

Restorative Witness

Evangelism and Reconciliation: A Wesleyan Theological Exploration

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Introduction

A few years ago, while I was a doctoral student, I attended an art exhibit and recognized an acquaintance from the community. As we introduced our respective spouses, he mentioned to his wife that I was pursuing doctoral work but was unsure of the area. When I responded ‘the theology of evangelism,’ their response was immediate and visceral. In perfect symmetry, they physically recoiled with expressions of horror. Embarrassed by the obviously negative nature of their reaction, he quickly apologized saying, ‘Evangelism, wow. I never would have thought. You’ve always struck me as so open minded.’ As I tried to alleviate his discomfort, I realized how difficult it would be to convince him that evangelism and open-mindedness were not mutually exclusive with one clearly preferable to the other.

Sadly, this experience is not unique. Repeatedly, across denominations and both within and outside the church, I have encountered hesitation, frustration, misunderstanding, denial, negativity, and even outright hostility in response to the entire

topic of evangelism.¹ Clearly few people, at least in a Western context, are comfortable talking about evangelism, much less engaging in it. Further, historically there has been either confusion or silence within the academy regarding this area of theological inquiry. William Abraham rightly points out that evangelism ‘falls between a rock and a hard place. The rock is the extraordinary silence on the part of systematic theologians on the subject of evangelism. The hard place is the inability of practical theology to reach any sustained measure of internal self-criticism.’² The present project is prompted by this continued discomfort, coupled with the clear need for additional attention from the academic community. Although some might wonder about the placement of this paper within the Theology and Ethics Working Group, I believe it is appropriate because though the main topic is evangelism, the heart of the discussion focuses on the theology that undergirds it.

In contemplating the challenges of evangelism, I believe there are several areas in which the church, particularly in the United States, has proclaimed a less-than-holistic message. Specifically, rather than presenting the whole gospel, the church appears to have frequently erred on the side of a message emphasizing the individual at the expense of community; heaven, or some other image of the afterlife at the expense of responsible stewardship of all of God’s good creation; and the salvation of individual souls for eternal life at the expense of the just and merciful care of whole persons, both now and in the age to come. The results of such a partial message can be seen, for instance, in the disregard

¹ ‘Evangelism’ and ‘evangelization’ are widely used throughout the literature and often denote similar if not identical concepts. I use ‘evangelism’ because it is used most commonly in the contexts that I find myself.

² William J. Abraham, ‘A Theology of Evangelism: The Heart of the Matter’ [1994], in P. Chilcote and L. Warner (eds.), *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 18

Christians appear to have in relationship to environmental issues, or the way in which the church appears to be insensitive to issues of domestic violence as evidenced by the frequent advice for women to return to or remain in abusive relationships as part of their role as submissive, 'Christian' wives.

Furthermore, proclaiming such an incomplete message has over time led to the unhealthy existence of the church in the midst of antigospel environments, such as slavery, colonialism and postmodern imperialism. This has been unhealthy. Rather than being 'salt and light' by proclaiming the gospel for transformation, the church has instead often operated in deliberate partnership or unconscious complicity with powers at work in those settings. Although such complicity is not limited to one faith tradition, an obvious example is the ongoing sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church. For all Christian churches in a Western context, this has led to an atmosphere of mistrust/distrust, a loss of integrity, and a crisis in evangelism, both within the milieu of Western culture and from the perspective of the Western church's relationship with other cultures. New understandings are needed to restore wholeness to the Christian message, integrity to evangelistic practices and reconciliation in relationships.

In the current exploration, I offer a new means of theologically grounding evangelism that recognizes the need to approach both the gospel and the formation of faith holistically. Using the lens of Wesleyan theology³ and drawing on theological work in the area of reconciliation, I propose that as the church engages in evangelism it must do so from a stance of reconciliation. In making this proposal, I believe Miroslav Volf's

³ Abraham has suggested that 'as a serious experiment in theology, Wesleyanism is over.' That may be true. However, I believe that the term still has value not because it exists as a systematic approach, but because it emphasizes and brings together certain understandings of theology and practice in ways not always as apparent in other traditions. William J. Abraham, 'The End of Wesleyan Theology', *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 40, no. 1 (2005), 18

metaphor of embrace, when adapted to the context of evangelism, is well suited for the task of envisioning what such a stance entails.⁴

Context and Assumptions

A brief description of context and assumptions is important at this juncture. I believe that currently the church in the global North and West exists in an age marked by declining trust and cultural divisiveness. Unfortunately, time does not allow a thoroughgoing discussion of this aspect of culture. Suffice it to say that studies indicate that in general trust has declined in relation to a wide variety of professions,⁵ and polls have provided enough consistent indications of Americans' and others declining trust and even clear distrust in major institutions, especially in the government and news media, that it is now acceptable to simply assert that this negative situation is a fact.⁶

An incident during my time at Durham University illustrates the importance of this aspect of culture for the present project. During those years I frequently took my meals in the St. John's College dining hall. One evening, a young man joined me at table. As a middle-aged American woman in the midst of mostly British twenty-something students, I was a curiosity at St. John's, and I am sure he was wondering what business had brought me there.

