

Present Day Evangelisation

SECOND LETTER TO A BROTHER

by H. R.

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D.B.E.A.,
38 Kendall Avenue South,
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(Second Letter to a Brother)

NOTE — To avoid any misunderstanding, the writer of these lines desires that it be understood that this letter is fictitious and without any controversial aim. He chooses, from among many others, a phrase of one of his correspondents, expressing in a precise and moderate manner the character of present day evangelism, for this phrase offers a theme easy to link with several questions which are the order of the day.

March, 1912.

DEAR BROTHER,

After having taken cognisance of my letter on "The Lord's Supper and the Lord's Table," intended to combat certain loose views which have been expressed amongst us, you write to me rightly that the present pre-occupation with the subject of the Lord's Supper is a kind of rebound to the claims of T.W., because in our present young generation there is a tendency to go from one extreme to the other, like a pendulum before reaching its equilibrium.

I do not doubt the correctness of your remark; however, I should like to add this. There are, without doubt, cases where, having to combat a

narrow and dangerous principle, one is obliged to put much weight and emphasis on another right principle, which condemns it. How many times have we not been obliged to combat legalism which insists on responsibility, by insisting, in our turn, on the grace which abolishes legal responsibility. Although this game of counterpoise has its dangers, it is, however, legitimate, only it requires much wisdom, moderation and doctrinal balance, but it is by no means a question of this in the case of which we speak, where we see an error of narrowness combated by an error of looseness. To act thus is to condemn oneself, never to find one's balance again, while the Word of God alone makes us find it and maintain it from the outset, without our needing to swing like a pendulum. We are not excusable for not seeking immediately in the Scriptures the magnet which fixes the needle of our compass, and, be it noted, all looseness as to elementary principles of Christian witness associates us anew with the principles of this present evil age from which grace has withdrawn us. The fact is that the ardour of combativeness and the desire to triumph over an adversary seem to have more importance with the present generation, than humble dependence on the Word of God.

You quote, with much love, as an excuse for this state of things, the great zeal which drives

young Christians to evangelisation. Allow me to remind you of what you say on this subject: "All these questions are much more the order of the day in this country than on the continent, because we are surrounded by earnest and devoted Christians of all shades, ecclesiastical and otherwise, and they are very numerous. Besides, the barriers which existed are disappearing in a measure, because the common efforts to spread the Gospel—more than ever necessary in these times of declension—bring together children of God who were little known (or unknown) previously."

This phrase sets forth very clearly and distinctly the subject which I have on my heart to discuss with you, but, before approaching it, I should like to make a short remark. You say you are surrounded, more than on the continent, by a large number of fervent Christians and devotees of every shade. I think a little reflection will suffice to show that neither the devotedness nor the number is confined to the country in which you live. I know hardly any country where the number of fervent and devout Christians would be greater at present than in Germany, and where they might be more represented by all shades of opinion. These Christians act freely in evangelisation; they are loved and esteemed by all, and we are happy

to recognise them and to stretch out a brotherly hand to them. It is the same, although to a lesser degree, in a part of Switzerland, and I was a witness, last spring, of the same efforts in Belgium, then in places in France where one could hardly expect a serious and lasting movement of this nature.

One thing, perhaps, contributes to error on this subject: that is that national characteristics, in which Christians, alas! all participate more or less, differ; and that in your surroundings one easily adopts an energetic activity, under which much self-will can be hidden, as having infinitely more value than a steady, quiet work which leaves the worker in the shade, and, in the end, may be accompanied by more real results than the first.

