

Evangelism as Ecclesial Holiness

Bryan Stone

Boston University School of Theology

The thesis I would like to put forward for our discussion is that the necessary but also sufficient condition for all Christian evangelism is the holiness of the church. The most evangelistic thing the church can do today is to be the church – to live together as a worshipping, confessing, forgiving, enemy-loving, nonviolent, compassionate, and inclusive body formed into Christ’s body by word and sacrament. It is thus the very shape and character of the church as God’s “new creation” – a distinct, embodied witness in the world to God’s reign – that is the source and aim of Christian evangelism. On this understanding, the *missio dei* is neither the individual, private, or interior salvation of individuals nor is it a more or less thorough Christianization of the social order. It is, rather, the creation of a people who are both “pulpit and paradigm” of a new humanity.¹ And insofar as evangelism is the heart of mission (as I believe it is),² it is this very “people” that constitutes both the public invitation as well as that to which the invitation points. That is why all Christian evangelism is fundamentally rooted in ecclesiology. Indeed, it can even be said that the church does not really need an evangelistic strategy. The church *is* the evangelistic strategy.³

Allow me to radicalize this a bit further. My point is *not* that the church, by behaving rightly in public, is capable of being truly evangelistic because, to the extent it avoids hypocrisy, it is better able thereby to reach the world with the message of the gospel (though there may be some truth in this). As Albert Outler observed, “Wesley understood, as we seem to have forgotten, that it is the *Word made visible* in the lives of practicing, witnessing lay Christians that constitutes the church’s most powerful evangelistic influence.”⁴ And yet this is not quite what I want to say, for this still tends to instrumentalize and externalize the church vis-à-vis the message of the gospel. My point, rather, is that the very form of the Christian faith community *is* the message of the gospel. To construe the message of the gospel in such a way (for example, “justification by faith,” “love of neighbor,” “do justice,” “personal relationship with Jesus,” “forgiveness of sins”) as not to found it and orient it toward that unprecedented social creation of the Holy Spirit that the first Christians called “church” (along with the social imagination⁵ that this creation both invites and demands) misses the point.

As I understand it, then, the central message of the Bible is God’s calling forth and creation of a people. The most evangelistic thing the church can do is to be the church not merely in public, but as a new and alternative public;⁶ not merely in society, but as a new and distinct

¹ John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 41.

² Cf. Dana Robert, *Evangelism as the Heart of Mission* (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, 1997).

³ Here, of course, I am mimicking Stanley Hauerwas’ dictum, “The church does not *have* a social ethic but rather *is* a social ethic” – hopefully to good use.

⁴ Albert Outler, *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1971), 26.

⁵ I am using the word “imagination” not in the sense of a merely imaginary or disembodied idea, but that whole complex of practices, arrangements, aesthetic, discipline, stories, and gestures that has the “power to discipline bodies, to habituate them and script them into a drama of its own making.” Cf. William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 31. Cavanaugh in this quotation is talking about the “imagination of the state,” but the church is also a social imagination rival to the imagination of the nation state. I am also indebted at this point to the work of John Milbank, especially his magnificent *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990)

⁶ For a helpful development of this theme, see Reinhard Hütter, “The Church as Public: Dogma, Practice, and the Holy Spirit,” *Pro Ecclesia* 3:3, 334-361.

society, a new and unprecedented social existence where enemies are loved, sins are forgiven, the poor are valued, and violence is rejected. For this reason, in thinking about evangelism today, we do well to insist with Cyprian (ca. 210-258) that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, “apart from the church there is no salvation.” This formula is wrong within the social imagination of Constantinianism; but as a post-Constantinian expression of the ecclesiological shape of salvation, of holiness, and of evangelism, it is quite right. Any evangelism for which the church is irrelevant, an afterthought, or merely instrumental surely cannot be authentic Christian evangelism. Social holiness is both the aim and the intrinsic logic of evangelism. And this social holiness *is* the very witness that becomes evangelism in the hands of the Holy Spirit.⁷

In contrast to this, the ecclesiology that currently underwrites the contemporary practice of evangelism – at least that which predominates in North America – is at best an ecclesiology where the church is either instrumentalized in the service of “reaching” or “winning” non-Christians, or a reduction of the church to a mere aggregate of autonomous believers, the group terminus of individual Christian converts. Such an ecclesiology derives from an alternative social imagination made possible by modern, liberal philosophical and capitalist economic assumptions about history and about the nature of the self and its agency in the world. As John Milbank points out, within this rival discourse, the human person is essentially a self-possessing, self-preserving will that exists over against other individual, autonomous wills.⁸ Arising from this are modern conceptions of ownership and rights as well as an understanding of human interrelationships as fundamentally ‘contractual’.

