CHRISTIAN FAITH IS "YES!"

to God's **invitation** IN PERSON

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As I awoke this morning, I found myself thinking of a book I read yesterday, WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized, by G.Fackre, R.H.Nash, & J.Sanders (ed.), InterVarsity Press, 1995; & I heard the words "Polymeros kai polytropos," the opening words of the NT's "Hebrews," the biblical book on which, exactly ½ century ago now, I was teaching a summer course in a theological seminary in Kansas City & had just responded to an impersonal invitation to welcome home General of the Allied Armies in Europe Dwight Eisenhower.

1 How come, when you get an impersonal printed invitation, it says "We extend to you a *personal* invitation...."? Since Eng. "you" can be either s. or pl., "personal" indicates the singular force, applying to you "personally" a distributive-plural announcement. But the stronger meaning of a "personal invitation" is an "invitation **in person**," face-to-face (the form of invitation that brings 85% of new members into the church).

Now please notice the second line of this Thinksheet's title & in your mind set it alongside Hebrews 1.1. Now notice, in the first line, all the words except the first; & you have "Faith is 'YES'!" The gullible say yes to a scam, put their faith in a get-rich-quick scheme that's too good to be true (& is). That's faith, such as it is. But the **particular** faith the first line's first word designates matches, in the second line, the **particular** face-to-face invitation God gives every particular human being by himself "personally" becoming the inviter/invitation.

Or, to say the same thing, here's my dynamic-equivalence translation of Hebrews' opening: "In many places, times, and ways God spoke in the past; but now he's spoken to us **in person** [literally, "in/by Son"]."

2 Here are some building materials for constructing a theology of evangelism:

(1) In inviting followers/disciples to "strive...for the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Mt.6.33 NRSV), Jesus was himself, "in person," God the Inviter. I can never say this without awe & humility & discomfort. Awe, humanity's primordial response to the presence of the holy. Humility, for who am I to receive this invitation when most human beings past & present have not? Discomfort, for I fear, for myself & other Christians, (1) giving unnecessary offense & (2) yielding to the temptation to the arrogance of misunderstanding the invitation as privilege, which rots into prejudice, which betrays the invitation.

(2) This claim, that Jesus is God the Inviter-in-Person, is so astonishing that it at least at first strikes everybody as "foolish" (1Cor.1.18-31). When I say that, I can see an MIT scientist calling me foolish (in 1937, after he'd heard me preach on the opening ¶ of Hebrews). And I can see a beloved Jewish friend saying to me, only half humorously, that the world would be better off were there no NT. The evangelist should treat with respect the reasons why "Jews and Greeks [non-Jews]" think this central Christian claim is nonsense. Please recall: it was nonsense to you, wasn't it, the first time your really heard it?

(3) Why did it cease to be nonsense? Here comes the evangelist's (= the Christian witness's) conversion-or-realization story. When/where/how did you "hear" the invitation ("faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of [mg. "or 'about'"] Christ," Ro.10.17 NRSV).

(4) That in-&-as Jesus Christ God offers himself not as a power to be encountered but as a Person to be known--that fact models that the Christian is to be a face-to-face, person-to-be-known witness-evangelist: the Christian's mouth is to be in evangelistic action, telling the Story of God's salvific love for us sinners. This "personal evangelism" is a Christian duty, not a Christian option; & the Spirit uses such efforts of ours, feeble & ineffectual though they often are, to confirm us in the Faith, our joy & peace increasing: the reflex of our **mouth-to-ear-resuscitation** (of the spiritually dead) endeavors. The difficulties of this "speaking a good word for Jesus Christ" should not be used to deny, or obscure, the duty to do so. Even a "God bless (you)" calls attention to the Center, sounds the centering word into the ears of the God-forsaking world & the God-forgetting church.

(5) The distance from the Good News (the "gospel" Story) to a question that's being asked is shorter than the distance from the Good News to a question that should be, & isn't, being asked. As Christian faith is positive response to God's in-person invitation, Christian witness is--in its fundamental form--

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in-person invitation to **hear** (Ro.10.14-17), & say yes or no to, this divine invitation: indeed, to *be* this invitation by extension in correlation with the hearer's questions &, secondarily, with such questions as the witness deems it appropriate to propose.