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996)

⁵ Howard Gardner, Jessica Sara Benjamin, Lindsay Pettingill, 'An Examination of Trust in Contemporary American Society', Working Papers (The Center for Public Leadership at the John F. Kennedy School of Government), 6, www.ksg.harvard.edu/leadership/research/publications/papers/2006/1_trust.pdf (3 April 2007) Cf., Hugh Hecllo, *On Thinking Institutionally*, On Politics (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2008)

⁶ Since the mid-twentieth century there has been widespread decline in nearly all of U.S. society's major institutions, a trend shared by virtually all the advanced nations of the world. Cf., Globescan, 'GlobeScan Report on Issues and Reputation', Globescan.com (2005), http://www.globescan.com/rf_ir_first.htm and http://www.globescan.com/rf_ir_pessimism.htm (18 July 2010)

Our conversation began with the usual pleasantries; however, when he discovered I was studying the theology of evangelism, he became quite animated. Apparently during that week, there was a very intense, public thrust of Christian witnessing sponsored by Christian Union Mission occurring on the Durham University campus. It was clear that this young man had little regard for this type of evangelism, which he felt to be overbearing and intrusive. As our conversation progressed, however, he mentioned that he had a Christian friend who had shared quite intimately about his faith journey. In contrast to the public witnessing, this young man was dramatically more receptive to the sharing of his friend. I asked him to describe his perspective on the difference between the two experiences. Interestingly, he replied that they were very distinct, the public witnessing was evangelism; the sharing of his friend was not. Yet he recognized that both his friend and the people involved in the public witnessing event provided him with *the same information*. He could not adequately explain this, even to himself; however, at an intuitive level he knew the answer was in some way related to trust. He could receive information from the friend whom he trusted that he could not receive from strangers making public witness on campus.

Though anecdotal, this experience is important because I believe Christians in a Western context often operate out of an assumption that others will instinctively trust them, regardless of whether those others are within or beyond the church. This is interesting given the extensive literature available on cross-cultural evangelism and mission; however, I am not asserting that the importance of trust is *unrecognized*. Rather, I believe in the Western context, the *actual existence* of trust as a foundation for mission and evangelism has been *assumed*. Annette Baier aptly describes this assumption. ‘We

inhabit a climate of trust as we inhabit an atmosphere and notice it as we notice air, only when it becomes scarce or polluted.⁷ For better or worse, the climate of trust in the early years of the twenty-first century has become polluted. Trust is something that can no longer be assumed – if, in fact, it ever actually could be.

A second assumption that grounds this discussion relates to evangelism itself. Again, time and space prohibit a more in-depth exploration; but it is important to touch on the foundational ideas on which this paper is based.

Much of the current literature related to evangelism is intent on providing renewed and expanded understandings about the nature of evangelistic practice. This can be viewed only as a positive development. The valuable nature of the discussion lies in its focus on infusing the practical with theological reflection. The sustained measure of internal self-criticism within the arena of practical theology that Abraham calls for appears to have begun in earnest.⁸ At the same time, however, the conversation remains focused on practice; there is still ‘extraordinary silence on the part of systematic theologians on the subject of evangelism.’⁹ It is my hope that the current discussion will in some way contribute to breaking that silence, offering a rendering of evangelism that, rather than presenting a new definition of evangelistic practice, speaks to *the theological stance that undergirds* its practice.

With that in mind, it remains important to outline the operating definition of evangelistic practice that grounds the present argument. Although others have presented varying definitions, Abraham’s offering in his now classic book *The Logic of Evangelism* remains in my view, the most effective; it is nuanced, yet does not sacrifice clarity. For

⁷ Annette Baier, ‘Trust and Antitrust’, *Ethics* 96, no. 2 (1986), 234

⁸ Abraham, ‘Theology’, 18

⁹ Abraham, ‘Theology’, 18

Abraham, evangelism is 'that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time.'¹⁰

Flowing from that definition is another conviction grounding this discussion: evangelism is to be embodied in all of Christian practice. Elaine Heath echoes the distinctively Wesleyan understanding that the gospel is for all when she rightly contends that 'evangelism...is at the heart of all we believe and practice as Christians.'¹¹ Therefore even as one engages in practices unique to and in the context of the community of faith, one does so with the hope-filled intent that all might have the opportunity to be initiated 'into the holy life revealed in Jesus Christ, anchored in the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, yielded to the reign of God, for the transformation of the world.'¹²

Such a holistic understanding is valuable for two significant reasons: it more accurately reflects the interrelatedness of Christian practice in the lived experience of the church; and it recognizes the vital link between proclaimed word and lived practice that is necessary, especially in an environment of mis-distrust,¹³ if evangelism is to have integrity. When Paul mentored Timothy in the work of an evangelist, he was deliberate about instilling concern for the quality of life of the body of Christ. (I Timothy) Thus it appears from the beginning that there was a significant link between the church's corporate life and the message it was proclaiming.

