

## THE GOSPEL AS GOOD NEWS IN TODAY'S WORLD

[Address, 1972]

The theme once more: “The Gospel as Good News in Today’s World.” That theme prompts four quick questions: World? In? New? Good? (If you have a craving for acronyms, as I do, then think of the four-letter word “wing”, W-I-N-G: W is for “world,” I is for “in,” N is for “new,” G is for “good.”) Four questions and, let us hope, four answers.

W is for “world.” The question is, Which world? If the Gospel is good news for today’s world, then for which sectors of today’s world is it good news, for which sectors is it not good news? If the gospel offers encouragement, say, to the world’s oppressed, does it likewise encourage their oppressors? If the Gospel gives hope to those wretched of the earth who long for liberation does it give aid and comfort also to tyrants? If the Gospel supports peacemaking and development and conscientization, does it similarly support warmongering and imperialism and inhumanity? If not, then the gospel is not good news after all for the whole of today’s world? Then are there people in today’s world for whom the gospel is by its very nature bad news?

Answer: Yes. For the Gospel is hardly indifferent to moral distinctions. By the very judgment it brings it divides the world, bringing not peace but a sword, separating those on our Lord’s right hand from those on his left. Why else do Christians join forces with just causes against unjust ones? In fact, people don’t need to be Christians to recognize that distinction, though Christians too, like their Lord before them, do expose that dimension of the “world today” which is evil and demonic. After all, a gospel which could not make up its mind about what is good and what is evil, what is the right side and the wrong side of moral issues, what God does want for this world and what he does not, who are responsible culprits and who are their victims – I say, a gospel which could not handle even such basic distinctions as these could hardly be good news for today’s world, certainly not for that world about which our Lord was so prophetically decisive.

But then, come to think of it, how could our Lord be so decisive about this world? Why could he be bad news to some folks, and good news to others? I ask, Why? Perhaps your answer is, Why not? Why not! Why, because that same Lord seemed also to be saying that the gospel, however good it is, is bad news for everybody -- not only for some people but for all people. Jesus extends his condemnation to the whole world and to everyone in it. The prophets, in whose tradition he followed, knew that “all men are liars,” that “there is no one who does good, no, not one.” Can you and I still recover that radicality? Can the Christian world mission still dare to be that drastic? What I mean is, if we do accept with our Lord and the prophets the universal fallenness of the race, can we still do that other thing which they also did, namely, take seriously such intra-worldly distinctions as between the oppressors and the oppressed, the just and the unjust? For don't the scriptures' sweeping denunciations of all sinners tend to obliterate those equally urgent distinctions between some sinners and other sinners? Doesn't the Christian doctrine of original sin, in other words, de-romanticize all illusions about the noble poor and the high-priority downtrodden? Doesn't the fact that the whole world is under judgment so paralyze the moral judgment of Christians that they are disabled from choosing sides – that is, if even liberationists are exposed as having clay feet and if today's oppressed are merely tomorrow's oppressors? In short, can Christians be radical politically if they are also radical theologically? I believe they can be. The question is: How? The bitter truth is, the gospel is bad news for the world today, for the whole world today. But then which world is it, if any, for which the gospel is good news? (The answer to this question will have to wait until later.) W stands for “which world.”

I is for “in.” The gospel is good news in the world today. How far is “in”? Dare the gospel be so far into the world today as to get its hands dirty or even bloody? If the gospel is to indigenize, to what extent, with whom all may it indigenize? Only in the slums and the barrios? How about the corporations and the pentagons? Or do we say, that far into the wicked world the gospel may not identify? Is the gospel doomed to lose its soul if it gets in with the reactionaries – like the centurion or Cornelius or pre-Paul Saul? According to some observers, that is precisely the plight of the Christian world

mission today: Not that it hasn't indigenized but rather that it has indigenized too far, into the most worldly centers of the world? Still, is that really so? If so, what then is the moral for missions? To be in the world though not very far in? Only into the world's outer margins?

It is high time, I think, that the Christian world mission recover some of the military connotation which the word "mission" has, if only for the surprise value of such usage. The Christian mission, as the rhetoric of the New Testament abundantly illustrates, is a kind of warfare. The Christian mission is not just to convert people's souls, nor even to convert their souls and heal their bodies. The mission is also out to defeat enemies. It is a mission whose missionaries are engaged in mortal combat against principalities and powers, against the most massive opposition a man could face, against structures which tyrannize men and nations not only economically and politically but finally spiritually, negating the very faith which the gospel is meant to bring.

