

A View From Mars Hill

by Alan Parker

Is UNION LIFE against evangelism? Some critics say we are. After all, our stated position is that we are not primarily concerned with laying again the foundations of the doctrines of repentance from dead works and the beginnings of faith in God, having left behind this elementary teaching in order to press onward into the infinite living sea of our God's glorious life.

Though our *primary* emphasis is not evangelism, we recognize that the Gospel message of salvation is of the highest importance, and all believers are commissioned to share that message. What, then, do we do when we encounter someone who, as yet, has no faith in Jesus Christ?

To understand evangelism from our union perspective, we must first ask some basic questions about evangelism itself. First of all, just what do we mean by "evangelism"? Different Christians use different terms, but we all understand evangelism as a process of "getting people saved." But, what is salvation? Salvation is redemption, or being born again, through the power of the Gospel. Then what is the Gospel? It is the "Good News" that by the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, all have been reconciled to God. This Good News is the power of God for salvation and the re-birth (or reunion) of the life of God and man.

Therefore we are most correct in saying that salvation is a Person—The Person—our Lord and Almighty God, Jesus Christ, the express image of the Father, the sender of the Holy Spirit within men's lives, the author and finisher of salvation, the Creator of the universe, and our All and in all. He is Salvation. We personally experience this salvation when Jesus Christ, who is God, is born, revealed, and made manifest in our lives. The only hope of glory that we have is the reality of Christ in us. This is the great mystery of the Gospel. The central point in this mystery is that only by death can anyone be freed from the grip of sin. Sin is a terminal disease in human beings. Death is the only release or cure. But this is no cure at all if the person is destroyed. Only God can save us from the disease of sin and the result of inevitable death and separation from Him.

Jesus, who is God, became sin itself for our sakes, and died to all sin. Jesus died the *actual* death, not a representative death, of every man. All humanity rose in the resurrection of this second Adam, just as all humanity died in the fall of the first Adam.

The only prerequisite for receiving this salvation is to accept that Christ Jesus died the death required by our own sins, that we died with Him, that we were buried with Him, that we rose with Him, and that He is this new life in us. Salvation becomes a reality to us as we, by our leap of faith, accept this new life, received as a gracious gift, not by our effort or merit.

But why is it that the evangelical churches first preach to the potential believer that he is a miserable sinner, hopelessly lost and separated from God? It is a sad fact that this condemnatory charge of sin and separation usually becomes a fixed state for the believer after his acceptance of Christ. So, instead of being liberated by the new birth, the believer is miserably bound in the guilt of his continued sinfulness and unworthiness. Is this method of evangelism Scriptural? Was this the way Paul—the Apostle to the Gentiles—preached the Good News of salvation? I say not.

It is true that when Paul preached to the Jews he continually pointed out that they were hopelessly lost in their efforts to find salvation by trying to keep the Law, and it is probably

appropriate for us to take the same approach with legalists whose faith is in their good conduct to get them to heaven.

But when Paul preached to the heathen and the pagan Gentiles, he didn't tell them they were lost. And why should he? Whose responsibility is it, anyway, to convict individuals of their lostness? Is it the responsibility of a preacher, of a Christian writer, or of you and me? No. According to the Bible, it is the exclusive jurisdiction of the Holy Spirit. Am I saying, then, that it is Scripturally incorrect to tell people that they are lost and need salvation? No. Evangelism which emphasizes the negative aspect of "lostness" and sinfulness can sometimes be very effective, but it all too often has bad after-effects. I believe that there is a more positive method of evangelism, which can lead to a quicker understanding and realization of union.

Notice that most of Paul's "negative" preaching in the New Testament was to Jews bound in the legalism of self-effort. When no Jews were present, as in his Mars' Hill episode (Acts 17:22-34), Paul took a different approach. When he preached the Gospel to the Greek scholars, did he argue with brilliant logic that they were lost because of their sinful acts and idolatrous practices? No. Did he tell them they were guilty of wickedness and ungodliness, and that they deserved to burn forever in hell's fire and be tormented by devils because they were evil, miserable sinners devoid of any good? No.

Then what did Paul tell them? Basically he said that they, the Greek scholars who had spent all of their lives in idolatry, were in fact God's children, and that the source of their being was in the life of God, even though they were ignorant of this truth. Paul told them that between God and man there existed a secret underlying union, which was only then—for the first time in history—being revealed to all because of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Take a look at a unique approach to evangelism—as seen from Mars' Hill—in my paraphrase from the King James Version of Acts Seventeen:

"Then Paul stood on Mars' Hill saying, you men of Athens are too superstitious in everything. While I was passing by this way, I watched you as you were in the middle of your prayers and devotions to your various gods, and I found this inscription on one of your altars that had no idol on it, but rather was empty, being dedicated "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD."

I now openly declare to you this Unknown God whom you ignorantly worship. You see, the central truth is, that this God, who is the Lord of heaven and earth and who created the world and everything in it, does not dwell in a temple made with hands. No, neither is He to be worshipped by idols which are the workmanship of men's hands. Rather it is the Unknown God who gives life and breath to all things, and He has made all men and intended them to be of one blood and family to live on the whole face of the earth. It is this God who has determined the boundaries of the habitation of all nations. And this Unknown God has done this so that all nations should seek the Lord, so that perhaps by their individual inclinations and choices, all of the men of earth would search after and feel out for God in their souls, so that haply they would find Him.

For you see, the truth is that God is not now, nor has He ever been, far from any one of you. For it is in God that we live, and in Him we move and have our being. Just as some of your Greek poets have said, "For we are God's offspring."

Therefore, since it is true, by your own cultural teaching, that we are the offspring of God, we should discard and reject the absurd notion that the God of heaven and earth can be bound up and limited in art devices of gold and silver made by men. However, I also want you to know that God understands your ignorance, and God has winked at the duration of this ignorance. But now the time has come and the order is now being given by God to men everywhere to change their way

and their mind on this matter. Because the same God has appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness by that man, Jesus, whom God has ordained and by whom God has given us assurance because God raised Him from the dead.

And when they had heard Paul say these things, some mocked, but some held tightly to Paul and believed, including Dionysius and a woman named Damaris."

The point is, it is possible, even Scriptural, to engage in evangelism by emphasizing *union* instead of separation. Personally, I take this to be the biblical method of evangelism.

As for some in evangelical churches, perhaps it is necessary to take the painful path of separation, involving the guilt from past and present sins, the effort to keep the new "law" of church legalism, and trying by self-effort to win God's favor. But I doubt it. It is much better, I think, to tell the lost soul, "You are found. Accept it. You are home in your Father's house. Receive it. You are free. Christ has found you and you have a new life. Christ is that new life. There is no separation. Accept your death and the replacement of your old selfish life with the new life of Christ living through you as you. Look inward to heaven, and find your salvation. Worship and follow the living God who is in you. Don't worship yourself, nor the Bible, nor the church, nor some preacher or evangelist."

Have you wondered, with your new perspective of union, how to share Christ with unbelievers? Why not use a Mars' Hill approach—*simply affirm Christ in the would-be believer*. But, you ask, who will convict the person of his lost condition and his need for repentance? Why not leave this to the Holy Spirit and to the cleansing blood of our Savior Jesus Christ? Some will mock this type of evangelism, just as some did on Mars' Hill, but for those who see, they will hold tightly and believe.