(6) The witness *of* the Word (Jesus as "faithful witness" [Rev.1.5] in word & deed, in his whole incarnate being) is both the content & the model of Christian witness. We are to witness in his spirit, through the Spirit he has sent us (Jn.16.7), *to* the Word.

(7) God's/Christ's love for the hearer is greater than ours, & the Spirit is more persuasive than we are.

(8) True witness is the speaker's/doer's whole being in the presence of the hearer's whole being, not just the hearer's "soul." (The Orphic religion centered in getting "souls" safely into the afterlife: the Christian religion centers in the glory of God through accepting his Good News through Jesus & being good news to the neighbor's "body-&-soul" & social & natural environment.)

(9) Since the Good News can be heard only "in the native language of each" (Ac.2.6 NRSV), the true witness will hear, respect, & use the words the hearer uses. Linguistically, witnessing is correlating those words with the words (biblical, only thereafter other) essential to telling/applying the Story.

(10) While witnessing is discipling/teaching (Mat.28.19-20), evangelism's results are primarily transactions between the hearers & God, & only secondarily visible to us.

(11) While "What should I do with Jesus?" (Mt.17.22 NRSV) is, as we Christians see it, the intimate-ultimate question for all human beings (Phil.2.9-11), & Christians & churches should view evangelism as perpetually urgent business, human collective & individual destiny is in God's hands, not ours. Therefore, anxiety is as out of place as trust is in place.

3 §2 was a necessary prelude to my **comments** on the Fackre/Nash/Sanders book:

(1) I'm pleased that all three authors are evangelical in proclaiming the finality of Jesus Christ & the particularity of God's central self-revelation in & through him. This perspective being essential to Christianity, I might as well call it orthodox or classical or canonical.

(2) Since the book's about the destiny of those dead who in life never heard of Jesus, the title should be WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO NEVER HEARD?: "have never heard" includes the living "unevangelized" (as in the missionary phrase, "tribes who have never heard"). The book's steady, single focus is on a particular category of the deceased.

(3) The book never mentions the "perish[ed]" (Jn.3.16), those who --in contrast to believers, who "never die" (11.26), who timelessly "have life" (20.31)--cease to exist. Much of the ancient church believed in conditional immortality, an afterlife for those who continue to move closer to the light & a fading away from life in the cases of those who continue to "love[d] darkness rather than light" (3.19), "walking in darkness" (1Jn.1.6, 2.11, 8.12, 12.46), which cannot "overcome" (1.5) "the true light [Jesus the Word], which enlightens everyone" (1.9) & continues to illumine all those who move more & more into light-love-life. [NB: All the references are to a single biblical author (Jn., 1-3 Jn.); the dominant metaphor of conditional immortality, viz. light/darkness, derives not so much from the surrounding culture's photeric mysticism as from Jesus' & John's favorite book, Is. (9.2, 42.6-7, 60.1-3).]....All three of our book's authors believe in unconditional immortality, viz. that everybody, in one condition or another, survives physical death. This view carries, in my opinion, a greater theodic burden: hell is harder to square with the goodness & justice of God than is extinction.

(4) Why, in ¶3(3), did I note that all those references are from the Jn. school? Because some other NT trajectories, e.g. the Paul school, use darkness/light in other ways. Early Christian literature's **unity** is in its christocentricity, all its planets (schools) in orbit around "Jesus Christ, God's Son & our Savior" (the fish acrostic, "Ichthys"). But its **variety** or diversity (schools) both adds richness & protects against intellectual rigidity (dogma). My point here? The book takes no note of this variety, treats the whole NT canon as though written by a single author (as the fundamentalists do).

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(6) The books authors neglect to exploit not only the biblical schools but also, more seriously, the biblical literary genres (types). In hermeneutics in a 1937 seminary course, I learned that a text's **meaning** emerges in the interaction of its **form** (genre, type; e.g., poetry, argument) & its **content** (in the course, called P-TIE-P: persons, times, ideas, events, places).