One more little objection and I approach my subject. You say that the barriers which existed are disappearing in a measure, and you attribute this result to the common effort to spread the Gospel. I shall, perhaps, astonish you by saying that if this is the cause of this reconciliation, however real, I should sincerely regret it, for it is quite another cause which seems to me to have provoked it in my surroundings. Taught by humiliating experiences, through having confidence in themselves, a good number of brethren have realised that a so-called superiority, acquired by

a more exact knowledge of the Scriptures, is not worth more than the practical faithfulness of their brethren associated with present religious systems. If it is not that which has made them seek the fellowship of their brethren, whilst desiring to see them set free, I should esteem the brethren, of whom you speak, much to be pitied. The fact is that, in the relatively restricted circle in which it is given to me to act, it is—I note with joy—true humiliation as to our state which has made us seek to realise more the unity of the Spirit with our brethren, where they are found, which has gained the hearts of several of them and has made them appreciate, in some measure, the value of the truth which we have to present to them. There is an immense difference between that and placing ourselves on their ground.

It is, however, this distance which a young generation, which is occupied exclusively with evangelisation, seeks to do away with, thinking that it is good that “the barriers which have existed should disappear.” These young Christians do not see that, in speaking thus of taking away these barriers, they enter into a way of looseness and indifference to the truth. These barriers which must fall, or rather ought never to have existed, are a lack of love, spiritual pride, sectarian narrowness, feeling of superiority and the aggressive

spirit which results therefrom—the barriers which must remain are obedience to the Word and humble dependence on the Scriptures, which separate us from false doctrines, teaching dishonouring to the name of Christ, practical negation of the Holy Spirit, clericalism in all its forms, the mixing of the family of God with the world. You would not wish these barriers to fall, would you, dear brother?

When we find ourselves in touch with “fervent and devout Christians of all shades, ecclesiastical or otherwise,” our whole heart goes out to them; we apply ourselves—unknown to them, perhaps—to keep with them the unity of the Spirit, treating them as part of the same body, and basing on this fact our relations with them in all humility and gentleness, in the bond of peace. It is this unity of the Spirit which is so invoked by Christians to-day who know absolutely nothing of its meaning and extent.

All this, dear brother, brings me to the subject which I have had on my heart for a long time, that of evangelisation, for which your phrase will serve as the theme.

We have, therefore, well established, it seems to me, that the barriers which separate us from divers Christian sects must exist without wounding the love which is inseparable from the truth in

brotherly relations. It is on this ground of evangelisation that I see the young generation not taking account of the necessary barriers of which I speak. Certainly I should rejoice if it were only a question of brotherly relations and of a broad recognition of the happy results of the faithfulness and devotion of brethren from whom we are separated by our testimony, but this is by no means the case, and I shall seek to prove it. I claim that the decline—note well, I insist particularly on the above—shows itself at the present time as much in the manner of evangelising as in the abandonment of the elementary principles of gathering of the children of God.

That the Lord, whatever His instruments may be, acts in an altogether special manner in these last days to bring souls to the knowledge of the Gospel and to gather His own in view of the near return of Christ, is undeniable, and this fills with joy every heart attached to Christ and His Church. However, I have some doubt in expressing this truth with your words that “the common efforts to spread the Gospel are more than ever necessary in these days of ruin.” It is much less a question here of our efforts, and especially of our common efforts with those from whom our walk separates us, than of the action of the Lord Himself in view of gathering souls for His coming. It is on this

last character of evangelisation that we cannot insist enough. It is one of the special features of the witness of Philadelphia, and everywhere where true Philadelphians meet, they will see realised, in their extreme weakness, this encouraging word of the Lord: "Behold, I have set before thee an open door." But let us remember that the open door is only one of the features composing the whole of those which characterise Philadelphia. Philadelphia has little strength, she has kept the word of the True One, she has not denied the name of the Holy One, and more than that, she has her point of departure and the reason of her existence in her name: "Brotherly love;" finally she awaits the Lord. Everywhere where I meet these characteristics united, even with isolated Christians, I recognise Philadelphians, and I count for them on the "open door." Note that it is not a question there, as you say, of "common efforts," but of a moral state which leads to this result, because Philadelphia, having little strength, the Lord puts Himself at her disposal, as the One Who has "the key of David." It is, perhaps, well to add that, whilst the faithful realise these characteristics, sooner or later the "synagogue of Satan" disowns and rejects them.