We Christians need to recall that bold military rhetoric and that aggressive mentality today. But while we're at it, why not update the rhetoric by taking a page from modern warfare, from that kind of warfare which in recent times has become so exasperatingly effective: guerilla warfare, the strategy of insurgency? For too long now the Christian mission has been entrusted almost exclusively to its generals, its professional warriors. They are much too identifiable by their uniforms and their well-learned battle slogans. It is much too easy to distinguish them, the combatants, from the non-combatant civilians. These professional, organizational soldiers of the Church conduct their conventional wars against the enemy in open pitched battle, theologically and sometimes even geographically removed from the hamlets of the common populace. In guerilla warfare, however, the objective is not so much a territorial one as an ideological one, the winning of men's hearts and commitments. The objective is the people themselves. That is why the really effective insurgents lost themselves among the people – as Mao has said, like fish in the sea. It is from the people that they take cover, gather intelligence, draw sustenance. Most of all, that is where – namely, among the people, whether in the factories or in the board meetings – that the real enemy is afoot.

And which enemy is that? The root enemy, the people's ideological gods, their anti-gospels. That far "in the world today" the gospel has got to be.

N is for "new." News, whether good news or bad news, is by definition new. What is it about the Christian gospel that is new, let alone good? God knows that the world is looking for something new, something radically new. Willy Brandt campaigned for "a new norm for humanity," George McGovern appealed for a new kind of openness and mutual trust, Richard Nixon is reorganizing his government toward a "new spirit of individual responsibility," Martin Luther King, Jr. called his country, as Paulo Frere calls his, to a new national conscience. How does the gospel propose to meet this need for fundamental newness? Simply by offering sinners a new quality of spiritual inwardness, a private consolation in place of private despair? Granted, that already would be no small thing. But is there more to the gospel's new order than this new Innerlichkeit? Is it just the new inner power to put up with the same old outer world order? Or does the gospel bring also a new world order, a new social structure?

Yes, also a new world order, not only a new humanity individualistically conceived but also a new community, a new kind of community. For example, Christian ministry is itself a whole new, revolutionary dimension in social relationships, the likes of which the world has never before known. It juxtaposes man to man in the same radically new relationship in which Jesus was juxtaposed to sinners, the relationship of forgiving their sin. It identifies the whole community of his believers with his own death and resurrection, does this new ministry, and claims authorization for communicating that same death and resurrection to one another by so much as announcing it, and by such other preposterous media as baptismal washing and the eating and drinking celebratively of his eschatological body and blood, and by generally accepting one another for no other reason than that that he did. I repeat, this gospel, for from being confined to the internal regeneration of private persons, embodies a whole new configuration of social relationships. Call it the church. It relates guilty people to one another, irrespective of their own value or disvalue on no other ground than their Lord's mercy. That community, once its secret is recognized and employed, is new enough to subvert all

sorts of sacred shibboleths in the old social order, whether that be economic slavery or political repression or marital inequality or authoritarianism generally. N is for “new”, all right.

G is for “good.” What is it about the gospel, the good news, which is good? Do Christians merely take from the surrounding culture whatever definitions of good happen to be at hand and then say, “There, this is what we too mean by good”? Is that all that is good about the gospel, merely what everyone knew to be good anyway? Or does the gospel bring with it its own transformed brand of goodness?

Not only that, but also the gospel takes what many a man had regarded as bad and transforms even that into good. For example, take the law, the divine law, that activity of God in history by which he subjects men and nations to criticism. That nomological process or criticism strikes most men as bad news. At best, they are ambivalent toward it. Even though everyone engages in that criticism, still we do so with an uneasy conscience, unless we can do it secretly and behind one another’s backs or without any danger of being criticized in return. For it is difficult enough to have to administer criticism, but it is even more difficult to have to accept criticism of oneself. Criticism angers. “The law begets wrath.” And the gospel – if you will, the “gospel in the broader sense” – does indeed entail law, God’s historical activity of criticism. And that criticism, no matter how godly, continues to be bad news – that is, until the good news of the gospel comes along.

The gospel is good because, among other things, it frees men up to take criticism, even to the point where they can welcome it, including its most mortifying effects. What’s more, the gospel can embolden Christians also to administer criticism. Having begun with themselves, they can be liberated by that gospel so as to assume with good conscience their critical responsibilities over against other men and other institutions. Christians are able to affirm this negative process, this bad news of the law, because paradoxically they know it has been trumped, superceded, by the divine mercy in Christ Jesus and because therefore the days of the law are now numbered. – That is but one

example of what is good about the gospel, namely, the way it can transpose what otherwise is bad news into something profitable for repentance and life and healing. That is no mean benefit for a world today, which is so easily intimidated by the critical processes of history. For even those grim processes are brought into captivity under Christ. G is for “good.”

Robert W. Bertram

1972