How important is this? Very, as I'll show in two directions:

(a) "Rhetorical criticism" uses, for biblical interpretation, what literary critics have learned about nonbiblical rhetorical materials, e.g. Cicero's orations. This bridging was the chief contribution Amos Wilder made to NT studies after his retirement. Beginning with "Scholars, Theologians, and Ancient Rhetoric" (1956: JBL 75.1-11), Wilder produced a spate of articles and books to show that virtually the whole of the NT is rhetorical literature, arising from Christian oral-persuasion efforts & meant to be read in public. I was early persuaded of this, & ½ century ago today I read aloud to my seminary students in Hebrews the early Christian rhetorical work most similar to Hebrews, viz. 1 Clement (slowly, taking 2½ hours, including showing the parallels)....Of course the book recognizes--e.g., pp.110, 120, 126-7--that rhetorical action (the work of the *keryks*, the preacher) pervades the NT, but does not note how the fact that the message was preached effected its content (i.e., form effecting content, the "result" [the *-ma* of *kerygma*, the proclaimed-preached word].)....Instance: Where an essay will make a nuanced, close distinction, to enlighten, an oration will make a stark, wide (& thus exaggerated) distinction, to persuade. Exercise: Try to write something of Jesus' rhetoric, a parable or an aphorism, in essay form!

(b) Many of the texts the book adduces in facing its title question are in apocalyptic form, a genre the Exilic & Second Temple Jews carried into further development than did any of their neighbors. There's more of it in NT than in OT, & in the Quran (written six centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple) the separated destinies of the saved/lost are painted more exaggeratedly, so more shockingly, than anything in the earlier Jewish & Christian rhetoric.

A basic function of religion is to render truth impressive, enough so to persuade the devotee to feel/think/live/teach the truth. Wow, is apocalyptic (e.g., Mt.24-25, M.13, L.21) impressive! But is it true? It's vision, impulse, intent are true. But are its details true? As true as those of other types of poetry (apocalyptic being a category of rhetorical poetry). Are heaven & hell true? True as imaginatively representing the fact that thisworldly decisions/deeds have moral otherworldly consequences: the Bible's promises/threats lead on toward this- & other-worldly eventualities. Without these consequences, these eventualities, human life could not have the seriousness, & dignity, it has in biblical perspective. The Cross is the supreme act & model of this seriousness: Jesus recognized, & honored, the moral universe by taking upon himself the consequential burden of our sin (alienation from God) & sins (violations of God's will & the cosmic order).

Christian apocalyptic pictures God in Jesus both as innocent-immanent **Victim** & as almighty-transcendent **Victor**. Because he was Victim, grace is (as the hymn says) "greater than all our sins," & becomes operative on condition of our repentance & faith: because he is Victor-Pantocrator, opposition to him will finally, after God's "longsuffering" of the wayward wills of some angels & some humans, cease (in what I may call an eschatological imperialism of free will--a future forbidding the penultimate violation of the neighbor's will by the imposition of our own).

(7) The book is right in maintaining the NT tension between heaven/hell apocalyptic & the here-&-now social demands of the gospel (as Amos Wilder convincingly laid out, in the case of Jesus, in his 1932 Yale PhD, pub. as ETHICS AND ESCHATOLOGY IN THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS). Wrong are those who destroy the tension by yielding one or the other pole--the eschatological-apocalyptic (e.g., D.F.Strauss [1832] & the current Jesus Seminar*), or the ethical pole (e.g., Albert Schweitzer [1910])....*E.g., this from p.147 of J.D.Crossan's THE ESSENTIAL JESUS (HarperSanFrancisco/94): "Jesus lost faith in God as the imminent apocalyptic One and came to believe, instead, in God as the immanent sapiential One." I believe that Jesus used both **modes**, that of prophet (with futuric language, including heaven/hell) & that of sage (e.g., "Consider the lilies...."). And we can be sure (else how explain his frightening the authorities?) that he used hyperbolic, inflamma-

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tory rhetoric which, when read literally, betrays both his apocalyptic-parabolic-aphoristic forms & himself. Nor should we destroy the tension between his modes: the same person said both "Love your enemies" (Mt.5.44 & parallel--the saying of a sage) & "These will go away into eternal punishment" (25.46, the saying of an apocalyptist). The attitudes attendant upon these two modes cannot possibly be reconciled. What we can say is that Jesus found each mode appropriate to its own set of circumstances. *Each mode qualfies the other, neither should be read literally by itself*, as do the three authors of the book.

