

**MODELS OF EVANGELIZATION:
DISCERNING HOW TO LIVE AND PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL**

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Over a period of some fifteen years, starting in the year 2000, I found myself in the orbit of one of the most well-known and successful evangelization movements of modern times. I didn't plan it; it happened by friendship, curiosity, and a set of invitations that kept multiplying. The way I arrived there - and the way it ended, rather abruptly - taught me an invaluable lesson about the way Christianity works and spreads.

I grew up in southern Italy, deeply involved in my parish's youth and catechism programs before joining a Benedictine monastery at eighteen. Until thirty, I knew only the Roman Catholic Church, yet curiosity about other Christian traditions played a role in my choice to pursue doctoral studies in the UK to explore their theology and worship.

Oxford, is often celebrated as the "city of dreaming spires" not only for its many college chapels, but also the bell towers of the many parish churches. The religious scene I discovered there was exceptionally vibrant and offered a wide variety of forms of worship.

- On the traditional spectrum of Roman Catholicism there was the church of the Oratorians, St Aloysius.
- The charismatic evangelical church of St Aldates was bursting at the seams with students.
- Slightly more subdued but equally exceptionally well attended was St Ebbe's, a conservative evangelical church with outstanding preaching – if, sadly, totally fixated on the themes of God's wrath and penal substitution.
- And then of course there were the many classical Anglican chapels with their world-renowned choirs: Magdalen, New College, and Christ Church.

On any given Sunday I would attend the Roman Catholic mass at 9 am, then run for the 10 am service at St Ebbe's, and finally join the evening service at St Aldates - which featured 45-minute long sermons, speaking in tongues, laying on of hands, prophecies, healings and the like. For good measure, on weekdays, I became addicted to evensong, especially at₁

Christ Church (my college) and New College. It is there that began my love for the Anglican liturgy and its affinity with my Benedictine background. This experience was going to play a major role in my decision to become an Anglican some 20 years later.

I never attended any of these churches simply as an observer. I embraced their worship, reflected on their teaching, and made many friends.

Some even asked for spiritual counselling and at one point invited me to Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) in London. I soon befriended the pastors of that church. In those years the Alpha Course was spreading like wildfire in the Roman Catholic church and a sympathetic Roman Catholic monk like me was welcomed with open arms.

Over the following years they invited me to speak at several of their gatherings,

- included the Alpha Leadership Conference in the Royal Albert Hall –
- where I found myself elbow to elbow with Rick Warren, Joyce Meyer, Bill Hybels, Raniero Cantalamessa (the former papal preacher), and of course Nicky Gumbel.
- What drew me there was my genuine desire to understand what was that made the Alpha course so impactful and why HTB was growing exponentially and exporting its model to its plants so seamlessly. On their part, they were yearning for insights into the treasures of Catholic and especially Benedictine spirituality.
- video

They kept asking me to give talks about prayer, leadership, and Pope Francis' teaching on evangelization. At one point I even ran an Alpha Course with other students in Oxford.

HTB and the Alpha Course

Alpha has genuine strengths. The format lowers barriers for people who are secular, sceptical, or hurt by the Church.

It begins with a meal – significantly not preceded by prayer - then a video is shown, followed by a conversation in which participants are encouraged to speak honestly, and are not pressured into agreement. When people feel listened to, they listen in return.

Their videos and manuals use accessible language and testimony. The warmth of the home setting and the hospitality are just as essential as the teaching. Everything is designed to foster belonging as a conduit to believing.

It did not take me long to realize that this model works because it takes seriously some of the core principles of the Gospel:

1. Mission is a community enterprise, and Christian community is essentially missionary.
2. Every shared meal has a Eucharistic dimension even when it is not accompanied by a prayer. There is a grace hidden in the breaking of bread together.
3. The main vehicle of the Gospel is healthy fellowship, a disinterested hospitality that says: “You are welcome here, without precondition.”

In the progression of the course though, especially once it reaches the weekend away dedicated to the teaching on the Holy Spirit – its centrepiece- there is a twist.