Such a position is very humble, but very blessed in the work which proceeds directly

from the Lord. Doubtless it is no longer the realisation of that which was demonstrated at the beginning of the Church, in her days of youth and strength: "standing firm in one spirit, with one soul" (Phil. 1. 27, 28). However, this common realisation can take place, although much more partially than formerly. from the movement that the Philadelphian character of individuals has united in the same testimony.

Now I ask you if it is the same happy and simple picture which you have at present before your eyes. Does this picture resemble in any measure the evangelisation of Peter, of Paul, and of their companions? The manner in which these latter proceeded (for it is not on the subject of the Gospel that I speak here) differed utterly, but let us first examine the Scriptures to get a clear idea.

At the beginning of the preaching of the Gospel, whether among the Jews or the nations, the miracle preceded it habitually, and served, so to speak, as the theme. We shall, therefore, leave these cases on one side as differing, in the manner of procedure, from present day evangelisation. Other cases, however, have not the same character. If Philip evangelises the Samaritans on the basis of a miracle, he is also directly sent by the Lord—it is true by an angelic messenger—to the eunuch. On

the other hand, brethren, pursued by persecution, go here and there, evangelising (Acts 8. 4; 11. 19), and this last case would correspond more to the evangelisation of our days.

The preaching of Paul among the nations is much less often accompanied by the miraculous, though this was, for example, the case at Lystra. In chapter 13 Paul and Barnabas are sent by the Holy Spirit. Sergius Paulus asks to hear the Word, and the miracle only takes place to remove the obstacle which Elymas opposes to the Gospel (Acts 13. 7-12). The same fact is reproduced at Philippi (Acts 16. 18), but it is here also seen, in a very interesting manner, how the apostle proceeded in his mission. He stays "several days" at Philippi, there, as generally, without doing anything but waiting on God. He makes use of the usual meeting places to announce the Word. At Philippi it is at the river side where it is customary to pray; everywhere else in the synagogues where "according to his custom" he announces the Gospel first to the Jews; finally at Athens, in the Areopagus, when the curious take him there. Everywhere, profiting by customs and circumstances, he accomplishes his service quietly waiting on the Lord. At Corinth he makes tents and discourses in the synagogue, then he retires to the house of Justus, awaiting the manifestation of

the "much people" that his Master says He has in this town. At Ephesus, rejected by the synagogue, he speaks in the school of Tyrannus and separates the disciples, withdrawing them from among hostile and unbelieving Jews. Everywhere we find calm with him, exempt from all agitation and seeking of novelty, a true servant entirely about his business, seizing the opportunity without provoking it, but certain that God will furnish it to him. I do not speak of the manner, so profoundly instructive, in which Paul adapts his preaching to the circle in which he finds himself and to the persons to whom he addresses himself, for I only wish to bring out this: no search, no human means of publicity, but an absolute dependence on divine direction in the midst of circumstances which God Himself has ordered or prepared. Many days doing nothing, save waiting on the Lord; simple conversations, attending to his manual work; preaching before a limited audience; sometimes addressing crowds.

Did Paul seek crowds? When God sends them to him, as at Lystra or Corinth, he rejoices and acts in consequence. Philip does the same in Samaria, Peter at Jerusalem. When God sends a eunuch to Philip, a Sergius Paulus, a Felix, an Agrippa, or even a family like Lydia's and the jailor's, to Paul, Cornelius and his neighbours to

Peter, all these men do not wish for anything else, do not speak of "common efforts to be accomplished" to spread the Gospel, as, for them, it is the Lord Who spreads it Himself. No preparation but what God prepares for them.

Such is the procedure of the apostle. Let us now see the common work, and to whom, for evangelisation, Paul gave the hand of association. To Barnabas first, who was specially called to this service by the Spirit of God. But when Barnabas, giving way to family ties, wants to introduce in common action "a man who had not gone into the work with them," Paul separates from him. He then chooses Silas and other companions in the work whose hearts were entirely, and in full fellowship with him, in the work. Paul was very scrupulous in the choice of those to whom he extended the hand of association; he could rejoice in that Christ was announced, even if it was not "purely," but can you picture him associating himself with those who, although preaching Christ (perhaps with much fervour and devotion), did it in a party spirit?

