

EVANGELISM IS A PROCESS

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When I was a child the classic way in which many people became Christians was by attending an evangelistic event and responding to an appeal to come forward at the end of the sermon. Faith for them involved very much a crisis in their lives.

I remember as a ten-year old attending the Billy Graham Crusade at Harringay Arena in 1954 – and watching 100s if not 1000s of people streaming forward to the front in response to the appeal. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s that was the kind of evangelism that worked. However, it is generally reckoned that the last major successful evangelistic event held in Britain was the Billy Graham Mission England crusade held in 1984. After that, things changed. People no longer responded to Billy Graham – or indeed to any other evangelist – in the way they once did.

The fact is that we as a country have changed. Whereas at one stage there were many lapsed Christians and many people on the fringes of the church, people who knew the basics of the faith and subscribed to them, today things are very different. Today there is widespread ignorance about the Christian faith. As a result, there is no longer a harvest which evangelists can reap on a one-night stand. Instead, evangelists have to be in the sowing as well as in the reaping business.

Evangelism has changed. Alpha courses, Y courses, Just-looking courses, are the name of the game. People need to be given time to become Christians. The Alpha course, for instance, is ten weeks in length – and even then, many find it too short. Indeed, it is not unusual for people to want to repeat an Alpha course – and even then they need more time before finally committing their lives to Christ. Evangelism is no longer an event, it is a process.

In many ways the present developments are very healthy. With people further and further away from the Christian faith, it is inevitable that the journey to faith takes longer. People need time to reflect on the Christian Gospel and its demands before they commit themselves to Christ. Becoming a Christian is a massive step. It is a stepping from spiritual darkness to light. It is an act of life-long commitment. It does radically affect the way we live our lives. It is only right and proper that people take their time. If the ordinary physical birth process takes nine months, then we should not be surprised if the spiritual birth process takes a number of months too.

So although we still preach ‘Gospel’ sermons – we have a monthly ‘welcome’ service in addition to baptismal services and other specials – the key work of evangelism in our church is done in our Alpha courses. And the encouraging thing is that so many people want to come along to Alpha. Indeed, our experience is that just putting up a large banner outside the church advertising the next course brings people in off the streets. Such evangelism is demanding in terms of time, but it is also deeply rewarding.

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