

THE OFFICE OF THE EVANGELIST IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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I looked, and saw a Man named Evangelist... he gave him a Parchment Roll, and there was written within, 'Fly from the Wrath to come.' (Pilgrim's Progress)

Evangelist: Office, Gift, Or...?

The term Evangelist has circulated in the Church's vocabulary for nearly 2000 years. That acquaintance, as is often the case, has made the word popular but left it technically undefined. When the archives of historical systematics and comment are searched, treatment of the term is occasional, seldom critical, and brief (if at all).

For example, John Murray in a nine page article entitled "Office in the Church," allows only one paragraph to the question, and concludes: "It would appear, therefore, that here is a moot question on which we are compelled to be indecisive." (*Collected Writings* Vol. IV p.365)

Analysis

The data which can be brought to the question is this: First, evangelist (εὐαγγελίστης) is found but three times in the NT.

1. Acts 21:8 — where Philip is surnamed "the evangelist"; pointing to his exploits recorded in Acts 8:5-13; 26-40. (His activities in the interim are not known.)
2. Ephesians 4:11—where evangelist is listed with other 'gifts' (viz. apostles, prophets, pastors and teachers) given by Christ to the Church.
3. 2 Timothy 4:5 — where Timothy is called upon to "do the work of an evangelist".

Second, historically evangelist was employed reflexively to denote one who preached the gospel (εὐαγγέλιον), and came to be understood as those who were the apostles' lieutenants (e.g. Timothy), carrying on their work after them. Not until the second century was the term applied to those who had written a "Gospel." Notice that neither of those specifically related to the term in the NT (Philip or Timothy) authored Gospels.

Third, contemporary usage has tended to identify evangelist with missionary (i.e. one who carries the gospel beyond the borders of its previous acquaintance). It should be noted, however, that missionary is not a NT word.

The notion that evangelist is an itinerant "revivalist" hired to supplement a church's

evangelistic emphasis, is adventuresome and without NT warrant.

Synthesis

The unresolved (perhaps unresolvable) question appears to hinge upon whether ‘evangelist’ is an office or a gift. That is, is it to be viewed as a recognized office or a recognizable gift. A third alternative would be that it is neither. Consider:

1. The multiplication of offices which have no footsteps in the New Testament has endangered both the church and those within it. Warning against the historical accretion of ecclesiastical “offices” by Rome, John Owen cautioned:

Four things are required unto the constitution of an office:— 1. An especial trust; 2. An especial mission or commission; 3. An especial name; 4. An especial work. All these are required unto an office properly so called and constituted. . . .

If there be any office, let it be under never so glorious or so specious a title, if Christ hath not appointed that office by virtue of gospel ordinance and institution, there is a nullity in it,—it is no gift of Christ. . . . All the outward order and solemnity in the world, and all the holiness of persons, when engaging in such an office, cannot give it a right and title; because it wants the law of Christ for its foundation.” (*Works*, Vol. IV:355, 436)

2. Both normal and continuing NT offices (viz. deacon and elder) are supplied with specific information re. qualification and recognition; evangelist is not. (See 1 Timothy 3:2-7 and 8-11.) Note: The two NT individuals stated to have functioned as evangelists, were, in fact, already holders of office (Philip, a deacon; and Timothy, presumably an elder).

3. The Ephesian passage (4:8-12):

1. mentions gifts, but not offices (“he gave gifts,” v. 8; “he gave some...,” v.11) It is granted, however, that the gift may be the office.
2. directly respects not the conversion of sinners, but “the perfection of saints,” (v. 12), which would obviate the specific thought of “missionary” labor.
3. “prophets” cannot be identified in terms of NT office; and deacon, a regular office, is not mentioned. Even if this were a list of offices, it is not complete.

4. Timothy is not told to enter the office of evangelist, but to do the work of evangelist (2 Timothy 4:5). “The ministry is described in verbs, not nouns: Tend, feed, not be a pastor, hold the office of pastor.” (C.K. Barrett *Essays*, 165-166)

5. Where Paul alludes to a ‘division of labor’ within the office of elder, he mentions only teaching and ruling, not evangelizing. (1 Timothy 5:17). Lawrence Eyres, in his excellent work

The Elders of the Church, enumerates several “areas of specialization” beyond the essential duties of teaching, praying, and ruling. Although the list is thorough and suggestive, a specialist in the area of evangelism is not mentioned.

Issues

The following questions seem likely to reappear:

1. If an office, what are its qualifications?

If these cannot be adduced from the NT, how could the church recognize and set apart men who by their gifts and aspirations were inclined thereunto.

2. If an office, was it temporary?

Many think so. For example Lloyd-Jones reckoned “the evangelist was a man whose office was temporary, and as the churches were established and became more settled, this office likewise disappeared.” (*Christian Unity*, 192). “I call this office ‘extraordinary’, because in duly constituted churches it has no place.” Calvin (*Institutes* IV.3.4)

3. If an office, to what extent has the church suffered by being delinquent to recognize it as such?

The church at Philippi contained “bishops and deacons” (1:1). Was it deprived of a full complement of officers?

4. If a gift, is it sequestered to those regular officers within the church (i.e., deacon, or more regularly, elder)? Would it belong (in some degree) to all office-bearers or only to some especially endowed thereunto? And, if a special endowment, How are those so gifted within the regular offices to be formally recognized, there being no NT criteria?

If these questions cannot be answered by listening to the NT, listening to the “talkifications” of human deliberation is ill-advised, and Murray was right in his resignation that “here is a moot question”. Perhaps the problem lies not in the answer, but in the question. The query which limits the alternatives to that of office or gift is to blame. It would appear from its three instances in the NT, that evangelist was neither an office to be entered, nor an gift to be exercised, but a work to be performed. A work clearly contained within, but not limited to, the regular offices in the church.

Men differ in gifts, and only a relative few hold office, but every Christian may be called upon to “do the work of an evangelist.”

The Man therefore looking upon Evangelist very carefully, said, “Whither must I fly?” Then said Evangelist, pointing with his finger over a very wide field, “Do you see yonder Wicket Gate? ...go directly thereto, so shalt thou see the Gate; at which, when thou knockest, it shall be told thee what thou shalt do.”

So I saw in my dream that the Man began to run. . .crying, "Life! Life! Eternal Life!"