¹⁰ William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 95

¹¹ Elaine A. Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 13 Cf., Brad Kallenberg, *Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 54 Cf., Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 47, 49 Cf., Lacey C. Warner, *Saving Women: Retrieving Evangelistic Theology and Practice* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 278

¹² Elaine Heath and Scott Kisker, *Longing for Spring: A New Vision for Wesleyan Community* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010), 40, n. 3

¹³ I have coined the term 'mis-distrust' as a way to describe to the range of feeling that marks current Western culture: from the more neutral sense of skepticism reflected in the word, mistrust, to the complete lack of trust reflected in the word, distrust.

Having outlined the problem, context, and assumptions underlying the overall discussion, let us now explore embrace as a theological stance to undergird evangelistic practice.

Identity and Otherness: The Subtext of Evangelism

N. T. Wright has often said that one element of judging the value of a scholarly work is its ability to contribute to academic areas other than the scholar's own. In his book, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Miroslav Volf has done just that in providing a surprisingly effective lens through which to explore the evangelistic task. Understandings of evangelism play no part in Volf's volume; rather his focus is reconciliation (particularly under conditions of enmity), undergirded by a perceptive examination of identity and otherness. He convincingly asserts that full reconciliation cannot take place until people are willing to give themselves to others and readjust their identities to make space for them.¹⁴ To illustrate his understanding of reconciliation, Volf offers the metaphor of embrace. I believe that Volf's metaphor and his backdrop for it hold great imaginative power, and it is upon this metaphor that I am building my theological understanding of evangelism.

A major assumption underlying evangelistic efforts is that there are people and groups outside the community of Christian believers who are to be engaged in such a way as to bring them into that community. That assumption rightly lies at the heart of the evangelistic task understood as being 'oriented toward the reign of God.' It is the idea that outsiders will be transformed into insiders that undergirds the goal of 'initiating persons into an alternative community of God's people who give themselves for the life

¹⁴ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 29 Hereafter referenced in footnotes as 'Volf.'

of the world,' which is, in my view, the proper end toward which evangelism aims.¹⁵

Thus from the outset there is a sense of the insider and the outsider, the Christian and the other.

On the surface, the sense of a community that recognizes and deliberately commits to the reign of God, and a group that has yet to make such a commitment, is not inherently negative; rather, it is quite natural and honestly depicts the situation of God's reign as being here, but not yet here. However, because human nature is fallen, people tend to privilege homogeneity and are wary of differences; therefore tension arises within understandings of the relationship between those within the community of faith and those not yet a part of it, often turning that relationship into a more confrontational 'us' and 'them.' In light of this, Volf's metaphor of embrace is significant; and to get at the potential force this metaphor contains for evangelism, it is necessary to directly engage his ideas of identity, otherness and reconciliation.

Of particular importance for my use of the metaphor of embrace is Volf's discussion of creation as a process of 'separating-and-binding,' which results in various patterns of interdependence, a process he terms 'differentiation.'¹⁶ The process of differentiation that forms the individual identity is not simply a matter of the logic of opposition and negativity; rather, it involves a complex process of 'taking in' and 'keeping out.' 'We are who we are not because we are separate from the others who are

¹⁵ Paul Chilcote and Lacey Warner (eds.), *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), xxvi

¹⁶ Volf, 65 Cf., Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 29

next to us, but because we are *both* separate *and* connected, *both* distinct *and* related; the boundaries that mark our identities are both barriers and bridges.¹⁷

For the Christian, this identity-shaping process of taking in and keeping out has an additional layer that Volf terms distance and belonging, using the story of Abraham to illustrate. Abraham trusted God and departed from his homeland. (Gen. 12) It is both his trust *and* his departure that makes him the ancestor of all. In trusting God and departing, Abraham found himself belonging to a wandering community, strangers separated from their native soil. Yet this stranger Abraham, while bound to his wandering community, also found himself most completely bound to God; it was God who claimed Abraham's ultimate loyalty. Because Abraham departed, God promised to make him the father of a *single family*, which would receive God's blessing. (Gen. 12, 17)

Christians believe in the one God of Abraham. A significant point flowing from this is the belief that humanity *in its entirety* will receive God's blessings. God's covenant-with-Abraham-for-the-blessing-of-all signals that in keeping this promise, God plans to redeem the overarching situation of estrangement that affects every human being. (Gen. 3, 4, 11)¹⁸ Abraham's departure created distance, yet he continued to belong to a wandering community; in similar fashion, so Christians belong to a community or culture, but must also create distance from it. Volf rightly asserts that there is a reality more important than culture: God and the new world God is creating, a world where all

¹⁷ Volf, 66 (emphasis original) Cf., Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros* [1987], trans. N. Russell (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 4th ed. 2007) 5-8

¹⁸ Cf., N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 55-77 Cf., N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1, *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 215-279 Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 340-346, 529-530

will gather around the triune God.¹⁹ Like Abraham, who found himself most fundamentally bound to God, the Christian's ultimate loyalty is to God, rather than to culture or place; this allegiance requires distance from one's culture. On the other hand, it is this distance that enables the creation of space within individuals to receive the other.

