

Telling the Story

(Evangelism in the Early Church)

Maurice W. Lusk, III

And it came to pass in Iconium [Southern Galatia], that they [Paul and Barnabas] entered together into the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke, that a great multitude of both Jews and Greeks believed (Acts 14:1).

Here again we see the agenda that becomes the primary means of carrying the message of God to a destroyed world. Their message was that God had come down to this world to redeem the human race and restore man to his original state as a being created in the image of God. Why did Paul and Banarbas go to the synagogue? There was where the people of God were assembled to hear the voice of God as the Scriptures were read, expounded, studied, and kept alive in Israel. As Stephen said in his address to the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem,

*This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear." 38 "This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received **the living oracles** to give to us (Acts 7:37-38).*

As Paul writes concerning the Jews in Rom 3:1-2, "What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed **the oracles of God.**" Since the time of Ezra the scribe, who returned from Babylon to Jerusalem four hundred years earlier with what Jewish tradition claimed was a collection scrolls containing the

oracles or God, the Jews yet possessed these scrolls of the Law and the Prophets.”

It was from these writings that the Jews drew their hopes of a deliverer, an Anointed One (Messiah/Christ), who would save Israel from its occupation by the Romans and restore the Jews to their original place as the chosen people of God. Every synagogue of every major city of Palestine and throughout the Diaspora of the Mediterranean world possessed some form of these oracles of God.

So, if Paul wished to fulfill his commission from Jesus of Nazareth to carry the message of God’s redemption to the Jews of the Dispersion and also to the gentiles of the Greco-Roman world, he would need to go where he could find an audience who would know who the Messiah was, and a copy of the Scriptures from which to prove that Jesus of Nazareth had fulfilled the messianic prophecies found in these Holy Writings.

Here in this text (Acts 14:1-7), Paul and Barnabas entered into the synagogue of Iconium (most likely the largest synagogue of the city), requested a hearing and so spoke that a great multitude of both Jews and Greeks believed. Paul’s presentation was an apology (from the Greek *apologia* – a logical argument) for the messiahship of Jesus. Many believed but not to all.

The Unpersuaded Jews (14:2)

. . . and the unbelieving Jews stirred up and created evil in the souls of the gentiles against the brethren.

The word found here describing the attitude of those who did not accept Paul’s apologetic presentation is *a-peitho* (not persuaded), where the word used to describe those who accepted Paul’s case is *pisteuo* (believe). The word for believe is has its roots in the word meaning to be persuaded. The word used here telling us that some were not persuaded is *peitho* (I am persuaded) prefixed with the Greek alpha (a), which in Greek grammar negates the word to which it is prefixed. Many came to faith, which means “they were

persuaded” that Paul’s words were true and they responded with a behavior consistent with being persuaded. Those who were not persuaded did the same.

As is most always the case in the NT, disbelief expresses itself in anger and violent behavior. Here, those who were not persuaded attempted to instill their anger in others so as to create evil in the souls of the gentiles (*ethnoi* – the nations) against the brethren.

From Anger to Violence (14:3-4)

. . . they [Paul and Barnabas] stayed a considerable time speaking with boldness concerning the Lord, testifying of the word of his grace, [the Lord] granting signs and wonders by their hands. 4 The multitude of the city was divided, and some were with the Jews, and others with the apostles, 5 and when there came an attempt of the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers to mistreat them and to stone them, 6 having become aware this they fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra, and Derbe, and to the region round about, (14:3-6).

Paul and Barnabas remained in Iconium for “a long time” (*hikanon*- much or considerable, from *chronos* – time). Rather than retaliate against the unbelievers attempts to fill the people of Iconium with the desired to do them harm, Paul and Barnabas simply continued to speak with boldness concerning the Lord; i.e. the content and focus of their teaching and preaching was the identity of Jesus, giving testimony of the message of the his grace, and the Lord produced signs (*semeia*) and amazements (*tereta*) by their hands.

The miracles given to confirm Paul and Barnabas as messengers of God (Mark 16:20), appears to have led to a division within the city, some siding with the unbelieving Jews and others with the apostles. The axiom “When all else fails resort to violence!” is set in play here leading to Paul and Barnabas’ exit from Iconium.