Within such a heretical narration of history, the church becomes a disembodied, mystical reality because there is no longer the space for its communally and visibly embodied form of human relationship. The church is thus able to be controlled by the power of the state “while protecting it as a ‘private’ value, and sometimes invoking it at the public level to overcome the antinomy of a purely instrumental and goalless rationality, which is yet made to bear the burden of ultimate political purpose.”⁹ The church becomes a whole that is actually less than the sum of its isolated, autonomous parts, each of which is busy pursuing its own private self-interests (including “getting saved”). All that is required is that the private subject not exercise its will in a way that violates the free exercise of other private wills. One may certainly (and ideally) yoke these wills together for united purpose and witness, but sociality is inconceivable as constitutive of personhood, much less salvation.

It is within such a social imagination that salvation is able finally to be construed as a “personal relationship with Jesus” and thus something that takes place outside, alongside, or as a substitute for the church. Under the conditions of modernity – and perhaps even more so under the conditions of postmodernity – the church does not really matter because there is no imaginative room for a genuine social body in which what it means to be a human person is to be “for” others. Today Christian evangelism has the enormous challenge of rejecting as heretical the predominant characterization of salvation as a personal relationship with Jesus and, instead, must find a way to bear faithful and embodied witness to the Spirit’s new social creation.

⁷ I therefore find myself in agreement with Hauerwas when he says, “I have little use for the current fascination with individual salvation in either its conservative or liberal guises. Such accounts of salvation assume that God has done something for each person which may find expression in the church. I do not assume that salvation is first and foremost about my life having ‘meaning’ or insuring ‘my’ eternal destiny. Rather, salvation is being engrafted into practices that save us from those powers that would rule our lives making it impossible for us to truly worship God.” *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 8.

⁸ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

John Wesley, Ecclesiology, and Evangelism

John Wesley can help us here, but we will have to take account of several instabilities within his ecclesiology and its relationship to evangelism. The label “instability” need not be entirely pejorative, however, for the negative aspect of these instabilities arises largely due to their mistranslation or misappropriation in contexts other than Wesley’s. Holding together tensions that might otherwise develop into contradictions is a mark of genius and creativity, not failure.

In one sense, ecclesiology was not something with which Wesley was preoccupied, though he did want to renew the Church of England. Outler once claimed that early Methodists had no ecclesiology,¹⁰ and passages in Wesley can be cited that support views that his ecclesiology was Anglican, classically Protestant, or Free Church. Much of Wesley’s creative theological work was not in the area of re-thinking the nature of the church and so, for example, he felt no need to alter the article on the Church when revising the “XXXIX Articles of the Church of England” for the Methodists in America. And yet, in another sense, Wesley’s entire life and work can be fairly interpreted as ecclesologically oriented.

One of the instabilities in Wesley’s ecclesiology is that his Methodists were a mission movement before they were a church. Indeed, in North America, early Wesleyans understood themselves to be “mission societies” and persisted in calling themselves that rather than “churches” well after 1784.¹¹ As Jim Logan remarks, “While Methodists in the United States may not have formulated an ecclesiology, they nevertheless operated with an ecclesial consciousness. Mission was not a derivative of the church. Quite to the contrary, church was derived from mission. Mission was the central and crucial mark of the church.”¹²

But herein lies precisely the problem. When “church” is derived from mission rather than mission from church, the seeds are sown for an instrumentalization and externalization of the church relative to evangelism. Especially in North America, missional ends are then developed as if the salvific social creation called ‘church’ does not really matter. Mission becomes the central and crucial mark of the church rather than ecclesiality being the central and crucial mark of mission. It is then a simple step to disembodify mission, separating it from the worship, practices, disciplines, and saintly lives – in short, “the body” – that constitute the church as God’s holy new creation. From this development, I think, Wesleyans in North America have never quite recovered. In my own tradition, the Church of the Nazarene, it was not until just two decades ago that a doctrine of the Church was even considered as an Article of Faith. Much of the work being done around ecclesiology and evangelism today has been to rethink the church in terms of its “apostolicity” or “missionality.”¹³ It is now commonplace – and, partly true – that if the church is to experience both renewal and revival, it will have to discover its missionary nature. But while there has been great interest in the “missional church,” perhaps what we really need is an interest in ecclesial mission, ecclesial evangelism. What Wesleyans can bring to the

¹⁰ Albert Outler, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?” In *The Doctrine of the Church*, D. Kirkpatrick, ed. (1964), 12.