Volf builds on his discussion of the formation of identity as a process of differentiation (the taking in and keeping out) and on his theme of distance and belonging by moving to an exploration of exclusion as a metaphor for sin. For Volf, sin, at its most basic, creational level, is to 'put asunder what God has joined and join what God has put asunder.'²⁰ If human identity is, as Volf cogently asserts, a melding of both separation and connectedness, both distinction and relationship, sin, as exclusion, is a 'powerful, contagious, and destructive evil' that disrupts that pattern of interdependence.²¹ It either, breaks connection and creates a stance of sovereign independence, or it erases appropriate separation in such a way that the other is no longer recognized as distinct, but rather as inferior and therefore requiring assimilation or subjugation.

Using the framework of 'sin as the practice of exclusion' is helpful because it 'names as sin what often passes as virtue, especially in religious circles.'²² Volf perceptively highlights Jesus' joint practice of renaming and remaking, which both strengthens the view of sin as the practice of exclusion, and provides a starting point for imaging reconciliation as embrace. Jesus renamed people and things that had been falsely labeled unclean, thus eradicating a distorted system of exclusion. (Mk. 7.14-23; Mk.

¹⁹ Volf, 50

²⁰ Volf, 66 Significantly, Volf neither asserts that exclusion is the most basic sin, nor that it lies at the bottom of all sins. Rather, exclusion as a metaphor for sin names what infuses most sin. 72 Cf., Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 30

²¹ Volf, 30

²² Volf, 72

5.25-34 implicitly) Jesus also remade people and things. He took truly unclean things and made them clean through forgiveness, spiritual transformation and healing, thus tearing down barriers created by wrongdoing. (Mk. 5.1-20, Mk. 2.15-17)²³

In bringing the two metaphors, exclusion and embrace, together, Volf provides valuable insights on issues such as justice and truth, and a concept he calls ‘noninnocence’, all while appropriately grounding his discussion in the self-giving love of the divine Trinity as manifested on the cross of Christ. These are important facets of Volf’s overall argument, and I will return to them in greater detail; however, for now it is important only to highlight that the force of his use of the metaphor of embrace is found in the assertion that embrace, full reconciliation, cannot take place unless ‘in the name of God’s crucified Messiah, we distance ourselves from ourselves and our cultures in order to create a space for the other.’²⁴ Further, this space making, this *will to embrace*, must be present *before* any judgment about others is made. The will to embrace is ‘absolutely indiscriminant and strictly immutable; it transcends the moral mapping of the social world into “good” and “evil.”’²⁵

From the perspective of evangelism, this initial overview raises several important questions. Building on Volf, might one ask, are Christians called to distance themselves not only from the particular societies within which they find themselves, but also from their faith culture, or more accurately, from their *church* culture, to make space for the other? Accepting that the will to embrace must be present before any judgments about the other are made, might one consider that the will to embrace must also precede all else

²³ Cf., James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, vol. 1, *Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 528-532, 605-607

²⁴ Volf, 30

²⁵ Volf, 29

undertaken in evangelistic practice? Further, might it be that this space making should be seen as an end in itself rather than as a means to achieve the greater goal of presenting the gospel? In other words, does the space created for embrace embody evangelistic practice in its ultimate fullness? I would answer yes to all of the above, and it is upon these assumptions that I wish to offer an adapted understanding of Volf's metaphor of embrace as a metaphor to theologically ground the evangelistic task.

There are several reasons for beginning with these assumptions. First, as has been previously discussed, Western culture, especially in the U.S., is currently marked by a climate of mis-distrust, which significantly affects the church's relationship with those beyond its boundaries. This climate highlights the gulf that presently separates those inside the church from those outside it. Distancing the self from the comfortable culture of the church, readjusting one's identity, so to speak, makes it possible to gain an understanding of the perspective of the other and to begin bridging the gap of mis-distrust.

Furthermore, everyday experience confirms that to varying degrees humans have an innate ability to discern motives when dealing with others.²⁶ In a climate of mis-distrust, that 'radar' is frequently more sensitive; thus love as a foundation for evangelistic practice is paramount.²⁷ Moreover, one does not 'love' in order to 'set the stage' for evangelism, one loves because it is a foundation of the Jesus way, which makes

²⁶ Cf., John Greco and John Turri, 'Virtue Epistemology', in E. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring, 2011) <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/epistemology-virtue/> (31 March 2011) Such innate perception is considered by virtue epistemologists such as Ernest Sosa to be a 'faculty-virtue' contributing to intellectual well being or flourishing.

