

# oikos evangelism

## the biblical pattern

By Dr. Thomas A. Wolf

Several fundamental insights from contemporary anthropology help us understand more clearly the biblical pattern of evangelism which flowed so freely, fearlessly and forcefully through the early church across the Mediterranean world.

Peter B. Hammond, professor of anthropology, Indiana University, observes that "in most cultures the social systems of greatest importance are based on kinship. Human beings everywhere are born into some sort of family. And almost always this family is important in giving them-literally and figuratively-a start in life: producing them, feeding, clothing, protecting, and educating them, and eventually establishing for them a 'place' in society...In most cultures the kin group plays an even more important role [than in America], lasting throughout life as the principal source of the individual's emotional, economic, social-and frequently supernatural-support, and providing the basis for community organization."

Dayid G. Mandelbaum, professor of anthropology, University of California, summarizes his findings: "Whatever diversity there may be among social groupings the world over, there are at least two types which are found in every human society. The family is one of them—In every land, among every people, the child is ordinarily raised and nurtured within a family. The other type of group universal to humanity...is the local community. Just as no person normally lives all his life alone, devoid of any family, so does no family normally live entirely alone, apart from any local group...of neighbors."<sup>2</sup>

Mandelbaum goes on to point out a third group-the clan-which is also a cultural universal, if one allows for its evolution in the contemporary Western setting. The clan has developed into "...the social units which are extensions of the local group...voluntary associations based on common interests...ranging from trade unions and medical associations to bridge clubs and parent-teacher associations. Each of these groupings is held together by a common interest, an interest arising from mutual participation in the same trades, the mutual enjoyment of a game, or mutual problems in relation to a set of children."

The three universal units of societies worldwide, according to anthropological research, are social systems based on 1) common kinship, 2) common community and 3) common interests. Now let us go one step further. Since this trinity of social systems is a part of present day human life, would we be so surprised to discover the same central characteristics in the human matrix of social life in the times of the New Testament? In fact, that is exactly what we find. For this phenomenon is not only transcultural, it is transhistorical, reaching across centuries.

The apostolic church used the interlocking social systems of common kinship/community/interest as the backbone for communicating the Gospel. The basic thrust of the New Testament evangelism was not individual evangelism, it was not mass evangelism; and it was definitely not child evangelism. The normative pattern of evangelism in the early church was OIKOS EVANGELISM.

"Oikos Evangelism" What is it? *Oikos* is the Greek word most often translated *house* or *household* evangelism. But be careful. Don't just assume you know what those words mean. Of course, we know their basic meaning in English. But what was their original connotation?

Under the old Attic law, *oikos* was *the whole estate*, while *oikia* was the *physical dwelling* only. However, that precise distinction was lost in later Greek. In the New Testament there are several places where *oikia* actually means *the inhabitants of a house* (Mt. 12.25; Jn 4.53; I Cor. 16.15; Phil. 4.22)

*Oikos* means a house. Specifically, it means *an inhabited house* in contrast to *domos*, the mere building itself. Thus, one can understand the significance of a house being a dwelling. *Oikos* was sometimes used to specify a certain kind of inhabited building such as a temple, a palace, or even a grave.

It was common in Egypt to call a temple the oikos of the deity. The papyri refer to "the oikos of Ammon" in the main temple of Hephæstus. The anthropological literature records the basic animistic practice of consecrating an image or shrine to a spirit and inviting the spirit to come and indwell the shrine. Such is the significance of Micah's oikos/shrine for the spirits during the times of the Judges (Judges 17.5)

The oikos of the Lord of Israel was the chosen place for His presence (Judges 18.31; 2 Sam. 12.20), though there was continual clarification that the Lord of all the earth does not dwell in buildings made by man (Is. 66.1 -2; I Kings 8:12-21, 27-30; Jer. 7.1 -11; Acts 7:46-50).

Jesus spoke of His Father's oikos, sometimes meaning the earthly temple (Jn. 2.16) and sometimes the heavenly dwelling (Jn. 14.2). Spiritually, the body becomes the real oikos/dwelling place of God (I Cor. 3.16; 2 Cor. 6.16). Even demons will claim men's bodies as an oikos to inhabit when conditions are appropriate (Mt. 12:44; Lk. 11:24) I Timothy 3.15 makes it clear that the Oikos of God "is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth."

