

Book Review: Evangelism in the Early Church

by Daniel H. Chew

Book: Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970)

The book by Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, is a book detailing how evangelism is done in the context of the early church, with a focus upon the post-apostolic pre-Nicene era. Chapter 1 starts off with the overall historical context of the era which facilitates the act of evangelism in the early church, namely: the Roman Peace, ubiquity of the Greek language and Greek thought, the quest for security, the need to deal with guilt, the desire to escape from the determinism of Fate, and the spread of Jews and Judaism within the Roman Empire.

Chapter 2 details the obstacles to evangelism from both Jews and Greeks, listing the factors that either aided the acceptance or rejection of Christianity by them — intellectual, cultural, ethical and social. Chapter 3 has Green give a presentation of the Gospel that the early Church proclaimed. Green does this through a look at how the different authors of the books of the New Testament understood the Gospel with its motifs of proclamation (κηρυσσω and cognates), preaching the Gospel (εὐαγγελίζομαι and cognates) and witnessing (μαρτυρεω and cognates).

The rest of the book focuses on evangelism proper. Chapter 4 looks at how the early church evangelized the Jews and the successes and failures of the Jewish missionary enterprise during that era. Chapter 5 looks at the evangelization of the Gentiles, the “translation” of the Gospel for Gentile hearers, and the risks and gains in that endeavor. Chapter 6 speaks of the biblical teaching on conversions and the impact the teaching of the necessity of conversion has on those who hear the Gospel, giving some examples of the reasons why some ancients like Tatian convert to Christianity (pp.161-5). Chapter 7 deals with the nature of the evangelists who were proclaiming the Gospel, and show that both formal and informal proclamation by people from all kinds of life were involved. Chapters 8, 9 and 10 deal with evangelistic methods, motives and strategies in the early church, where examples from written sources by the ancients and the church fathers as well as archaeological finds were used to reconstruct what went on in that era.

This reviewer has learned a lot from the book, especially since there are little books on how evangelism is done in the early church. Green does a good job of presenting how unregenerate Jews and Gentiles during that era would have viewed Christianity with its counter-cultural and exclusivist message. For example, one is led to in some sense sympathize with the Jews who see what they believe as an unbiblical sect taking their heritage of the Old Testament Scriptures and calling themselves the new Israel while denying the natural Jews their heritage (pp. 99, 100). The alienation of many Jews from the Christian faith seems to be partly due to the growing hostility of Gentile Christians towards the Jews during that era. Chapter 8 on evangelistic methods is fascinating as it shows us the many ways that evangelism proceeds during that era, primarily through preaching and witnessing within the home, the basic social unit of both the Jews and the Romans. The discussion that household baptism sometimes includes the baptism of babies (p. 210) shows that household conversions were very important in that era, certainly an important issue in light of the modern dispute with our Credobaptist brethren.

Another commendable thing about the book is it attempts to stick close to Scripture as a major authoritative source for the history of the church despite their interaction with critical scholarship. This attempt to closely follow Scripture can be seen in the discussion about the Gospel in Chapter 3, which though it discusses the views of Schweitzer, the existential theologians and Form Criticism among others on the question of the kerygma of Scripture (pp. 60-63) argues against their criticism of a fixed kerygma and chooses to allow the Scripture as historically received by the Church to define its Gospel message.

One critique about the book however is when it speaks of the “translating” of the Gospel in the evangelization of the Gentiles. Certainly it is true that contextualization in the sense of language usage occurs. The issue however is that Green uses as evidences of such translations the writings of Paul (pp. 116-7), which are found in the Scriptures themselves. Therefore, it is strange that Green later probes the issue of how far the Subapostolic Church misrepresent the Gospel as a corollary of such contextualization, as if the writings of Paul set a precedent of later “undue adaptation to the thought forms of the day” (p. 141). Any over-contextualization done by people such as Ignatius, the example given by Green (p. 138), should not be seen as continuing the trajectory of Paul, but of compromising with the

worldviews of their era, noting that Paul in Acts 17 for example though he quotes pagan poets did not for example approve of Zeus worship.

As it was mentioned, Green's book is helpful in its detailing of the evangelistic methods of the early church. Such could give us guidance as to how better to do evangelism instead of the modern fad of getting our methods from the world of sales and business. Furthermore, the methods pertaining to evangelism of Jews and Gentiles could be broadly applied today to those conversant with the Judeo-Christian worldview and those who are not, as both types of people still exist and need to be given the Gospel for their salvation.