²⁷ There are also ample theological warrants for this regardless of the cultural climate.

it an end in itself. Volf's assertion regarding reconciliation grounds the evangelistic task as well:

The will to give ourselves to others and 'welcome' them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity.²⁸

Similarly, Heath effectively contends that it is in the context of the healing community of faith that evangelism takes place.²⁹ As people first receive compassionate care and love, they are able to experience healing and are then drawn into the community of faith. George Hunter also parallels this thinking, recounting the early Irish community's practice of bringing individuals into the *community* before ever attempting to bring them into the *faith*.³⁰ Both of these understandings point toward the sense in which the will to embrace precedes all evangelistic practice.

Although my use of the metaphor of embrace will be different from Volf's for the obvious reason that I am discussing evangelism and he is discussing reconciliation, in a very real sense the two are deeply intertwined, and the metaphors can overlap in ways that might make them indistinguishable. Yet I am not asserting that evangelism is the same as reconciliation in the sense in which Volf uses the word. Nor am I asserting that reconciliation (again, in Volf's usage) is the same as evangelism. Although his discussion is thoroughly grounded in the reconciliation with God made possible by the cross of Christ, Volf is focused primarily on human-to-human reconciliation. In this sense, reconciliation between two Christians is not evangelism.³¹ Conversely, in this same sense

²⁸ Volf, 29

²⁹ Heath, *Mystic Way*, 13

³⁰ George G. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 47-55 Cf., Kallenberg, *Live to Tell*, 47-89

³¹ Cf., Robert Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992) Schreiter poignantly outlines the need for reconciliation *within* the Christian church.

when a person engages in the evangelistic task with a friend who is not a Christian, with the fervent hope that the friend might recognize the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, that person is not engaged in reconciliation because the context is friendship. However, when one looks at the larger theological understanding of reconciliation with God, the boundaries between evangelism and reconciliation become fuzzier, and to a large degree, the metaphors blend into one another. (Col. 1.19-20, 2 Cor. 5.17- 20)³²

One basis for proposing embrace as a theological stance to undergird evangelism is my contention that theologically, reconciliation with God (a distinguishing mark of the kingdom) is the ultimate goal of all evangelistic practice; thus evangelism is a part of reconciliation. Further, one cannot be fully reconciled with God without also being reconciled with others. In this sense the two usages of the metaphor of embrace overlap. Moreover, when Christians engage in evangelism from a posture of embrace, they are mirroring the reconciliation available through the self-giving of the divine Trinity. Once again, in great degree, the metaphors merge.

I believe this is one of the strengths of the theological rendering I am offering as it points to the holistic nature of Christian life and witness. These issues are irrevocably intertwined. However, other Christians may be less comfortable with the blurring of boundaries between the concepts of reconciliation and evangelism and believe it more helpful to have clearer understandings of the differences between them. Abraham has

³² Cf., Robert Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 130 Schreiter blurs the boundaries substantially when he suggests that reconciliation might be ‘one way of defining [the church’s] mission in the world today.’

said on more than one occasion that if everything is evangelism, then nothing is evangelism.³³

The point is well taken. It is important to have a clear understanding of what one is doing. On numerous occasions I have encountered Christians involved in specific acts of mercy, such as serving at soup kitchens or volunteering at homeless shelters, who consider themselves to be actively engaged in evangelism. Yet they readily admit that they *avoid* speaking explicitly with anyone about issues of faith, believing that the service itself is all that is necessary. If this self-reporting is true, then there is nothing to distinguish such service from many other secular or explicitly non-Christian organizations that also serve at soup kitchens and volunteer at homeless shelters. I would argue that such acts bring *integrity* to evangelistic practice; however, if issues of faith are consistently *avoided*, it then seems difficult to label this as evangelism.

Therefore, I believe the overlapping of embrace as a metaphor for reconciliation and for evangelism is not so problematic as to provide grounds to reject it. The need for a more holistic understanding of Christian life and witness is, in my perspective, of great enough value to risk the possible blurring of categories. Moreover, metaphors are valuable because they allow people to grasp meanings that in many ways are often deeper and more profound than can be expressed in plain language, or delineated by sharp boundaries of description. They often point to foundational things, things that are intuitive and emotive rather than literally expressive. Embrace as a metaphor is valuable

³³ Abraham rightly cautions that when ‘everything is evangelism then nothing is evangelism; and we should be surprised if anyone in the church takes it very seriously.’ *Logic*, 44 Cf., Stephen Neill, ‘If everything is mission, then nothing is mission.’ *Creative Tension* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1959), 81 as quoted in David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 511 Cf., Stone, *Evangelism*, 46-47

for understanding reconciliation and evangelism, not because it describes the step-by-step practice of either, but because it points to the milieu of vulnerability and openness to the other that is required for both.³⁴

In conclusion, Volf chooses the metaphor of embrace because it brings together three interrelated themes to which he is profoundly committed. I share his commitment and believe they are foundational for evangelism as well:

(1) The mutuality of self-giving love in the Trinity (the doctrine of God), (2) the outstretched arms of Christ on the cross for the ‘godless’ (the doctrine of Christ), (3) the open arms of the ‘father’ receiving the ‘prodigal’ (the doctrine of salvation).³⁵

For all of these reasons I assert that the space created for embrace embodies the theological stance that must undergird evangelistic practice if it is to be undertaken in its ultimate fullness.

