faithfully and proclaim it more effectively, so that the whole world, in the words of Vatican II, "by hearing the message of salvation, may believe, and by believing may hope, and by hoping may love."