In the past, literalism forced a choice between the orthodox & the heterodox on the heaven/hell issue. Geo. Eliot did not understand Jesus' two-mode thinking/teaching, & had Adam Bede resolve the tension by rejecting hell: "Father, I choose. I will not have a heaven haunted by far-off cries from hell. My soul has grown too big with things that might be." The widespread early Christian doctrine of conditional immortality (§3(3)) would have made her choosing unnecessary, & thus also her abandonment of the Faith & the Church. Today, a literal-apocalyptic evangelicalism erects an unnecessary, & therefore tragic, barrier to conversion, impediment to evangelism.

(8) In the Bible, is the **modes** mentality peculiar to Jesus? Certainly not! E.g., Paul in Romans teaches both that Jews, like everybody else, need to hear & respond to the gospel to be saved (1.16) & that Jews have the advantage of divine affirmative action (11.26, "all Israel will be saved" as "beloved" "as regards "election," which is [v.29] "irrevocable"--even though "as regards the gospel they are enemies of God"!). C'mon, Paul, which is it? We want him to be consistent so we can make a system of his thinking, but he's off on other business.

(9) I recall, many years ago, what a liberation it was for me to discover this bi- or even multi-modal character of biblical thinking. Pertinent to this Thinksheet here is the Bible's quatra-modal handling of questions of human destiny beyond physical death. The first of many aspects on this was Thinksheet #33 just ¼ century ago. It had a four-piece pie, which here I render thus:

Who have a blessed afterlife?

none	A	B	**all**
some, the survivors of physical death	C	D	**some**, in contrast to others who also survive physical death

An agglutinative consciousness (e.g., Chinese) would understand that these four Western-linear-consciousness irreconcilables are all functionally true, each to be squeezed for its human worth *in situ*, as occasion demands....**Mode A**: While in the NT, because of Jesus' resurrection & its promise, believers are trustful & eager for a blessed afterlife, almost all of the OT gets along without this motivator. Sometimes the reverse: Living is positive, death is its negation (so get your praise of God in now, before you no longer can: Ps.6.5b Is.38.18). Indeed, when you're dead, you won't even remember God: Ps.6.5a. In "Sheol...the Pit" (Is.38.18; v.17, "the pit of destruction"), we "cannot hope for your [God's] faithfulness," so fathers should "make known to children your [God's] faithfulness." Job (10.20-22) wants a little peace here & now "before I go...to the land of gloom...deep darkness...chaos, where light is like darkness." I have spelled this out in some detail to show (1) that the Bible teaches, among other afterlife-views, annihilation (none of us is going to get out of this alive here or hereafter), & (2) that the call to praise God is not dependent on the belief that the "soul" will "'live forever'" (Gn.3.22, expulsion from Eden to block immortality). Humanity is a temporary species on a temporary planet; & if you've got to get to heaven, you won't. Let's call this mode/view naturalism. We die like dogs, which demotes us to fellow-creaturehood with the rest of nature and promotes dogs. Value: good for psychic & social peace, & for ecology....**Mode B**: Everybody gets a blessed afterlife. Let's call this mode universalism. As the sentimental, amoral Queen of Hearts says, "All have won & all shall have prizes." This transcendentalized welfare dependency is de-moralizing, cutting the sanctional cord of afterlife moral consequences (as A does not). Value: both divine & human benevolence are victorious; the divine-justice problem (i.e., theodicy) is solved, for God's power & goodness converge without remainder.....**Mode C**: For this, conditionalism, you may wish to refresh your memory of reading §3(3). Value: the ultimate in religious seriousness....**Mode D**: The afterlife divides wheat from weeds, sheep

