

# Bearing Faithful Witness - Resources

Exploring what it means to become a community that responds to "our people" by living and communicating a good news story.

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## RESOURCE #4

### RECLAIMING THE E-WORD

SHORTLY AFTER I BEGAN TEACHING AT BOSTON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY, A COLLEAGUE PLACED IN MY HANDS A BROCHURE INTRODUCING THE WOMEN'S INTERFAITH ACTION GROUP. THE BROCHURE DESCRIBED THE GROUP AS "A WEEKLY GATHERING OF WOMEN FROM ALL FAITHS, AS WELL AS THOSE WHO FEEL DRAWN TO THE SPIRITUAL, BUT WHO DO NOT CLAIM A PARTICULAR RELIGION." THE GROUP PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE ON CAMPUS IN PROVIDING A FORUM FOR SHARING AND DISCUSSING RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL HISTORIES, COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES. AS MY COLLEAGUE POINTED OUT, WHAT WAS ESPECIALLY INTERESTING ABOUT THE BROCHURE WAS THE FOLLOWING SENTENCE, IN PARTICULAR ITS USE OF THE WORD *EVANGELIZATION*:

AN ENVIRONMENT OF MUTUAL RESPECT IS MAINTAINED IN WHICH MEMBERS MAY FREELY SHARE BELIEFS AND DIFFERENCES WITHOUT FEAR OF DISPARAGEMENT OR EVANGELIZATION.

TO EVANGELIZE MEANS LITERALLY TO OFFER "GOOD NEWS" OR A "WELCOME MESSAGE." ISAIAH 52:7 CELEBRATES THE BRINGER OF SUCH GOOD NEWS:

HOW BEAUTIFUL ON THE MOUNTAINS ARE THE FEET OF THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS, WHO PROCLAIM PEACE, WHO BRING GOOD TIDINGS, WHO PROCLAIM SALVATION, WHO SAY TO ZION, "YOUR GOD REIGNS!"

BUT CLEARLY, TODAY EVANGELISM DOES NOT ALWAYS MEAN GOOD NEWS, AND THE FEET OF THE EVANGELIST ARE NOT CONSIDERED SO BEAUTIFUL. FOR MANY PEOPLE IN OUR WORLD, BOTH CHRISTIAN AND NON-CHRISTIAN, EVANGELISM IS NEITHER WELCOMED NOR WARRANTED. AS THE BROCHURE MADE CLEAR, THIS IS ESPECIALLY TRUE IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE, WHERE EVANGELISM IS PERCEIVED AS SOMETHING TO BE FEARED, AS A BARRIER TO MUTUAL RESPECT, CAREFUL LISTENING, OPEN SHARING, AND COOPERATION.

BUT IT IS ALSO THE CASE IN THE WIDER CONTEXT OF AN INCREASINGLY PLURALISTIC CULTURE, WHERE THE NOTION OF EVANGELIZING IS AUTOMATICALLY CONNECTED TO AN ATTITUDE OF INTOLERANCE AND SUPERIORITY TOWARD OTHERS – A BELLIGERENT AND ONE-SIDED ATTEMPT TO CONVERT OTHERS TO OUR WAY OF SEEING THINGS, WITH THE NECESSARY IMPLICATION THAT THOSE WHO DO NOT BELIEVE AS WE DO ARE LOST OR IN ERROR. FOR SOME, THE WORD CALLS TO MIND A SHAMEFUL HISTORY OF FORCED CONVERSIONS, INQUISITIONS, FRAUDULENT TELEVISION PREACHERS, RELIGIOUS WARS, CRUSADES, GENOCIDE, COLONIZATION, AND THE RUTHLESS EXPANSION OF WESTERN POWER THROUGHOUT THE WORLD. THE E-WORD HAS BECOME A DIRTY WORD – AN EMBARRASSMENT TO THE CHRISTIAN AND AN AFFRONT TO THE NON-CHRISTIAN.

IS IT POSSIBLE NONETHELESS TO RECLAIM THE E-WORD AS EXPRESSING SOMETHING POSITIVE, VITAL AND BEAUTIFUL ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN LIFE? MIGHT EVANGELISM BE A PRACTICE THAT CALLS FORTH THE HIGHEST IN THE CREATIVE ENERGIES, INTELLECT, AND IMAGINATION OF CHRISTIANS RATHER THAN A CRASS EXERCISE IN MARKETING THE CHURCH TO CONSUMERS WITHIN A WORLD OF ABUNDANT AND COMPETING OPTIONS? I THINK SO. BUT GIVEN THE WEIGHTY CULTURAL, HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BAGGAGE ATTACHED TO EVANGELISM AND GIVEN THE CHURCH'S TEMPTATION TO ACQUIESCE TO THE WORLD'S DEMAND THAT THE GOSPEL BE GOOD NEWS ON THE WORLD'S OWN TERMS, ANY SUCH RECONSTRUCTION OF EVANGELISM WILL NOT BE SIMPLE OR EASY.

RETHINKING AND RECONSTRUCTING EVANGELISM IS A TASK THAT MUST BE TAKEN UP IN EVERY ERA AND IN EVERY PART OF THE WORLD WHERE THE CHURCH TAKES SERIOUSLY IT'S CALLING TO "ANNOUNCE PEACE" AND TO BEAR FAITHFUL, PUBLIC AND EMBODIED WITNESS TO GOD'S REIGN IN ITS OWN CONTEXT.

FROM BRYAN STONE, **EVANGELISM AFTER CHRISTENDOM**, p9-10