Proclaiming Good News (14:7)

This text concludes with a reoccurring motif that appears again and again in this second composition of Luke, “*and there they were proclaiming good news.*” In these words we see a thread that runs throughout Acts of Apostles. The key term here is “*euangelizomai*,” [e-van-ga-LEEZ-o-my] meaning “to deliver a message,” which in the ancient world was done orally and loudly. It is this Greek word that gives us our word “evangelize.”

In the NT *euangelizomai* is essentially, “telling a story;” a story unlike any story ever told, a story that can produce great emotion. This story is filled with both the wonder and power of God. That the content of this message (*angelia*) is a cause of joy is conveyed by the prefix “*eu*,” attached to the word *angelia*, giving us *eu-angelion* (a good message), as may be seen in the words of the angel to the shepherds at the birth of Jesus, (Luke 2:10-11), “Behold I announce good news (*euangelizomai*) to you of great joy (*charan megalen*), which shall be to all the people, in that there was born to you today in the city of David a savior, who is Christ the Lord,” or, “the Lord Messiah.”

The gospel of the NT is the story of God’s descent into the world through the human birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. This visitation of God resulted in a recreation of the race of Adam. Those entrusted with this story, which Paul calls the “power of God unto salvation,” are the keepers of the story, but it is only a horded treasure until it is told, again and again; those who tell the story are essentially, “divinely appointed storytellers of the greatest story ever told.”

MWLIII

Excursus on “the Gospel” (Ευαγγελιζομαι/Ευαγγελιον)

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The terms of this study can be traced back into the ancient cultures of Israel and Greece. One of the most thorough discussions of this word family: *evangelizomai*, *evangelion*, *evangelistes*, is found in *The Theological Dictionary of the NT*, edited by Gerhard Kittel. Gerhard Friedrich does the article on the words of this study. He begins with a word picture of the noun *evangelion* (pronounced “e-van-ge-LEE-on),

Evangelion is a technical term for “news of victory.” The messenger appears, raises his right hand in greeting and calls out with a loud voice: *Chaire . . . nikomen*. [Rejoice . . . victory-MWL]. By his appearance it is known already that he brings good news. His face shines, his spear is decked with laurel, his head is crowned, he swings a branch of palms, joy fills the city, *evangelia* are offered, the temples are garlanded. . . crowns are put on for sacrifices and the one to whom the message is owed is honoured with a wreath. Political and private reports can also be *evangelia*. For them, too, sacrificial feasts are held. But *evangelion* is closely linked with the thought of victory in battle . . . Good fortune is contained in the words (G. Friedrich, “*evangelizomai, evangelion, et al,*” in *TDNT*, vol 2, p 722).

As terms having much biblical significance, these words are introduced into the sacred literature of the Jews through the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures called the Septuagint (LXX), done approximately 250 BC in Alexandria, Egypt. This transition begins with the OT concept of *barah* meaning “good new, a message causing rejoicing.” Jesus associates this word with the declaration of the fulfillment of the expectation of the arrival of the Messiah and the beginning of “the messianic age,” which was the interpretation given Isaiah 55-59 by Jewish writers of the Second Temple period.

Content of the Heralding Tradition

Both *evangelizomai* and *evangelion* take an implied content, as is evident from the name given to the written collection of what was told, preached, or taught of the redemption story of Jesus. What began as an oral tradition developed into a written account of the life of Jesus. The Gospels are not just reports of something that has happened or a message of joy; they are collections of revelation from God containing the power of God for salvation.

In the Greek Septuagint (LXX) the words *evangelizomai* and *evangelion* are used to translate *basar*, *basorah*, and *mebassr* in the Hebrew Scriptures, which means, “to proclaim or announce a message of great significance,” or “to tell someone something that brings great rejoicing.” One of the most common texts giving insight to the meaning and usage of the Hebrew *basar* (translated in the LXX by the Greek *evangelizomai*) is Isaiah 52:7-10, a text used by the early Christians:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news [Hebrew-basar and LXX-evangelizomai] who proclaims peace, who brings glad tidings [Hebrew-basar and LXX-evangelizomai] of good things, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns!” 8 Your watchmen shall lift up their voices, with their voices they shall sing together; for they shall see eye to eye when the LORD brings back Zion. 9 Break forth into joy, sing together, you waste places of Jerusalem! For the LORD has comforted His people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. 10 The LORD has made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God (Isaiah 52:7-10; see Romans 10:14ff).