The weekend on the Holy Spirit is designed to lead participants to experiential submission to divine power. The teachings emphasize the Holy Spirit’s irresistible energy and desire to ‘take control’. During the so-called *Ministry Time*, participants are conditioned to expect visible signs of divine activity such as trembling, crying, falling, or sensations of heat, understood as physical manifestations of the Spirit.

This teaching draws on a stream of so called “power evangelism” (promoted especially by John Wimber)” that relies on making God’s presence tangible and irresistible.

Needless to say, this easily plays with *suggestibility*: repetitive songs, collective emotion, and the authority of leaders create a charged environment in which participants anticipate and conform to ecstatic responses. The resulting phenomena confirm the authority of those guiding the process. Unintentionally, this can turn into a form of emotional management, power assertion, and social control.

Indeed, with time I discovered – with many others – that the smiling and friendly façade hides tight authority and conformity. Ironically, it is at HTB that I often heard this joke: compared to Protestants, the Roman Catholic Church is lucky to have only one person, the Pope, who is supposed to be infallible.

Rick Warren and *A Purpose Driven Church*

At one of the Alpha Leadership Conferences I met Rick Warren. I was profoundly impressed by his personality, pastoral experience, integrity, and wisdom. His book *A Purpose Driven Church* is a trove of pastoral wisdom on church growth.

His main idea is that if a Christian community truly is spiritually healthy, like a body, it will thrive.

- He teaches that “Every church needs to grow warmer through fellowship and deeper through discipleship”: genuine growth happens when believers experience

real community and commit to growing deeper in faith together. This chimes with a key HTB/Alpha principle: belonging as a conduit to believing.

- Rick Warren says that “People don’t care how much we know until they know how much we care.” People are drawn to love before doctrine: when the church listens, cares, and walks with people, hearts open naturally to the message of Christ.

As with HTB, here too though there is a twist.

Rick Warren frames church growth not around numerical expansion but around spiritual order. His model blends *authority, accountability, and orthodoxy* within a relational framework — a family bound by covenant, protected by leaders, and maintained by discipline. Excluding non-compliant members is considered necessary for the integrity and health of the body.

“All prospective members must complete a membership class and are required to sign a membership covenant.”¹

“Saddleback practices church discipline - something rarely heard of today. If you do not fulfill the membership covenant, you are dropped from our membership. We remove hundreds of names from our roll every year.”²

The aspect I find most concerning is the form of paternalistic and custodial leadership he promotes:

“Membership places them under the spiritual protection of godly leaders (Heb. 13:17; Acts 20:28–29). It gives them the accountability they need to grow.”³

Models of Evangelization

As you can see, I’ve been both blessed and tested by my engagement with a variety of models of evangelization. I hesitate to label them, but at this point in our reflection some mapping might be useful

¹ p. 54 · Location 791

² p. 54 · Location 793

³ p. 313

- I would say that the conservative evangelical Church of St Ebbe's at Oxford with its belief that clarity of preaching about Christ's death on the cross is the key to converting people is an example of a **kerygmatic** approach.
- Many Roman Catholic circles I have been exposed to over the years lean more towards **apologetics**: the key to evangelization is to explain and defend beliefs with the help of reason. A perfect example of this approach is the immensely successful ministry of Bishop Robert Barron in this country and his *Word on Fire* Catholic Ministries.⁴
- St Aldates in Oxford and HTB exemplify an **attractional** and **testimonial** approach to evangelization, with an emphasis on **charisms** that give an emotional impact to faith. In many ways this model is much more suited to a Postmodern context often sceptical about reason and distrustful of institutions. The emphasis on personal experience, emotion, and encounter bypasses intellectual suspicion and reaches the heart directly.
- I suppose that the model I have been associated most since becoming an Anglican and ministering in High Churches such as St Paul's Knightsbridge in London and then Saint Thomas Church in New York could be labelled as a **sacramental** approach to evangelization that also is **attractional** insofar as it privileges the beauty of worship and music, and an embodied appropriation of faith - with the concurrent risk of aestheticism.
- I also suppose that most mainstream Episcopal and Protestant churches would see themselves as leaning towards a more **incarnational** approach to evangelisation based on social outreach, inclusion, and social justice activism. Of course social outreach (often minus the inclusion and the commitment to social justice) is immensely important for Roman Catholics, HTB, and most Christian denominations. In these cases though it is seen more as an expression of faith than as a form of proclamation. The drawback is that many churches that adopt this incarnational method tend to be very quiet and implicit with the proclamation of faith.

