

Evangelism and Wesley's Catholicity of Grace

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It has become difficult to speak on evangelism, not because it is a new or abstruse subject, but because so much has been said and written about it from such a vast range of perspectives. It has been defined and redefined, recycled and restated so many times, that I hesitate at the very thought of adding yet another view.

An attempt to reconceive evangelism at the present time is nonetheless important, for at least three reasons. First, there is a sense in which our understanding of evangelism is what really reveals our theological convictions. Evangelism emanates from an understanding of God, of the human person, of Christ, and of what God has done in Christ. Our understanding of evangelism is but the tip of the iceberg; underneath lies a whole theological worldview.

Second, at least in some Christian traditions, evangelism is the basic rationale for the existence of the church. In these traditions, evangelism is not a concept to be discussed, but a mandate to be fulfilled—the primary and permanent task of the church without which it has no right to exist.

Third (and perhaps we should take note of this more carefully than we have done so far), understanding what evangelism is and how to go about it may well become one of the most divisive issues of the church in our time. There is already a growing polarization that cuts across all traditional lines of division. Labels have appeared; trenches are being built; and from time to time one can hear the sound of artillery exchanges. As confessional differences become less and less

pronounced, the new division based on the understanding of the nature of evangelism comes to the fore.

Elements in Evangelism

The irony is that, in a sense, it is unwise and counter-productive to try to agree on a common understanding of evangelism. For in reality, evangelism is not a concept nor even a program, but a response of a person who comes to a particular knowledge and experience of God in Jesus Christ. A person's understanding of evangelism and commitment to it, therefore, will depend to a large extent on that knowledge and experience and the nature of the obedience demanded in a given situation.

This is not to deny that, on the basis of scripture and the corporate experience of the church, we can draw out some elements involved in the evangelistic task, nor that it is useful to arrive at some definitions. Nevertheless, evangelism is often much more complex than we wish to admit, rendering discussion of the task difficult and frequently confusing.

To begin with, evangelism has to do with sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. But there are so many aspects to the life and ministry of Christ, and so many ways of perceiving his life, death, and resurrection, even within scripture, that there is the abiding problem of discerning the content of the gospel. To some of us, this presents no problem; we consider the message to be clear in the scriptures. But as more and more people begin to reread the scriptures from various historical perspectives, there is much less agreement on what it is that makes the good news "good."

The second difficulty with regard to evangelism is that the good news has been, and always will be, mediated through persons whose own experience of the gospel invariably affects their understanding and presentation of the message. Even within the scripture, the presentation of the gospel by John, Paul, Peter, and the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, for example, have all been conditioned by the specific experiences from which they themselves responded to the message of Christ.

In the third place, evangelism is effective only insofar as the gospel is heard and received. Just as the one who presents the gospel mediates it out of his or her own experience, the hearers of the gospel can hear it only from the specific context in which they live. One of the exciting things about the second half of this century is that we are witnessing a great proliferation of ways in which the gospel of Jesus Christ is heard, understood, and received in different parts of the world. Increasingly, peoples of Latin America, Africa, and Asia are hearing the gospel in new ways, and in so doing they are also challenging what traditionally has been accepted as evangelism.

Finally, and most importantly, in all evangelism we believe that the Holy Spirit is acting to fulfill God's intention in each specific situation. Ultimately there is only one mission—God's mission, and one evangelist—God. Evangelism happens, therefore, not when the evangelist's intentions are fulfilled, nor when persons cross from one commitment to another, but when God's intention is fulfilled in a given life or situation. What ultimately matters in evangelism is whether more of life and life-situations have come under the rule of God. The temptation in evangelism is to forget that what we are about is God's mission, and for the evangelist to set goals and priorities as though God does not act. Such goals can become so absolutized that they can contradict God's own purpose, for the intention of God and the intention of the evangelist do not always coincide.

To summarize, any reconception of evangelism should include: (1) an understanding of the content of the gospel; (2) a recognition that the gospel is mediated and experienced in a variety of ways; (3) a deeper appreciation of the ways in which different situations and cultures affect the hearing of the gospel; and (4) a recognition that ultimately it is God's own purpose that should be fulfilled—all of which make the task of evangelism complex and our understanding of it difficult.