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from goats. Only some have a blessed afterlife (heaven): the others are off into hell (Mt.18.8, "eternal fire"; v.9, "the hell [fn. "Gehenna"] of fire"; v.34, "tortured"; 25.26, "eternal punishment," contrasted with "eternal life"). Let's call this eternalism. Value: the apocalyptic ultimate in ethical seriousness, more serious than the death penalty, which would be (said a recent letter to the editor, about the Oklahoma City bomber[s], at the prospect of his/her/their death by lethal injection), "too good...too quick and painless." The writer was expressing not sadism but moral outrage. Apocalypticism's ecstatic-passionate mode cannot be satisfied without diamentricality: lavish & unusual reward & (to use a U.S. legal phrase) "cruel & unusual punishment." The slaughter of the wicked is so extensive that for "about two hundred miles," horses wade in "blood as high as a horse's bridle" (Rev.14.20)--a slaughter triumphalistically prayed for "under the altar" by "the souls who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given" (6.9, a vengeance prayer to be contrasted with Jesus' "Love your enemies," but not incompatible with Jesus' feel for the full-come kingdom of God). (Our letterwriter went on to say that the bomber[s] should be thrown into a pit for a slow death by passive torture, viz. no water; &, I predict, will soon regret his shrill speech, but is to be commended for his highly involved caring for the victims of Okla.City, the dead & the grieving, & for justice.) (IRONY: You hear/read much saying that capital punishment is too bad; refreshing, perhaps, that the letterwriter thinks it too good.) False defenders of Jesus say that though his speech was colorful-hyperbolic at times, the hell-sayings were put into his mouth post mortem. Better interpreters see him as using this among many modes of speech, this form the best for threatening, warning of the coming judgment & final punishments. Endless punishment is the apocalyptic counterpoint to endless bliss & is a time-dimension reading of the fact of permanent loss entailed by turning away from God, choosing darkness rather than light--permanent loss even if only of the joy in God & in God's people & in the sense of the world as God's one misses while turned away (a view that can accomodate ultimate universalism). The rhetorical contrast appears in such adjectives as "eternal," "everlasting," "endless," & (fitting the Jewish mind/apocalyptic) "age-long" (which word can, again, accomodate ultimate universalism).

Evangelism is inviting people, through the door of repentance & faith, into now-&-forever fellowship with God in Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit with God's people; only secondarily is it warning people (as in Billy Graham's proper prudential pitch) to avoid permanent loss, "hell." The holy God's invitation, moved by love, moves us ("draw[s]," Jn.12.32; 6.44, "drawn by the Father") to love, but also to fear. Both natures, God's & ours, require that we experience the invitation both as the push of fear & the pull of love. Fear without love is scheming, calculating: love without fear is sentimentality, though fear lessens as one matures in love (1Jn.4.18, where NRSV mg. properly narrows "fear" by the qualifier "of judgment").

(10) Our book's subtitle, "Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized," uses a term which can mean either the un**converted** (in RHD2, the 2nd meaning of "evangelize") or the un**reached** (i.e., the unpreached to, those who haven't heard the Good News announced--the 1st meaning). Nowhere in the book is this ambiguity remarked. Since the book clearly means the unreached, why is not that the subtitle's word? Perhaps it's because "evangel"icals love words incorporating the Greek stem "evangel." However, all those Greek words are turn-offs to the general public & to Christians who don't call themselves evangelical. I conclude that the book is addressed to evangelicals, not to Christians in general.

(11) The word "unevangelized," as the book uses it, does not include the *under*evangelized. The vast majority of those who have "heard" have heard only an indistinct echo. Paul's companions on the Damascus road "didn't get it," as we say. They "heard the voice but saw no one" (9.7), or "saw the light but did not hear the voice" (22.9; in 26.14, "we" [i.e., Paul & his companions] fell to the ground, but apparently only "I" [i.e., Paul] "heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic" [Jesus' mother-speech]")....And how about the *over*evangelized, those who, instead of being "won" (winningly) to Christ, have been so high-pressure bombarded that they felt what was coming at them as *Bad* News? Grampa Elliott died an atheist, from (?) his mother's reading the KJV to her illiterate husband 33 times all the way through....Only God knows--thank God!--what it means to (truly) "hear" the gospel