⁴ Founded in **2000**, Word on Fire uses **media, film, podcasts, books, and online evangelization** to share the beauty and truth of the Catholic faith with a global audience. Its mission is to "**proclaim Christ in the culture**" by engaging contemporary society through reason, beauty, and storytelling — very much in the spirit of modern apologetics and the "New Evangelization" promoted by recent popes.

My experience has persuaded me that this variety is a blessing. Healthy evangelization should find ways of embracing all of them. At the same time, there always will be churches more comfortable with one model in particular and this is fine too. My intention here is to explore whether we can find some principles of discernment that help us to understand why some models enjoy such success despite what we, or at least I, would consider departures from Jesus' teaching and example.

Let us start with evaluating the success of these models around three main **areas**, namely truth, authority, and charisms. How does the way say HTB and Saddleback deploy each of them helps us to understand better what is going on?

1. Let us look at **Truth** first. Whether adopting the strategies of prioritizing belonging as a conduit to commitment, or intelligent and persuasive presentation, or even a relative simplification of core beliefs, **most of these experiments end up enforcing an intransigent and prescriptive adherence to a code of beliefs and morals**. You might think that this should make them less popular, but the contrary is true: in our time, the longing for structure, certainty, and stability can become so intense that a surprising number of people can be tempted to surrender their freedom to "godly leaders" and silence their critical sense. The contemporary political scenario should amply suffice to prove this point.
2. **Authority** is closely connected to Truth. These models are characterised by unforgiving forms of enforcement and exclusion (I experienced the latter from two of them!). Even more insidiously, they claim *divine* legitimacy for this authority, whether in the institutional form taken by the episcopal and papal ministries in the Roman Catholic Church, or by claiming a special mandate as in the case of many Protestant Leaders (remember the joke about all of them claiming infallibility!).
3. This in turn betrays a certain way of relying on **charisms** and of deploying them. Many such churches arise around charismatic leaders whose authority rests on personal magnetism and emotional appeal. Waves of revival—from the Great Awakening to Pentecostalism and Neo-Charismatic movements—share an unhealthy reliance on ecstatic worship, miraculous claims, and emotional intensity, often accompanied by a certain distrust of intellectual or theological reflection.

There are many more psychological, sociological, and political factors that should be taken into account. I chose to focus on these three areas to give an example of the kind of

theological, pastoral, and spiritual discernment required when thinking about models of evangelization.

Before I go further with this discernment though, let me pause for a moment to bring to the fore a potential source of bias on our part.

Confusion

Am I wrong in sensing some level of shyness in our Church when it comes to mission and evangelization? Is it not true that most of our communities have a tendency to retreat in a cosy **maintenance** approach, that is an almost exclusive concern with preserving building, traditions, assets, and with serving existing parishioners? Let me add also this: is it not true that sometimes we look at the undeniable growth of churches like HTB and Saddleback, or the popularity and effectiveness of the Alpha Course, with a mixture of envy, condescension, maybe guilt, sense of inadequacy, and a good measure of *confusion*?

Our discernment would benefit, I think, if we brought this confusion to the fore and bravely owned it.

We have a great Scriptural encouragement for this in the example of St Paul who, in his letter to the Romans declared: “I am not ashamed of the Gospel” (Rm 1:16). Whenever I read this passage I cannot help but thinking of Shakespeare’s famous sentence “The lady doth protest too much, methinks”.⁵ Had Paul not in fact felt uneasy about some aspects of his mission, or sensed the same disquiet in the reception of his message would he have written a whole letter trying to justify God’s ways of acting in history and in his own life? As it happens, part of what he was tempted to be ashamed of, to be *confused* about, was what he considered a failure in evangelization!

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit— that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. (Rom 9:1-3)

Do we not too feel *sorrow* and *anguish* about our inability to reach so many of our contemporaries, the limited impact of our efforts of evangelization, the rate of decline in

⁵ William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene II.

churchgoing? Are we not too confused about how successful some models we deem deeply flawed seem to be? Why is the Lord blessing them and not us?