Before I embark on a description of the metaphor of embrace, an additional clarification of usage is needed. I am writing from the perspective of a Christian in the United States and most of my critiques and assertions are directed to that context, though I hope they will also be helpful in other settings. With that in mind, the metaphor of embrace works well in the American cultural context (as it might also in an African environment). In other cultures such as Asian or North European, however, embrace might be too intimate; a handshake might be more appropriate.³⁶ Recognizing these cultural differences, the importance of the metaphor is not its physicality, but ‘the dynamic relationship between the self and the other that embrace symbolizes and

³⁴ For a helpful discussion of metaphor in theological discourse, see John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2nd ed. 2007), 18-37

³⁵ Volf, 29

³⁶ For Volf, the metaphor of a handshake could easily be substituted for embrace; what the metaphor is pointing to is ‘the whole realm of human relations in which the interplay between the self and the other takes place.’ 140 Cf., Z. D. Gurevitch, ‘The Embrace: On the Element of Non-Distance in Human Relations’, *The Sociological Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (1990), 187-201

enacts.³⁷ Furthermore, my hope is that the weight of my proposal will be great enough that should the metaphor itself be problematic, one might remove it without consequence.

Embrace: A Foundational Metaphor

Embrace is an integrated movement with four consecutive stages flowing one from the other: opening the arms, waiting, closing the arms, and then opening them again. Without all four elements, the embrace is incomplete. One cannot simply open the arms and wait, or embrace will never actually occur. Likewise, if one opens the arms, waits, then closes the arms but does not open them again, the embrace has been transmuted into an oppressive grip.³⁸

Stage one: *opening* the arms. Volf highlights four significant messages that open arms convey. First, open arms indicate a desire for the other, a signal that ‘I want the other to be part of who I am and I want to be part of the other.’ It points to the deeper truth that a void is created by the absence of the other, which generates desire, signifying that in some sense the other is somehow already present even before one’s arms are opened.³⁹

Open arms also signal that space has been created within the self for the other. Interestingly, it indicates that the self has moved *out* of itself toward the space of the other, but at the same time has *withdrawn* from its own boundaries to create new space. When arms are opened, ‘the self makes room for the other and sets on a journey toward the other in one and the same act.’⁴⁰ Similarly, open arms indicate that a gap has opened

³⁷ Volf, 141

³⁸ Volf, 141 If the arms are not opened, the embrace paradoxically becomes exclusion.

³⁹ Volf, 141

⁴⁰ Volf, 141-142

within the boundaries of the self that will allow the other to enter. One can desire the other; one can create new space by withdrawing from the boundaries of the self; but if the boundaries of the self are not passable, embrace will be impossible.⁴¹

Lastly, open arms are an invitation. Volf paints the picture of friends leaving the door open for one another: no need to knock, just a shout, ‘We’re here!’ and come on in. Yet open arms are not only an invitation; they also offer ‘a *soft knock* on the other’s door.’ In the same way that they both signal a creation of space and a moving out, opening the arms also signals an invitation to come in and also a desire to enter the space of the other.⁴²

The messages of open arms are significant for the evangelistic task in the senses that Volf describes, but they also provide theological grounding for evangelism. Open arms point to the void created by the absence of some from the divinely promised *one family* of Abraham. They indicate that all are one in the Messiah Jesus, (Gal. 3.28) but that the ‘all are one’ is not complete without the other. Open arms signal that the one family of Abraham is not a closed set, that boundaries have been made passable and that there is an invitation to shared life, which flows in two directions. Ultimately, and possibly most important for evangelism, the inward making of space and the outward reaching toward the other reflect the activity of the triune God in creation, its continued care and sustenance, and in the overarching history of humanity. In signifying the stance in which Christians are to take in relation to those outside the church, open arms reflect the stance of the triune God toward all of creation.

⁴¹ Volf, 142

⁴² Volf, 142

Stage two: *waiting*. For open arms to lead to a full embrace, one must wait, reaching for the other, but not yet touching. This is a significant part of embrace. Open arms initiate movement toward the other, but it is not a movement that invades, or forces a response. It creates space within the self and moves beyond the boundaries of the self, but it does not cross the boundaries of the other. Rather it waits for a response from the other, a reciprocal opening of the arms.

Waiting can be difficult, especially in the practice of evangelism; but waiting is the exercise of self-control within the self ‘for the sake of the integrity of the other – the other who may not want to be embraced but left alone.’⁴³ Although it may appear unbalanced, waiting with outstretched arms is not an act of powerlessness. Waiting holds within it an internal power not of coercion, manipulation or a forceful destruction of the boundaries of the other. Waiting holds within it the power of vulnerability and openness undergirded by expectant hope, a power that recognizes that without reciprocity, there can be no embrace.

