

A POLICY STATEMENT *of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America*

EVANGELISM TODAY

Adopted by the Governing Board
March 3, 1976

Introductory Statement

This is a statement that was developed by the Working Group on Evangelism of the DCS, and expresses a common ground where representatives of a wide range of churches outside the National Council of Churches could meet with those who are members of the NCC. It is not intended as a comprehensive theological treatise on evangelism, but as a corrective to the recent dichotomy between "personal" evangelism and "social action." It is a description of a past and present pilgrimage, and so does not attempt to address the problems yet to be encountered.

One way of setting forth what evangelism means in the ecumenical experience today is to review the journey of the past twenty-five years of that experience - a period in which evangelism has been a central issue in American church life. During this period of changing concepts of evangelism, its fullness has never been totally disclosed at any one time or place, and this statement does not attempt a final or definitive description of it.

In the 1950's, two major methods were utilized in evangelism: mass meeting campaigns and lay visitation programs, both inviting persons to make decisions for Jesus Christ. Although other factors probably contributed, these modes of sharing the Gospel coincided in the 1950's with a season of growth in church membership unparalleled in American church history.

However, growth in church membership and calling people to Christian discipleship were not necessarily the same. In the early 1960's it became apparent that for many people joining the church had not produced a significant change of attitude or behavior. This failure of new church members to be enlisted in a pilgrimage toward fuller Christian discipleship called

into question the effectiveness of the methods then being used. There followed an intense theological re-examination of what the demands of Christian discipleship should mean both for individuals and for society.

In the process of that re-examination, the practice of evangelism as a congregational function in which people are confronted with the Gospel and called to Christian discipleship was minimized in those denominations which were working together in the National Council of Churches. Denominational attention was focussed on social injustices, and efforts were made to mobilize church members to help rectify them. A false division resulted. Instead of social awareness and action being seen as natural expressions of Christian discipleship to which people are called by evangelism, social action was thought to be a contrast and corrective to evangelism. In this mistaken polarization between them, both - and the whole life of the church - were weakened.

Today we can see the futility of that polarization, but the churches still seem strangely bound by a reluctance to name the Name of Jesus as Lord and

Savior. Christians seem to lack the facility today to exclaim with excitement, "Jesus loves me; therefore, I love you." At this moment in history, there is great need for the churches to recover the ability to name the Name of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and to bear witness to that Name in word and deed.

But naming the Name and bearing witness to it must be better understood: the commitment to Jesus Christ is a profound event. It is a personal event; by the power of the Holy Spirit sinners experience the divine forgiveness and commit themselves to live obediently to Christ the living Lord. It is a social event; relationships with friends, neighbors and family are radically altered by the revolutionary demands and allowances of divine love. It is a community event; it engrafts one into the community of believers, the church. It is a public event; new confrontations with the institutions of society occur, for the "principalities and power" which impoverish and enslave humanity cannot go unchallenged by Christians!

Commitment to Jesus Christ must be made in the context of the issues posed for us by the moment of history in which we find ourselves - history in which God is at work, through us and sometimes in spite of us. That commitment to Jesus Christ must have an impact on the issues of social and economic justice through the stewardship, integrity and interdependence of Christian disciples. Thereby commitment to Jesus Christ is inescapably a personal social community and public historical event which affects the world and the human beings in it for whom Christ died.

Commitment to Jesus Christ is not a once-for-all event. It is the beginning of one's spiritual pilgrimage of discipleship. Those who are disciples of Christ face continual turning-points which offer new experiences rooted in being "born anew to a living hope."* We never move beyond the need to hear the renewing call to "repent and believe in the gospel," ** in order to live more obediently to the word of the Lord in every area of life, turning from the dead values of self-centered living, acquisitive consumption and upward social striving.

Commitment to Jesus Christ means to embrace more completely in our personal lives the new way of life which God's grace initiates, manifesting the Spirit's fruit of love, joy, peace, goodness, meekness, gentleness and self-control. Commitment to Jesus Christ means in our social life to love others more deeply, even as Christ loves us and gave himself for us, a love which is giving, accepting, forgiving, seeking and helping. Commitment to Jesus

Christ in community life means to be called out from the isolation of individualism, from conformity to the ways of the world into the fellowship of disciples which is the church, where by obedience we discover freedom, by humble service we are fulfilled, by sharing the suffering of others we are made whole. Commitment to Jesus Christ in our public lives means to be engaged more earnestly in the work not only of relieving the poor and hungry but removing the causes of poverty and hunger in the struggle to remedy both inequities and iniquities, in the liberation of the oppressed and the vindication of the deprived, in the establishment of God's rule in the affairs of humanity. Commitment to Jesus Christ brings confidence that, however dark the present hour, the ultimate victory is assured through Him who is the Lord.

The task of evangelism today is calling people to repentance, to faith in Jesus Christ, to study God's word, to continue steadfast in prayer, and to bearing witness to Him. This is a primary function of the church in its congregational, denominational and ecumenical manifestations. It challenges the most creative capabilities in the churches while at the same time depending upon the Holy Spirit to be the real evangelist.

Now, after the journey of the past twenty-five years, we can call upon people to confess the Name of Jesus Christ and to bear witness to that Name in their lives with a fuller understanding of Christian discipleship and a deeper commitment to share the Good News we have found.

For: 124
Against: 0
Abstentions: 4

* 1 Peter 1:3
** Mark 1:15