I think I have said enough on this important subject to show how the Word regards it. We shall now examine the character of present day evangelism, but before doing so, I wish to repeat, insisting much on this point, that the Lord acts

when and where He will, and that I have neither to criticise the instruments He employs nor the results which it pleases Him to grant them, for this would be to criticise Him, but the question never puts itself thus to the one who desires to remain faithful to the Word. A respected brother who was asked to engage in a "common effort" in a remarkable evangelistic effort which took place in your country, answered with this short phrase: "The Spirit blows where He wills, but I must obey."

Now, I ask you, is the character of this obedience found in the manner in which evangelisation is practised to-day?

Desiring to avoid as much as possible any accusation of criticism, I shall pass over in silence all the meetings which are more or less stamped with clerical principles and practices. But, solely aiming to make myself understood, I shall concentrate in a little picture the scattered features of what is happening in your country now, and, under its influence, in ours. An evangelist goes to a town. His friends hire a vast hall for him. The local press announces the meeting. The public hoarding bears notices on which it is stated that Mr. X—for his name is mentioned—will announce the Gospel in the evening. Even the subject is given; with a paradoxical enough title, sometimes

even ambiguous enough to be morally doubtful, which excites the curiosity of the crowd. Printed invitation cards are put through the letter boxes of all the houses. Methods of advertising used for theatrical performances are put into use and carried into the domain of the things of God: Do you really call that fervour and devotion or dependence on God? No, certainly not, but the fact is that the desired result is achieved: the hall is full.

That is not all. In the case which I have just cited and where no clerical influence is felt, once the audience is there, what happens? Most often a preaching more likely to emotionalise than to reach the conscience. A good many, you will tell me, do not act thus. I do not doubt it, and I cannot but commend them to all the sympathy of the faithful, but I describe a state of things which belongs to this method, and which recurs frequently. A hymn repeated up to three times, very softly, loudly, and more loudly still. An invitation to those who have "received salvation" to-day to raise their hands. They are counted; to-day 15, to-morrow 20 conversions are claimed. Intense emotion among the young girls, and also often among the crowd, for emotion among crowds is communicative. Of 100 conversions claimed at the end of several days, often not one remains, and in all this great movement what has there been for

the Lord? Ah! how much more profitable, in this case, it would have been for the evangelist to go and sit down at Sychar's well, like his divine Master! And, on the other hand, how different is the preaching to the crowds as we see it in the Acts, when it is the power of the Holy Spirit that acts!

But, you say to me, it is very necessary, nevertheless, to gather souls together. Yes, I agree most emphatically with you that this is necessary, but not at all by the means of which I have just spoken. In localities where an assembly of Christians is found, this duty is incumbent upon them, and it is from this side that zeal, alas! is so often lacking in a very humiliating manner, and that we can see one of the distressing signs of decline. Is it then for the evangelist to announce that he will speak this evening, or should the assembly, knowing that the Gospel is announced on a certain day in its room, not imitate the slaves who, with the insistence of the Spirit, invite souls to come to the great supper? And if it needed, as I have often said, four men to carry the paralytic to the feet of Jesus, was it not worth the trouble? There, then, is one of the saddest faults among the children of God, with regard to evangelisation. Much more, besides this activity of faith, we have yet another resource which removes us far from all worldly

advertisement: prayer. You may be certain that where there are many individual and collective prayers on this subject, one will also find many results as to the number and conversion of those present. Such was the case with the Philippians: they contended along with the Apostle (Phil. 2. 27; 4. 3), and we see in the Colossians (2. 1; 4. 12) in what the combat consisted.