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& yet not hearken to (obey) it, what it means to hearken to it without hearing it, & what the number & identity of those who both hear & hearken. P.95: "The shadow of mystery as well as the light of understanding attend our best efforts....We cannot catch God in the nets of human logic....Everywhere we run into paradoxes, mysteries that can be explored but not explained." (Fackre)

(12) A chart (p.20) sums up the book with definitions, key texts, & adherents (ancient, medieval, modern [including the three authors]), all "agree[ing] that Jesus is the only Savior." The chart even includes a POV the book doesn't represent (so why not four authors instead of three?): "Universal Opportunity Before Death. Definition: All people are given opportunity to be saved by God's sending the gospel (even by angels or dreams) or at the moment of death or by middle knowledge." But why not five authors, since the chart includes "Universalism" ("All people will in fact be saved by Jesus. No one is damned forever.")?

The three views both on the chart & expounded in the book are Restrictivism ("God does not provide salvation to those who fail to hear of Jesus and come to know him before they die." Augustine, Calvin, Jon. Edwards, Carl Henry,...Ronald Nash [one of our authors]); Inclusivism ("The unevangelized may be saved if they respond to faith in God based on the revelation they have." Justin Martyr, Jn. Wesley, C.S.Lewis,...Jn. Sanders [one of our authors]); & Divine Perseverence or Postmortem Evangelism ("The unevangelized receive an opportunity to believe in Jesus after death." Clement of Alexandria,...Donald Bloesch, Geo. Lindbeck,...Gabriel Fackre [one of our authors]).

(13) Ask yourself where you'd fit on the chart: according to "the law of noncontradiction" (p.151, Fackre), you gotta fit somewhere. What I call triple-C logic (clear, comprehensive, coherent) demands it. But what I call the canonical principle of nonexclusion (viz., that we believers are to wrap our arms around mutually contradictory biblical assertions, giving them all the benefit of the doubt-in-faith), I myself cannot sign on to any one column--though the one easiest for me to argue for is "Inclusivism" (including, on the chart, in addition to the above, Clark Pinnock, Wolfhart Pannenberg; &, not on the chart, A.H.Strong, Wm. Shedd, & Bernard Ramm).....Last Sunday, in a study group on prayer, I picked up from a layman the idea that when you hit, or are hit by, a biblical puzzle, you should wrap your arms around it & be patient. Reminded me of Jacob's getting a grip on the angel & saying (Gn.32.26) "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

Consider some doctrines requiring the principle of nonexclusion: (1) God is almighty-aljust-algood-alloving; (2) Jesus as truly both divine & human; (3) the Trinity; (4) the Kingdom of God /salvation as both now & now yet.

(14) One factor inclining me toward "Inclusivism" is its conformability to 3(9)C, viz. conditional immortality (i.e., afterlife for those whose this-life was on a Godward trajectory whether or not consciously so). As Sanders puts it (p.104), "God sees the overall direction in which we are going in this life--either toward or away from God--and brings those moving toward God into blessed fellowship with the divine Son after death." (On the down side, L.12.10 says forgiveness is just not available to all.)

Chaos theory, the most recent development in the philosophy of science, hints at a convergence of noncontradiction/nonexclusion. If widening the intellectual aperature enables the perception of post-chaos order, canonical theology may be comprehensive of the biblical trajectories (in the case of this Thinksheet, various views of post-mortem destiny) without sacrificing either clarity or coherence.

(15) All POVs try to touch all the value-virtue bases. Fairness/justice (what Sanders--pp.103,148--calls "distributive"[in addition to retributive] justice) is high on most lists. The criteria for all are (p.18, Introduction) "biblically based, theologically sound and practically relevant." And the authors (p.16, Introduction) have this consensus: "All orthodox Christians agree that God desires to save sinners, that Jesus is God incarnate whose ministry made redemption possible, that human beings are sinful, that the gospel has power to save and that Scripture is authoritative for faith and practice." Relevant components (p.17): "one's particular view of the nature of God...&...of the church, the significance of physical death, the value of God's revelation in creation, the nature of saving faith, the means of grace, and what method is best for doing theology. The stands we take on these issues decisively affect the answer we give to the destiny of the unevangelized."