Wesley's Context

The purpose of this rather lengthy introduction is to set a context within which we might consider Wesley's own understanding and practice of evangelism. His perception of

the gospel was very much influenced by the continuing debate within Reformation theology, his Puritan heritage, his study of the seventeenth-century Anglican divines, and by the new awakening in personal piety.¹ But his evangelical experience was very much a part of his own spiritual pilgrimage, which began under the wing of his mother, Susanna. His upbringing, his intense study of the scriptures, the search for personal holiness, the experience of assurance commonly said to have been received at Aldersgate Street, and his quest for perfection, were all part of the pilgrimage. Some have tried to build a model for evangelism out of Wesley's experience at Aldersgate Street, and there is no doubt that this was a significant turning point in his spiritual life.² But he himself refused to make it the norm. Further, while Wesley insisted that religious truth has to be "experienced," he refused to make experience the sole authority, and insisted primarily on the guidance of the scripture and on the corporate authority of the church.³

At the same time, the evangelical message he proclaimed was very much directed to a particular historical and spiritual condition of British life in the eighteenth century.⁴ He believed that God had raised the people called Methodists to "spread scriptural holiness throughout the land." This he did with all the vigor he could muster. Moreover, one of the healthy features of the Methodist tradition is that it has been a growing tradition. While the marks of Wesley's own teaching can still be seen in Methodism as a whole, the Methodist churches have grown in their own ways in different parts of the world, and have always maintained ecumenical relations with other churches.

Reconceiving evangelism today, therefore, should not be an attempt to go back to the Methodist tradition in order simply to reaffirm it. Rather it should be an attempt to look into the tradition to see what resources there are to guide us today. It is in this spirit that we can turn to the life and teachings of Wesley and early Methodism.

Catholicity of Grace

One of the crucial issues in evangelism is our theological evaluation of the world, and especially of the peoples of other

faiths and convictions. Evangelism is urgent, it is sometimes claimed, because millions are perishing without the gospel. In this view, the gospel has to be preached to save the world from damnation, with a sharp distinction between the "saved" and the "unsaved." The urgency of evangelism, from the perspective of potential believers, lies in the fact that if they do not hear, repent, and believe in the gospel, they will be "lost," perhaps eternally. The urgency for evangelists is that they are under a mandate to preach the gospel, and in some sense or other become responsible for the destiny of the potential hearers.

This view tends to produce a savior complex in the evangelist, with all of its attendant problems. Those who seriously hold this position, but who for one reason or another are unable to engage in active evangelism, must carry in their hearts a big burden of guilt. The real problem, however, is theological, concerning God's nature and relationship to the created world. If we believe that God's relationship of love and grace to humanity has always been the same, then the significance of the gospel event must be seen in that context and not outside it.

Wesley faced this problem. Even though he subscribed to the view that the human being is a sinner, and that it is God's grace alone that can redeem, Wesley found it difficult to subscribe to the theory of total depravity as did some of the Reformers. On the contrary, he held that God's law is written in the heart of every human being. Human conscience helps the person to know what is right, even if it is not possible to fulfill the law as God requires.³ Similarly, Wesley valued the human faculty of reason, asserting that there is a measure of freedom which makes it possible for someone to accept or reject God's offer of salvation.

Wesley was able to hold such views because of the catholicity of his doctrine of grace. He talked of grace in at least three aspects: prevenient (or preventing) grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace. With the doctrine of prevenient grace, he was able to modify the extreme position that the "natural" human condition "belongs to the devil." He claimed that God's grace is already present and active in

the natural person, moving and inviting towards saving grace, and commonly identified as conscience:

Can it be denied that something of this is found in every man born into the world? And does it not appear as soon as understanding opens, as soon as reason begins to dawn? Does not everyone then begin to know that there is a difference between good and evil, however imperfect the various circumstances of this sense of good and evil may be?⁶

But he rejected the idea that conscience is natural. It is rather "the supernatural gift of God above all his natural endowments."

No; it is not nature, but the son of God, that is "the true light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world." So that we may say to every human creature, "He," not nature, "hath showed thee, O man, what is good." And it is his spirit who giveth thee an inward check, who causeth thee to feel uneasy, when thou walkest in any instance contrary to the light which he hath given thee.⁷

The significance of this doctrine was twofold. It declared God's grace to be available to all human beings—"free in all, and free for all"—and what others considered natural Wesley insisted was the work of God's grace in each person.⁸ More significant, however, was the Christological and pneumatological dimension which Wesley gave to the doctrine on the basis of the Johannine prologue. Grace in its prevenience (its relation to nature as such) presupposes the Triune God of the Christian faith. It is prevenient in the sense of "before faith" and not "before Christ." For Wesley, there was no "before Christ." He believed that through faith we move in freedom from prevenient grace to justifying and sanctifying grace. His doctrine of original sin was severe: that total depravity was the result of the fall. But God was already at work with redeeming grace! With his doctrine of prevenient grace, Colin Williams says, Wesley "broke the chain of logical necessity by which Calvin's doctrine of predestination seems to flow from the doctrine of original sin."⁹