There, then, where we find a real development of the life of God, one will never be tempted to have recourse to human efforts, which usually accompany modern evangelism, but will have recourse to zeal according to faith and prayer.

I by no means forget, in saying these things, that the work of an evangelist is an altogether special work. The net cast into the sea and drawn to the shore collects fish of all sorts, and the case of Philip at Samaria shows us that this was the case from the beginning. But afterwards there is the calm and considered work of judging which is a good and which a bad fish, what must be put into the vessels and what thrown out. All those who are employed in drawing the net must occupy themselves with this work with perseverance (Matt. 13. 48). Is that what we see in our days? This haste to declare bad fish good generally characterises present day work. There are even certain circles where, after having brought to the

shore good fish, they are thrown back into the sea whence the Gospel net had brought them! Alas! a like manner of action has a good chance of not encountering any opposition even from the good fish, returned thus to their natural element and again mixed with the bad; but what a loss for them! What a loss for the fishers!

Thank God, I speak here neither to you, dear brother, nor to any enlightened Christian, but I notice a practice current among "fervent and devoted" Christians with regard to whom one would be tempted to remove, as being an obstacle, the barriers which separate us.

I now come to the sad consequences of the facts which I have just stated.

I see first in seeking big audiences a grave danger for the young evangelist. Do you think, said one of them to a very limited assembly, that I would have come so far to speak to two or three persons only? I do not think that the Lord would have said that to the Samaritan woman, nor Philip to the eunuch, nor Paul to the pro-consul, and perhaps God, I would say to this brother, intended you for this humble service, for fear that you might fall "into the snare of the devil." But if, in His grace, He gathers large audiences in order that they may hear the Gospel through you, speak boldly, do not fear. He will

watch over you and keep you from the danger of being puffed up by keeping you humble, in fear and trembling. If your work proceeds in the smallest way from you, you will acquire importance in your own eyes and you will prepare for yourself disappointments or falls.

There is, then, in the facts which I have described, a great danger for souls; convinced in a moment of emotion and without any work in their conscience, they turn aside very quickly. Others are present at these meetings with a good deal of composure; they consider the religion false which employs such methods, despise it and go away. Others, moreover, who are really converted, perhaps retain the irritating impression received at the beginning of their career.

There is, finally, a great danger for those assemblies which associate themselves with this form of evangelisation. Running after novelties, the young people, full of emotion, find the ordinary life of faith dull. They seek power, or that which has the appearance of it, where the spirit of sober good sense would have been more necessary to them. The truths which are the life of the assembly are neglected, lost to view; and when at last one sees the evangelists, who ought to maintain the barriers in the sense we have indicated, allow them to fall in view of "common efforts" with

other Christians, the assembly loses its position of separation, loses its testimony, loses, as we have noticed recently, even the notion of the elementary principles which constitute it.

I have no need to warn you, dear brother: let us avoid these dangers carefully. Let us avoid above all, by giving the hand to modern evangelism, weakening the testimony which God has confided to His own for the last days. This testimony exists, and if the great infidelity committed in certain countries by scandalous divisions has ruined it everywhere, for we are jointly and severally responsible for one another, do not think that one can remedy it by saying that "the common efforts to spread the Gospel are more than ever necessary in these times of ruin." No, they are no more necessary than to come back to "the law and the testimony" so painfully insulted. No, it is not a question of common efforts with fervent and devoted Christians to announce the Gospel. It is a question above all of being left there, as an afflicted and abased people trusting in the name of Jehovah, and instead of being puffed up, thinking that, perhaps, in the Gospel field, one will acquire a better reputation than that which one has lost, it is necessary to confess that one is without strength, and not to deceive oneself by common efforts, but to count on the Lord, Who, considering our

low state, will Himself set before us "an open door."

To act otherwise is, without doubt, to enter into the great current of the Laodicean spirit, where by the energy of man, or even the ability of Jacob, one seeks to acquire what, by pure grace, the Lord wishes to give us.