From the perspective of evangelism, waiting creates space for the working of the Holy Spirit. When Christians move back from their own boundaries to make space for the other, open their arms, and wait in the power of expectant hope, they open themselves to the working of the Holy Spirit in the space between the self and the other. Waiting provides the opportunity for discernment on the part of the self and the other, a heightened awareness of what the Holy Spirit might be doing within the self, within the other and between the self and the other.⁴⁴

⁴³ Volf, 142

⁴⁴ For a discussion of the necessary role of the Holy Spirit in evangelism, see John Wimber and Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism* (Ventura: Regal, 2nd ed. 2009) Cf., Schreiter, who stresses the importance of

Stage three: *closing* the arms. This is the essence of embrace, but is impossible without reciprocity. As Volf makes clear, ‘It takes *two* pairs of arms for *one* embrace.’⁴⁵ A full embrace is both active and passive; one holds and is held. There may be varying degrees of giving; however, each must enter the space of the other, make its presence known, and feel the presence of the other. Full embrace depends on such reciprocity.

Earlier in my ministry, I was responsible for a Sunday worship service that met in a local theater. Because it was unconventional, it was attractive to many people who had for a variety of reasons felt unwelcome in or disaffected by the church. Many were only nominally Christian; others were not Christian, but were interested in exploring faith. I ministered among these people for eight years, and many of them had a profound effect on me. As I sought to extend open arms to them, I felt their response, and it was often a surprising experience of ‘being held’ by them as much as my ‘holding them.’

Several years after beginning my current position, I encountered a woman who had attended regularly. As we spoke, she recalled that she was in a confused and unhealthy place in her life during those years and sensed that I knew this about her and in some ways disagreed with or even disapproved of some of the ways in which she was coping. She continued that this was actually a good thing because even though we might not have agreed, she felt there was a place for her no matter what. The security of that space had challenged her to seriously reevaluate her life. And, she added, it was important to her that despite our differences, I took her seriously and was always open to

waiting as ‘an active capacity,’ which opens one ‘to God and God’s reconciling grace.’ *Reconciliation: Mission & Ministry*, 72

⁴⁵ Volf, 143 (emphasis original)

the possibility that *she might have something to offer me*. Embrace must always be reciprocal.

Besides reciprocity, what Volf describes as a *soft touch* is needed. The other is not gripped too tightly, nor does one melt into the other. In both of these situations, embrace does not exist either because the other is overpowered or because the self has been lost in abnegation. Either constitutes not embrace but exclusion. In full embrace, the identity of each self is both preserved and transformed, with each seeing both the self and the other in a new light.⁴⁶

The word evangelism evokes a negative response in no small part, I believe, to a lack of a ‘soft touch.’ It is common to hear stories of preachers who at the conclusion of their sermons invite people to make a commitment by coming forward to the altar while everyone sings a hymn, such as *Just As I Am*. The preachers, rather than praying with or otherwise making contact with those who have come forward, stand looking at all those who have not yet responded. At the conclusion of the hymn, they announce that everyone will sing the last verse *again*; to make sure that *everyone* who feels led has had time to respond. The discomfort is often palpable.

The tendency to recoil at stories like the above is not, however, an excuse for no touch at all. A full embrace requires contact. Thus invitations are very important. I know of people who have said it took them much longer to enter Christian faith because they were never actually invited to do so. A gentler touch might be for preachers to provide an opportunity to respond, but to also model that response at the altar in prayer.

Like waiting, a gentle touch also allows the other space to freely respond. Because it respects the integrity of the self and the other, it also allows space for the

⁴⁶ Volf, 143-144 Cf., Kallenberg, *Live to Tell*, 31-46

transforming power of the Holy Spirit. That Christians believe in the Holy Spirit's power to transform is not controversial; however, in undertaking evangelism, often it is assumed that the one being transformed is the other rather than the Christian. One evangelizes the gospel with expectant hope that the *other* might be transformed, at the bare minimum into a person who professes faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. At times the assumption goes a bit further and involves the other being transformed into a Christian resembling the self, thinking and believing in like manner. Thus recognizing the transformative power of embrace for *both* selves is crucial to the evangelistic task. In evangelism, the will to embrace must also always involve openness to the power of the Holy Spirit to continually work not only through the Christian toward the other, but also through the other toward the Christian.