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the whole concept of the good news of God associated with the coming of the Messiah is rooted in the writings of Isaiah:

O Zion, you who bring good tidings (basar, in the LXX-evangelizomai), get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, you who

bring good tidings (basar, in the LXX- evangelizomai), lift up your voice with strength, lift it up, be not afraid. Say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" 10 Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him (Isaiah 40:9-10).

Who has declared from the beginning, that we may know? And former times, that we may say, 'He is righteous'? Surely there is no one who shows, surely there is no one who declares, surely there is no one who hears your words. 27 The first time I said to Zion, ' Look, there they are!' And I will give to Jerusalem one who brings good tidings (basar), (Isaiah 41:26-27).

The Heralding Tradition in Judaism

The tradition of "the heralding of good news" at the coming of the Messiah was very much a part of the Judaism of the first century, as may be seen in later rabbinic writings of the second century AD. In the rabbinic writings of the second century AD and later, there is a continuing presence of the messianic expectation and the heralding of the salvation he will bring, which was very much alive in the first century AD. This is found in the *midrashic* and *haggadic* literature; i.e. the collections of popular theological views of the most notable sages of the Second Temple period. These writing, although not given written form until the second century AD, are held to be the oral teaching of the *sopehrim* (scribes or scholars) of the first century AD.

Gerhard Friedrich (*TDNT*, vol 2, p 717, footnote 105) gives a quote from a collection of rabbinic homilies on the coming of the Messiah, in a tractate titled, *Perqe Mishiach* (*Beth ha-Midrash*, 3, 73, 17), (in Str.-B, III, 10c), we have the following:

In that how he will draw men and **bring good news** (*basra*) to those who sleep in the twofold grave, and will say to them, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, arise, you have slept enough. And they will answer him and say: Who is it who has taken off the dust (off the grave) from us? And he will say to them: I am the Messiah of *Yahweh*, salvation has drawn near, the hour has

come. And they will answer him, If this is truly so, then go **and bring the good news** (*basar*) to the first man, that he may arise first . . . Then the first man will arise at once, and his whole generation and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the righteous, and all the patriarchs and all generations from one end of the earth to the other, and they will **raise the voice of joy** and singing, for it is said, How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of him that brings glad tidings (*basar*), Is. 52:7. *Perqe Mishiach* (*Beth ha-Midrash*, 3, 73, 17 (in H.L. Stack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum NT aus Talmud und Midrash*, III, 10c)

One would think that, given the Christian use of this text, the Jewish scholars would have evaded it, as they did the name *Yeshua* (Joshua/Jesus). But its presence in their literature gives us some indication of how strongly this belief was among the more conservative Pharisaic rabbis of the second century AD.

The point here is that the terms with which we are concerned, (in Hebrew, *basar*, and in the Greek LXX, *euangelion*), meaning the declaration of the fulfillment of the long awaited promise, are very much alive. In his first public proclamation, found in Luke 4:18-27, Jesus quotes a similar text from Isaiah 61:1-2a,

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, Because the LORD has anointed (mashach) Me, To preach good tidings (basar, in the LXX- evangelizomai), to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound; 2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.

The Gospel as the Redemption Story

The Greek terms *evangelizomai* and *euangelion* are more than simply “good news” in NT usage. Jesus associates it with the long expected declaration of the fulfillment of the coming of the Messiah and the beginning of the messianic age (Isaiah 52-66). *Evangelizomai* and *euangelion* take an implied content as is evident from the name given to the written collection of what was told and proclaimed of the redemption story of Jesus. What had begun as an oral tradition

developed into a written account of the Messiah's coming, his life, teachings, miracles, death, burial, and resurrection.