Let us not forget that Christians hold to these anti-scriptural practices because experience has taught them that they produce certain effects. From Methodism to the Salvation Army, we see these proceedings advocated because of their results. It is not for us to question these last, but our sole duty is to hold to the Word and to the practice which it teaches us. Then our results, you say, will be less. Perhaps, but we shall find ourselves to be Philadelphians, keeping the Word and having little strength, and I do not wish anything else for the children of God in these last days. Even Elijah himself knew nothing of these little results when he said: "I am left alone." Many of our brethren in Christ imagine themselves to be left alone because, at a given moment, God has manifested His power by their means! They are wrong. There were many more souls converted in Israel without Elijah than he thought, but it was an afflicted and humbled people who, instead of the approbation of the prophet, had that of God.

It was necessary for Elijah to learn under the juniper tree that he was weaker than the weakest of these despised ones, but even this lesson profited him little until God obliged him to resign his ministry.

Dear brother, a few more words to conclude this too-lengthy letter. All the present evangelistic movements, on the admission of thoughtful people, are the product of testimony given and spread in the world 80 years ago. Previously, as agreed by those who are least sympathetic to it, this movement was absolutely unknown. In this testimony there was, from the beginning, correlation between these two things: the free action of the Holy Spirit in the Church, and His free action outside, in the world. As did the Apostle Paul in his ministry, we must faithfully maintain the two without ever disconnecting them, and keep ourselves from associating with those who would welcome the action of the Holy Spirit in the world, whilst rejecting it in the Church. The Christians of whom I speak here have, by the fact of their ecclesiastical associations, added to the evangelisation, the only service which they recognise, the proceedings at which we tremble, a few of which we have indicated. To associate oneself with this, however slight the differences may often be, is to associate with the

worldliness of the Church ; it is to spoil the Gospel and to take away its character of simplicity according to God ; it is to enter into a movement which seeks power in effort and does not say: "To obey is better than sacrifice." As for us, let us follow the way which the Word teaches. It suffices for all time, and gives us the perfect model of what should be perfect evangelisation according to God.

Let us rejoice with all our heart to see crowds converted in certain countries, whether by means of brothers really separated from the world or of brothers who "prophesy in the camp," or even of those who "do not follow us" (Mark 9. 38) ; and let us not expose ourselves by our narrow-mindedness to the rebuke which the Lord addresses to His disciples on this subject, but let us not follow them and not return into the camp to prophesy with them. Everywhere where we find fervent and devoted evangelists announcing the Word according to the light which they have received, let us pray for them, if we cannot associate with them practically. Let us pray for the souls whom their preaching brings into contact with the truth, so that they may be able to "come again with rejoicing, bearing their sheaves." Let us associate ourselves, on the other hand, by our collaboration, our activity and our prayers, with the work of our

brethren who pursue their humble service, to which the Lord gives, at times, with you as on the continent, a marvellous extension, and which is still accomplished to-day without any of the practices in vogue to which I have called your attention, but let us not grow proud through these successes, and let us never forget that "God giveth grace to the humble."

It is very certain, dear brother, that among the evangelistic brethren whom I desire to exhort, there are those who adopt loose practices or are tainted with the clerical influences of which I speak. Every sober-minded Christian disapproves of these brethren, or, at least, does not approve of them. More than one has refused to hear the exhortation, but if their refusal, while it does not take the character of revolt, must not and cannot separate us from them, let us not doubt that it deprives their ministry of many of its best results and becomes a stumbling-block for the simple.

If all these questions are, as you say, much more the order of the day in the country in which you live than on the continent, I believe I see the cause, not in a greater spiritual activity, but in the confusion into which incessant divisions have thrown souls. These questions are, you may well believe, the order of the day everywhere, but they are perhaps resolved more easily elsewhere, not by

the movement of the pendulum, but by its definite arrest in the Word.

I end this letter here, dear brother, with the desire that these pages may make the young generation alive to the dangers which threaten it in the perilous days through which we are passing.

Your very affectionate brother in Christ,

H. R.