Nor did Wesley hesitate to draw some of the implications of this view for the universality of God's grace. He believed that Christ works even in those who do not hear the gospel in

this life. Such persons are judged, he held, according to their response to the universal grace by which Christ works within them in a hidden way.¹⁰ Wesley saw no contradiction between this view and his belief in justification by faith. Those who have not had the opportunity of hearing the gospel, yet have responded to prevenient grace, are, like the patriarchs, justified by faith in anticipation of the full revelation of Christ.

Wesley's thoughts were of course conditioned by the limits of his own knowledge and the theological boundaries recognized within his inherited theology. But his concept of grace and the concern that is expressed in it are of much relevance to our own understanding of evangelism in a culturally and religiously plural world. Our evangelistic task is set, not in a world that is lost and deprived of God, but in one in which God is very much active, and where, moved by God's grace, people already experience the love of God in good measure through Christ and the Holy Spirit. The evangelistic task is not to deny this universal grace, but to help persons move from "grace to grace." The theological task lies in trying to understand the nature of the relationship between this universal grace of God available to all and the salvation offered to humanity in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Some would argue that such a generous doctrine of grace will undercut the urgency in evangelism. Wesley's own life remains the answer to this objection, for the same Wesley who held this doctrine of universal grace was also the greatest evangelist of his time.

The Whole Gospel for the Whole Person in the Whole Community

One of the important contributions that the Methodist tradition can make today, holds Mortimer Arias of Bolivia, is the "holistic or integral approach" to evangelism. The Evangelical Methodist Church in Bolivia puts it this way:

True evangelism is holistic; the whole gospel for the whole man and the whole of mankind. Evangelism addresses the person in the

totality of his being: individual and social, physical and spiritual, historical and eternal. We reject, therefore, all dichotomies, ancient and modern, which reduce the gospel to one dimension, or fragment man who was created in the image and likeness of God. We do not accept the idea that evangelism means only "saving souls" and seeking exclusively "a change in the eternal status of the individual." These concepts are biblically insufficient. We reject also the reduction of the gospel to a program for service or social development or a mere instrument of socio-political programs.¹¹

The problem that we face today is not so much that our evangelism reduces people to "souls with ears" or "stomachs with souls." The real problem lies in the fact that those who believe in saving souls have not, despite serious attempts, been able to expand their concept of evangelism beyond personal assurance, moral reformation, and a general concern for the poor and marginalized in society. The fundamental problem of sin as a structural reality in the social, economic, and political order somehow remains out of place. On the other hand, those who strive to act on the gospel imperatives to work for the kingdom within society, and who choose to stand in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed in order to resist the powers of structural sin, have not been able to integrate into their conception of evangelism the individual's need of forgiveness and the demand of the gospel for a radical change in the inner life of the person. Though they always claim, rightly, that there is an evangelical dimension to their work, they have not always succeeded in changing evangelical dimensions into evangelical intentions. Somehow the frontier between faith and nonfaith remains undefined.¹² Labels such as "fundamentalists," "radicals," "evangelicals," and "ecumenicals" have made the situation no better. Much ink and energy have been spent in mutual accusation and defense. Any reconceiving of evangelism has to take this situation seriously. There are now some attempts to initiate dialogue between these two perspectives on evangelism, but not always with much success. For many reasons it proves difficult to close the theological gap. The question, therefore, is—can we transcend it?

Obviously, early Methodism did not face the question in this specific form, but Methodist faith and practice can at least point us in some direction. Wesley saw the individual as a whole person, whose total life should be brought under the grace of God. He therefore emphasized sanctification alongside justification—the true mark of religion being discipleship as expressed in a life of holiness.¹³ And since he could not conceive of a Christian life apart from social living, he extended the concept of personal holiness to social holiness, emphasizing social service and political responsibility, with strong attitudes on social evils.¹⁴ His eschatological vision was one in which the whole creation would be transformed, when God would establish the fullness of the kingdom, the foretaste of which was already present in historical reality. Thus, even though Wesley saw his own life as a pilgrimage towards personal holiness, in his vision of redemption, the personal, the social, and the universal were held together.¹⁵

Perhaps most significant in Wesley's understanding of evangelism is that, contrary to what is often assumed, he never saw its purpose merely in terms of conversion. He began with the premise that God's grace was already in operation, and looked for the fulfilment of God's new creation, when all would be "perfected into one." His brother Charles captured the spirit of this evangelism in his familiar hymn:

Finish, then, thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in thee:
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.