The point I am trying to make about the necessity of theological, pastoral and spiritual discernment is meant to remind us of a simple fact: numerical, apostolic, vocational success should never automatically be interpreted as a sign of God's blessing.

Never take numbers and success at their face value.

We have no reason to be 'ashamed' – as long as we make every effort in our power to abide by solid and proven theological, pastoral, and spiritual principles of discernment, especially in the three areas I highlighted above, namely *Truth, Authority, and Charisms*.

Truth

We are right to be wary of the self-appointed champions of orthodoxy, or of the "right doctrine", "faithfulness to the Gospel" and the like. Solid theological reasons justify this suspicion.

- Truth in the Gospel is not primarily propositional but relational and personal. Only Jesus can say: *I am* the Truth, and only by following him, or dwelling with him, trusting him we are progressively introduced in it. Any claim to speak for the truth amounts to a claim to own Christ.
- In the time between Jesus' ascension and his return in glory – that is the time we live in- this ongoing introduction to the truth is the work of the Holy Spirit: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). Crucially, this means that this is a process, it takes time, and will reach its completion only at the end of history.
- Even more importantly, truth in Christianity is inseparable from love – Paul would say that truth can only be spoken in love, *veritas in caritate* (cf. Eph 4:16). This means that to win over others we should rely not on the coercion of doctrine, but on the eloquence of our caring and compassion – just as Jesus did. If we are unconvincing, it is ourselves we should question, not others.
- A number of other factors, especially with regards to the interpretation of Scripture, need consideration here. I never tire of meditating on one of the most puzzling of Jesus' choices, namely that he never wrote anything - ever, not a single word. The only access we have to his teaching and story is through a variety of witnesses, who instead of agreeing on a uniform literal record, left us several versions that inextricably combine memories with interpretations. I am not

disputing the inspiration of Scripture – far from it. I am simply saying stating the obvious, that is the inevitability of the labor, and the accompanying uncertainty, of *interpretation*. As one of my favorite authors on Scripture admirably puts it: “For those who count the Bible as sacred, interpretation is not a matter of whether to pick and choose, but how to pick and choose”.⁶

Authority

The so-called ‘great commission’, at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, is often appealed to by all the most zealous proponents of vigorous evangelization experiments:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Mt 28:18-20).

The usual reading of this passage is that since Jesus’ departure his disciples have been given authority and power to make disciples, baptize, and teach – thus completely subverting the meaning of Jesus’ words.

- Authority is given *not* to the disciples but to Jesus: “All authority has been given to *me*”!
- And Jesus does not go anywhere, on the contrary: “And behold (that is “Mind you!”) I am with you always, to the end of the age”.
- Whether this authority is claimed by Christian leaders institutionally (through the apostolic succession) or charismatically (through calling or empowerment for ministry), the consequences are equally deceptive. I am not questioning the ecclesiological principle of episcopacy nor the calling to ministry. The problem lies in *the kind* of authority often claimed by both with regards to truth and governance. Just as nobody can claim to ‘own’ the Truth, so nobody can claim unquestionable divine authority, or infallibility, in Christianity.
- Participation, consensus, mediation, and interpretation – however deeply frustrating at times (think about Conventions!) - are unavoidable in the process of

⁶ Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*, 56.

constant, vigilant, and collective discernment of Jesus' action and presence in history.

- We do not stand for an absent Jesus – we are always on the lookout for where Jesus is calling us.

Charisms

Which in turn leads us to charisms. I am all for a charismatic renewal – at least if we truly believe that we are saved by grace (cf. Eph 2:8), and confess with Paul: “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” (1 Corinthians 4:7). The main implication from what we have just seen about the nature of authority in Christianity is that a community thrives only to the extent that the whole variety of gifts, or charisms, necessary for the life of the Body of Christ are recognized, promoted, integrated in the service of the common good.

We are right to rely on *skills*. There is no point in appointing a director of music who can't read a score, a bursar who cannot count, a preacher who freezes in front of an audience. There is a crucial difference though between *skills* and *charisms*, lyrically illustrated by Paul's words:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Cor 13:1-3)

A skill becomes a charism when it is exercised with love. My skills truly contribute to the life and the thriving of Christian fellowship only when I look for the good of others and the common good before mine.