¹¹ Jim Logan, “The Evangelical Imperative: A Wesleyan Perspective” in *Theology and Evangelism in the Wesleyan Heritage* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, 16.

¹³ So, for example, Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) or George Hunter’s *How to Reach Secular People* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992) and *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

table, it seems to me, is an insistence on that which would prevent the instrumentalization of the church – namely, its holiness. F. Ernest Stoeffler gets this quite right when he says:

It is customary in our day to insist that John Wesley's ecclesiology was dictated by his highly developed sense of mission. While there is truth in this way of putting it, such an assertion actually says very little. The reason is, of course, that a sense of mission can be related to all kinds of goals, worthy or unworthy, self-centered, church-centered, or world-centered, this-worldly or other-worldly. What is again important to realize, therefore, is that Wesley's urgent sense of mission resulted from his own Aldersgate experience as witnessed to and tested by the corporate religious experience of his societies. Mission to the mature Wesley was mission as apprehended in the societies.¹⁴

A second instability shows up in the way Wesley actually related his evangelistic practices to the church. Wesley always thought himself a loyal churchman, but it is not difficult to detect a great deal of ambivalence in his attitude toward the church. He clearly wants to connect his converts to ecclesial life, but the ecclesiological dimensions of evangelism do not always press in on him in significant ways; indeed, most of his evangelism takes place outside the church in the form of the societies and field preaching. But both the societies and, of course, field preaching are in no way under the discipline, auspices, or authority of the church. It is possible to read Wesley's ecclesiology as not intrinsically connected to evangelism at all, but instead as taking the church to be little more than a conserving institution so that the fruits of the revival do not wither away. And so it is not by accident that when Wesleyans have done serious ecclesiological reflection, the church was placed almost exclusively under the heading of sanctifying grace, as a vehicle of grace for the growth and nurture of those who have already converted to Christian faith. Transplant Wesley's para-church evangelism to a situation where there is no commitment such as Wesley's to an established church and where the predominant social imagination is a highly individualistic, pragmatist one governed by capitalist modes of economic life, and you've got a sure fire recipe for disaster. Evangelism *will* be carried out as if the church is an afterthought.

A third instability in Wesley's ecclesiology, but one that makes room for enormous vitality and creativity when thinking about evangelism as ecclesial holiness is the way his evangelism was forged out of the rich ecclesiological metal of both the English and the Radical reformations. Wesley's synthesis of high churchmanship and Pietist experimentalism provides a path for re-thinking the fundamentally ecclesial nature of salvation and the embodied, corporate, and sacramental nature of holiness. What Wesley found on his Summer "road trip" to Germany in 1739 was not just a doctrine of assurance, but a connectional model of religious societies that could renew the church. "Their diaspora societies, therefore, were interpreted as nothing more and nothing less than a very much needed means of restoring the koinonia, the spirit, the message, and the sense of mission of that community within a given religious establishment, and of doing so without the need of disrupting the order of that establishment."¹⁵ This pietism was a much more ecclesial form than other forms of pietism and one that gave Wesley a "gathered church" orientation that, as F. Ernest Stoeffler notes, was not merely latent in English

¹⁴ F. Ernest Stoeffler, "Tradition and Renewal in the Ecclesiology of John Wesley" in *Traditio-Krisis-Renovatio aus Theologischer Sicht*, edited by Berndt Jasper and Rudolf Mohr (Marburg: Elwer, 1976), 309.

¹⁵ Stoeffler, 305.

Puritanism.¹⁶ This radical reformation twist on ecclesiology was synthesized by Wesley into his Anglicanism in a way that insists on the institutional nature (and, to a degree, the authority) of the Church of England, though constantly being “informed and reformed from within by a community of earnest believers in whose corporate life the Spirit of God is peculiarly at work.”¹⁷ (306).

But once Wesley’s soteriology and evangelism are uprooted from their sacramental and ecclesiological matrix and transplanted into the social imagination of liberal modernity, we are left with little more than a basically laissez-faire, free enterprise relationship of the Christian to culture in which, once again, the church is little more than an afterthought.