The "wonder, love, and praise" are not that the individual has reached heaven, but that God has finished the new creation—that all have been perfectly restored in God.

Widening the Vision

While the Methodist traditions can, as we have observed, help us avoid some of the pitfalls of contemporary evangelism, we should not forget that Wesley was a man of his time, and that in our own time Methodism and Christianity in general face new challenges and possibilities. There is a sense in which we have entered into a new era in our relationships with other religious traditions. The witness of other faiths and our dialogue with them have thrown new light on our own perception of witness and service. This, for example, was not an immediate issue for Wesley.

The social, economic, and political problems we face today have changed vastly in character and magnitude. Emphasis has moved from social service to questions of international economic order; millions starve and thousands actually die of hunger, even though enough food is produced to feed all mouths. The world is facing not only the horrors of war, but the real possibility of a nuclear catastrophe that can wipe out life from the surface of the earth. Social organization and international and interpersonal relations have become so complex that personal decisions and life-styles seem to have little or no impact on society. Similarly, individuals are unable to escape the impact and influence of social structures on their own lives.

In the midst of all these, there is the search for meaning, peace, and spirituality, but in the images and language of a new age. In our attempt to reconceive evangelism today, we should not only draw insights from our past, but also bring the complexity of our contemporary world into it, so that tradition, in its attempt to speak a meaningful word, may remain a "living tradition."

The question we face is this: Are we, in our attempt to understand the task of evangelism today, able—in the spirit of John Wesley—to look upon the *world* as our parish? If we do, our task will not be easy, but will certainly be worthwhile.

Notes

1. Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 7ff.

2. A. Skevington Wood, for example, in *The Burning Heart: John Wesley, Evangelist* (Devon: Paternoster Press, 1967), attempts to make a strong case that John Wesley was actually converted at Aldersgate Street. See especially pp. 66-69.
3. "The scriptures are the touchstone whereby Christians examine all real or supposed revelation. . . . For though the Spirit is our principal leader, yet He is not our rule at all; the scriptures are the rule whereby He leads us into all 'truth'" (*Letters* 2:17), quoted in Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 35.
4. Rupert E. Davies, *Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1976). A good discussion on the intellectual, spiritual, and social setting is found on pp. 21-37.
5. *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker House, 1979), 6:512.
6. Wesley, *Works* 7:187. Cf. Wesley's sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," in *John Wesley*, ed. Outler, pp. 271-82. "If Wesleyan theology had to be judged by a single essay, this one would do as well as any and better than most" (ed.'s introduction, p. 271).
7. *Works*, 7:188.
8. *Works*, 7:373-74.
9. Williams, *Wesley's Theology*, p. 46.
10. *Works*, 7:188. Cf. 6:206.
11. Mortimer Arias, "That the World May Believe," in *Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas J. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 91.
12. Arias, p. 92.
13. Cf. Wesley's sermon, "Christian Perfection," in *John Wesley*, ed. Outler, pp. 252-71.
14. Williams, *Wesley's Theology*, pp. 196ff.
15. *Works*, 6:295-96, 430-31.

Evangelism in the Wesleyan Traditions

Working Group Paper

"The Gospel is the Good News of the Kingdom of God. It is God's offer of life through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as risen Savior and Lord, participation in His Body the Church, and His call to become partners in the work of His Kingdom of love, peace, and justice in the world."

"Evangelism is the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. It means presenting the love of God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit so that persons repent, place their trust in the resurrected Christ, worship Him as Lord in the fellowship of His Body, and invest their lives in the work of His Kingdom."

With these definitions, the evangelism group of the Institute summed up days of research and discussion. The major areas of investigation and the main conclusions reached are as follows.

1. Wesleyan Evangelism

The message of the evangelism of John and Charles Wesley was the historic faith of the Christian church. The Wesleys were orthodox believers, remaining always in the mainstream of Christian truth and tradition.

In "offering Christ" John Wesley developed a clear understanding of the way the Holy Spirit works in "the Order of Salvation." Beginning with prevenient grace, the Spirit leads people through convincing, converting, and sanctifying grace. At the heart of this process are conversion and assurance, brought about through justification by faith. After conversion comes the call to seek holiness, including social holiness.