In a broader sense, *oikos* referred to *one's entire estate, people and property forming one family, a household*, as the usage of oikos applied to the church would imply in Israel, the oikos included not only wife and children, but also servants and resident aliens. Thus, the command of Deuteronomy 12.7, "You shall eat before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household", is explained by 12.12, "You shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your sons and daughters, your menservants and your maidservants." (See also Deut. 14.26)

This same concept of oikos was just as basic in Graeco-Roman society and thought. Acts 10 has a casually given, though faithful, definition of oikos. It says that "Cornelius feared God with all his oikos/household" (10.2). An angel of God instructed Cornelius to send for Peter, saying "He will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your oikos" (11.14) When Peter arrived, "Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his kinsmen and close friends persons" (10:24,27).

An oikos is a social system composed of those relate to each other through common ties and tasks. The New Testament oikos included members of the nuclear family, but extended to dependents, slaves and employees. Oikos members often lived together, but always sensed a close association with each other. And note this carefully, the oikos constituted the basic social unit by which the early church grew, spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord.

Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, confirms that "the (oikos) family understood in this broad way, as consisting of blood relations, slaves, clients and friends, was one of the bastions of Graeco-Roman society. Christian missionaries made a deliberate point of gaining whatever households they could as lighthouses, so to speak, from which the Gospel could illuminate the surrounding darkness. [We are, then,] quite right in stressing the centrality of the loikos household to Christian advance."

By thus cleaning the lenses of our socio-historical spectacles, we can see what an Oikos meant to the early church. An oikos was the fundamental and natural unit of society, and consisted of one's sphere of influence-his family, friends, and associates. And equally important, the early church spread through oikoses-circles of influence and association. With only a moment of reflection, we begin to realize a significant difference of thrust, tone, and tenor between much contemporary evangelism and early church outreach.

The first church does not appear to have had a fanfare of mass campaigns for evangelism. They would have considered it foolishness to organize camel caravans for growth, bringing kids to Timothy's Children's Church with the promise of Bythia Burgers after the services. (Tell me now, can you honestly imagine Silas and Titus as camel captains vying for the grand prize going to the camel team averaging the most children at the 1st Ecclesia of Ephesus??) But, joy of joys, the early church was not encumbered with the wholly unnatural (unnatural then and unnatural now) experience of forced evangelism; going reluctantly, flinchingly and embarrassingly door to door to encounter people they did not know, to explain a message which the first time often did not make sense, to an audience totally uninterested or unfriendly.

As Michael Green reminds us, an oikos for the New Testament church consisted of "blood relations, slaves, clients, and friends. Christian missionaries made a deliberate point of gaining whatever loikos] households they could as lighthouses, so to speak, from which the gospel could illuminate the surrounding darkness." An oikos corresponds to what contemporary anthropologists define as the three universal social systems of common kinship, common

community, and common interests.

OIKOS EVANGELISM is the God-given and God-ordained means for naturally sharing Our supernatural message. The early church spread through oikos evangelism-evangelizing family members who saw the old sinner become the new saint; sharing with the neighbor who questioned how such a difference had come over his old friend, and reaching the guys in the local trade union or the oikos that played tennis together.

It is here, also, that we catch an eye-burning hint of the key to oikos evangelism: Life transformation. If oikos evangelism is God's key to the natural and rapid spread of the Good News, the life transformation is the key to oikos penetration and persuasion. Life transformation. Maybe that is why some adults are forced into evangelizing only children. Could it be that the children do not yet see what the adult peer groups so clearly perceive-that one has become religious without becoming radiant? And could this also be a clue to why, all too often, the persons who are so gung-ho on doorbell evangelism seem-.er, uh, well, not to offend anyone, they just seem a little strange? Now, don't get me wrong. They are sincere; unquestionably so. And they are enthusiastic; embarrassingly so. And yet, so help me, I've met a lot of them, and well...Could it be that some of us in the contemporary church who are so bold to evangelize "out there" fall fruitless "right here" in our own oikos? In the early church, it was the restoration of balance, the restitution of wrongs, and the fragrance of an enchanting new life that drew so many to the fledgling oikos of God.

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved, you and your oikos." (Acts 16:31 ) That is the apostolic answer to .the question, "What must I do to be saved." The spread of the faith is included in the reception of the faith. Oikos evangelism is God's natural means to spread the Good News, for everyone who has ever, or will ever receive Christ. And the key that opens every oikos is life transformation through the indwelling of the living God.

#### FOOTNOTES

- 1 Hammond, Peter. *Cultural & Social Anthropology: Selected Readings*. 1964:145-46. MacMillan: New York.
- 2 Mandelbaum, David. "Social Groupings" in *HammondM Cultural & Social Anthropology* (see above).
4. Green, Michael. *Evangelism in The Early Church*. 1970:210. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids (For additional comments see pp. 207-223.)

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