Evangelism as Ecclesial Holiness

Contrary to prevailing opinions within the contemporary literature on evangelism, our most daunting challenge as a church is not that we will fail to reach unchurched, secular people because our boring preaching and stuffy music puts off the tastes, expectations, and preferences of our culture. Our greatest challenge is that, in reaching our culture, we will fail to challenge its racism, individualism, violence, and affluence, having being instead enamored of them all. Our church will then in no way subvert an existing unjust order, but rather mimic and sustain it. We may reach more people, but the gospel with which we reach them will have become a version of “Christendom lite,” a pale reflection of consumer preferences and a market-driven accommodation to felt needs. The subversive nature of the gospel will then have become itself subverted and that which is unprecedented and radical about the people of God will have become compromised in favor of mere ‘ratings.’

Though it may seem counter-intuitive, what is needed most in our context is not more attention to “effectiveness” and “success” in evangelism, but learning once again how as a church to bear faithful witness. Thus, I should like to argue that the logic of evangelism must be the logic of witness rather than the logic of accomplishment, the only criteria governing such logic being faithfulness and incarnation, rather than sheer effectiveness.

That which makes the church truly evangelistic are those disciplines, practices, gestures, worship, and saintly lives that constitute the church as the body of Christ. So, for example, it is impossible to evangelize the world and be a church that supports war and fails to include the poor. Likewise, apart from the recovery of practices of discipline at all levels within the church, it is difficult to see how the church can embody faithful witness. Indeed, one could even make the argument that a church that does not excommunicate cannot evangelize. But, of course, this presumes that the practice of communing is central to what it means to be church in the first place and not just one “means of grace” among others that might help us grow and mature every now and then. Rather, the Eucharistic table is that place where the church becomes the body of Christ, so that at least part of what it means to evangelize is to invite others to the table. While I do not have the space to develop it here, this means that evangelism and social ethics are ultimately not two different things. Nor is worship a third thing.¹⁸

In conclusion, the criteria for measuring Christian evangelism is not “effectiveness” in reaching the world or “winning” people to Christ. Indeed, as the cross makes abundantly clear,

¹⁶ Ibid., 306.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ On this point, see Stanley Hauerwas, “Worship, Evangelism, Ethics: On Eliminating the ‘And’” in *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2000), 155-161.

Christians are not called to “win.” There is instead only one criterion by which evangelism may be measured, and that is faithful witness. As John Howard Yoder put it, “The challenge to the faith community should not be to dilute or filter or translate its witness, so that the ‘public’ community can handle it without believing, but so to purify and clarify and exemplify it that the world can perceive it to be good news without having to learn a foreign language.”¹⁹

My own view is that contemporary evangelism is ecclesiological bankruptcy and tyrannized by secular models of practical reasoning. Rather than grasping the truth that it is only through the formation of a people (and thus the development of practices that make such formation possible) that we are Christian in the world, most evangelism seeks to ground Christian practice in the accomplishing of certain ends by whatever methods “work” best (and thus, the standard procedure in books on evangelism is to trot out a handful of “successful pastors” to tell us what “works”). In other words, it exchanges the Christian virtue tradition for a secular means-ends causality. What we need instead is a theology of evangelism that operates within an aesthetics²⁰ and an eschatology vastly different from those prevailing in modern Western culture. Stanley Hauerwas, in summing up a distinction made by Reinhard Hütter, makes precisely the point I want to make here. Hütter distinguishes between what he calls “a utopian” and “a pneumatological” eschatology. As Hauerwas says, “while the first follows the logic of modern politics, in which the implementation of the end defines the success of the political agents, the second follows the logic of the Spirit, where the ends are embodied in the means in such a way that ‘success’ is defined only by the specific nature of certain ends. Thus, the success of the church’s faithful witness can be hidden either through the form of the cross or in the future of God’s reign.”²¹

To claim, then, that evangelism is an eschatological activity is to insist that it is only possible in hope and that its character is shaped by that hope. The only certainty that justifies Christian witness is not its effectiveness in winning others to Christ, but this very hope that is incommensurable with external appearances and that defies apparent success or failure. It is only an unseen hope that can give meaning and purpose to evangelism. And so we may say with Albert Outler:

Give us a church whose members believe and understand the gospel of God’s healing love of Christ to hurting men and women. Give us a church that speaks and acts in consonance with its faith – not only to reconcile the world but to turn it upside down! Give us a church of spirit-filled people in whose fellowship life speaks to life, love to love, and faith and trust respond to God’s grace. And we shall have a church whose witness in the world will not fail and whose service to the world will transform it.²²

¹⁹ John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 24.

²⁰ I do not have space to develop this task here, but central to it is the thinking through of an evangelistic aesthetics rooted in holiness rather than modern notions of desire. Evangelism can never be beautiful as long as it reduces itself to that which is the object of desire. The beauty of holiness transcends mere desire.

²¹ Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, 30.

²² Outler, 56.