Evangelion is not just "good news." In the NT it has been filled with a specific content, it is the messianic story, the redemption drama. In Christian literature *evangelizomai/evangelion* is the story of the coming of the Messiah; from the announcement of his earthly birth heralded by an angel of God (Luke 2:8-15), to the announcement of his victory over death given by angels at the empty tomb (Luke 24:1-8), the verb *evangelizomai* becomes the act of heralding this specific body of good news.

The story called the gospel is the driving force of all the evangelistic activity of the book of Acts of Apostles. The words used for the story and the communication of this story are the noun *euangelion* and the verb *euangelizomai*, as may be seen in the following array of NT text containing the Greek terms of this study:

As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. 4 Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word [euangelizomai - heralding the good news of man's redemption in Christ], (Acts 8:3-4).

So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?" 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him [euangelizomai - he told him of the good news of man's redemption in Christ], (Acts 8:34-35).

But Philip was found at Azotus. And passing through, he preached [euangelizomai - he proclaimed the good news of man's redemption in Christ] in all the cities till he came to Caesarea, (Acts 8:40).

Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching (euangelizomai - heralding the good news of man's redemption

in Christ), *the word to no one but the Jews only.* 20 *But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus (euangelizomai - heralding the good news of man's redemption through recreation in Christ),* 21 *And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord (Acts 11:19-20).*

Now when they had fulfilled all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in a tomb. 30 *But God raised Him from the dead.* 31 *He was seen for many days by those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are His witnesses to the people.* 32 *And we declare to you glad tidings (euangelizomai - the good news of man's redemption) – that promise which was made to the fathers.* 33 *God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus (Acts 13:30-33).*

And they (Paul and Barnabas) were preaching the gospel there (euangelizomai - heralding the good news of man's redemption through recreation in Christ), in the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe, (Acts 14:7).

However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there. 35 *Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord [euangelizomai - heralding the good news of man's redemption] with many others also (Acts 15:34-35).*

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 *Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel [euangelizomai - he proclaimed the good news of man's redemption in Christ] to them (Acts 16:10).*

Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel [euangelion – the news of God's redemption] of God 2 which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, 3 concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was

born of the seed of David according to the flesh, 4 and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. 5 Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name, 6 among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:1-5).

For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel [euangelion – the news of God’s redemption] of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers (Rom 1:9)

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ [euangelion – the news of God’s redemption in Christ] for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek (Rom 1:16).

How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? 15 And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of the ones proclaiming glad tidings of good things [euangelizomai - proclaiming the good news of man’s redemption in Christ]!” 16 But they have not all obeyed the gospel [euangelion – the news of God’s redemption]. For Isaiah says, “LORD, who has believed our report?” 17 So then faith comes out of hearing, and hearing through the word of God. 18 But I say, have they not heard? Yes indeed: “Their sound has gone out to all the earth, And their words to the ends of the world,” (Rom 10:14-18).

For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ has not accomplished through me, in word and deed, to make the Gentiles obedient – 19 in mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ [euangelion – the news of God’s redemption in Christ]. 20 And so I have made it my aim to preach the gospel [euangelizomai - proclaim the good news of man’s redemption in Christ]!” not where Christ was named, lest I should

build on another man's foundation, 21 but as it is written: " To whom He was not announced, they shall see; And those who have not heard shall understand." (Rom 15:18-20).

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel [euangelion – the news of God's redemption] and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began 26 but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith 27 to God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen, (Rom 16:25-27).

In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation [euangelion – the news of God's redemption]; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory (Eph 1:13-14).

Conclusion

In the NT *euangelizomai* is "telling the story;" a story unlike any story ever told. This story should produce great rejoicing. It is filled with both the wonder and the power that comes from God. This was so from the very beginning. In the words of the angel to the shepherds at the birth of Jesus in Luke 2:10-11, "Behold I announce good news (*evangelizomai*) to you of great joy (*charan megalen*), which shall be to all the people, in that there was born to you today in the city of David a savior, who is Christ the Lord."

The gospel later becomes the story of the descent of God into the world through the birth, life, the teaching, the wonders of Christ; and greatest of wonders, his resurrection into a new creation existence for the race of Adam. Those entrusted with this story, which the apostle Paul calls the "power of God unto salvation," are the keepers of the story, but its power is only released when the story is told; and those who tell the story are the storytellers of the greatest story ever told.