As for the gifts so valued by Pentecostals of Charismatic churches, there is no point in endless arguments about whether they should be promoted or discouraged – they keep recurring in the history of Christianity, they produce mixed results like every other forms of evangelization, some undeniably good others less. As with any other 'skill', their legitimacy too depends on whether they become a form of love.

Each of these three areas – Truth, Authority, and Charisms- would require a much more extensive exploration. My intention was simply to provide a broad outline of their

authentic nature in Christianity with the intention of helping the discernment of methods of evangelization and hopefully inspiring the never ending search for new ways of being faithful witnesses of the Gospel.

Many of the most successful models tamper with truth, authority, and charisms – something essential about the Gospel is lost in the process.

There are no shortcuts when it comes to evangelization. The Gospel grows from neighbor to neighbor – one neighbor at the time.

The other ‘Great Commission’

Having said all that, I do have something of a favorite model when it comes to evangelization – which I would like to outline in conclusion. I believe it will come as no surprise to any of you.

I like to think that we can find not one but two ‘great commissions’ in the Gospels.

In addition to Matthew 28:18-20, there is Luke 22:19 (although its oldest instance is to be found in 1 Cor 11:23-35): “Do this in remembrance of me”.

As any other scriptural passage, this declaration can be interpreted in a variety of ways. What is exactly that Jesus is telling us to do as the paramount expression of his presence and action in our midst? Is it the keeping the Lord’s day, the celebration of his sacrifice, the thanksgiving, the meal? No doubt all of these, inextricably.

And yet, personally, I am increasingly fascinated by two New Testament illustrations of the content of this commission, both to be found in Luke’s writings:

30When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. **31**And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. **32**They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:30-32)

42And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. **43**And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. **44**And all who believed were together and had all things in common. **45**And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. **46**And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking

bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47).

- There definitely is a way for Christianity to gain “favor with all people”.
- We have indeed been entrusted with a form of proclamation possessing immense attractional potential and eloquence – a privileged way God has chosen for people to be “added to our number, day by day”.
- It is a form of proclamation that truly “opens the eyes” of those who have Jesus at their table, at their side, in their lives *already* even when they are unable to “recognize him”.
- Even the “opening of the Scriptures” is powerless without this more eloquent form of proclamation – as we are told in the final acknowledgment of the disciples of Emmaus: “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?”. The hearts might have been burning already when the Scriptures were opened, but we only become aware of this ‘burning’ when this more eloquent form of proclamation has been deployed.

This ultimate form of proclamation is rendered with the image of the *breaking of the bread*.

Christ breaks the bread to give himself to us, to unite us in one body. The Christian community in turn becomes a bread that is broken, given to the world – and the body grows, becomes an even greater loaf that keeps breaking and growing in size to embrace more and more people. The image of breaking has a sacrificial undertone: it is by giving ourselves to others that others are inspired to give themselves to others in their turn – in a chain that is meant to extend to the whole of humanity.

Here, I believe, we find the ultimate principle of discernment when it comes to evangelization.

- Evangelization that begins and ends in broken bread speaks truth in love, exercises authority without coercion, and turns skills into charisms. This will open eyes, make hearts burn, persuade not by pressure but by presence.
- Jesus can vanish after the breaking of the bread because the ‘opening of the eyes’ means that his love has made a breakthrough – united with him, we too become this bread. It is our turn to break the bread and ‘vanish’, become signs – always

imperfect but signs nonetheless- of Jesus own love for the world – bring people to God, not to us.

“By this,” Jesus says, “everyone will know that you are my disciples—by the love you have for one another.” (John 13:35)

Love is where our only credibility as disciples of Jesus lies.

We are called to “go”, yes. But first to “do this”: welcome at our tables, listen with humility, “sell our possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all” – that is letting our skills turn into ‘charisms’, gifts that truly edify the body.

Then we will find that the Lord himself adds to our number, not because we have mastered a method, but because we have become transparent to the persuasive power of his love.