Stage four: *opening* the arms again. For an embrace to be complete, the arms must always open again. Embrace never creates one fused body out of two; rather, the dynamic identities of each are preserved even as the imprint of each remains on the other. There is a circular movement to embrace:

The open arms that in the last act let the other go are the same open arms that in the first act signal a desire for the other's presence, create space in oneself, open up the boundary of the self, and issue an invitation for the other to return. They are the same arms that in the second act wait for the other to reciprocate, and that in the third act encircle the other's body. The end of an embrace is, in a sense, already a beginning of an embrace, even if that other embrace will take place only after both selves have gone about their own business for a while.⁴⁷

The circular nature of the movement of embrace mirrors the ongoing nature of evangelism. The evangelistic task is more often a process than a specific act as people are loved, welcomed, and nurtured in faith. What is more, this circular movement points to the expectation that having experienced embrace, the other will go on to be a

⁴⁷ Volf, 145

transforming person in the life of others. Inherent in embrace is the assumption of a transformative process of people becoming disciples, who will then make disciples, who will then make disciples...and so on.

This is significant for evangelism because in the context of the local church, frequently the focus quickly shifts from evangelism to discipleship. Churches reach out to others and seek to assimilate them through discipleship ministries that encourage spiritual maturity. This is not without merit and is, in fact, an important part of firmly grounding new believers in the reign of God. However, including the concept that having experienced embrace, one then moves out to embrace others is not always included in that discipleship.⁴⁸ The preferable balance as churches guide those new to the faith would be to emphasize that embrace is not static, nor is it isolated. It is a dynamic process in which both selves are transformed and move outward as conduits of continued transformation.

Having described the metaphor of embrace, Volf raises three other issues that are important for a deeper understanding of the power of this metaphor for evangelism. The first is its grounding in the self-giving love of the divine Trinity as manifested on the cross of Christ. The second is the concept he terms ‘noninnocence,’ and the final issue is ‘double vision’, which Volf explicates in relation to justice and truth. We turn first to the self-giving love of the Trinity.

⁴⁸ The silence regarding the cyclical nature of the evangelistic process is apparent in much of the current conversation regarding discipleship. When Christian ‘practice’ and developing congregations marked by ‘porous monasticism’ are emphasized, the focus appears to be inward, despite the attention given to fluid boundaries. For an example of a valuable reimagining of congregational discipleship, which is also interestingly silent on evangelistic practice, see Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2004)

The Self-Giving Love of the Trinity

Vital to Volf's and my use of the metaphor of embrace is an understanding of the self-giving love of the Trinity, especially as explicated by Jürgen Moltmann. For Moltmann, the creator God is a trinitarian community of persons who relate to each other in a relationship of reciprocity and mutual indwelling.⁴⁹ God's activity in creation provides a foundational vision for an understanding of embrace. Creation begins when the transcendent God, the source of creation's being and life, makes room within Godself for the otherness of creation, a freely undertaken self-limitation of the infinite, omnipresent God to create something outside Godself.⁵⁰ God's kenotic, space-making, self-giving activity in creation is not only an integral part of the Christian message; it is also the model for that message. As the transcendent God makes room within Godself for the otherness of creation, so Christians make room within themselves for others, especially those others currently beyond the boundaries of the faith community.

Before continuing the discussion of Moltmann's understanding of the self-giving love of the Trinity, a descriptive word is needed regarding the space-making, self-giving activity of God in creation and the replication of that activity in evangelism, specifically regarding the element of risk involved in both. One of the strengths of Wesleyan theology is, I believe, its commitment to 'freewill theism,' which affirms that 'God has made a

⁴⁹ Cf., Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 109-129 Coakley's discussion of Gregory of Nyssa is helpful in understanding the various nuances that exist in the use of trinitarian language such as 'community' (verses communion) and 'persons.'

⁵⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* [1981], trans. M. Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1993, 109 Cf., Clark Pinnock, whose description of the Trinity is significant: 'The Trinity depicts a relational God who is ontologically other and a dynamic world that has real value. As internally social and self-sufficient, God does not need the world but creates it out of the abundance of his rich inner life. This makes God free to create and respond to the world, free to be gracious and take the initiative where necessary.' 'Systematic Theology', in *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 109

world with freedom, in which loving relationships can flourish. It is an ecosystem capable of echoing back the triune life of God.⁵¹ This libertarian freedom (the ability to do otherwise) implies, however, that ‘God took the risk in creating such beings that we might choose to use our freedom to love or we might use it to sin.’⁵² Therefore while God may be ‘leading the world forward to the place where it will reflect more perfectly the goodness that God himself enjoys,’⁵³ such activity comes at great cost; though ‘we cannot be saved without God’s help, God will not save us without our participation. God takes the risk that we will refuse to participate in his redemptive work.’⁵⁴

The implication for evangelism practiced from a stance of embrace is twofold. First, it is not a risk-free endeavor, quite the contrary; it is a stance that requires a willingness to risk hardship and rejection. Although Christians might initiate embrace by the opening of their arms, embrace cannot happen without the participation of the other. Therefore a stance of embrace extends freedom to the other, while at the same time undertaking risk for oneself.⁵⁵ Moreover, in risking that the other might refuse one’s embrace, one does so knowing that the pain of that rejection must be born alone.

Second, it is not optional. The open theism reflected in much of Wesleyan theology emphasizes that God takes human beings seriously as covenant partners, co-

⁵¹ Pinnock, ‘Systematic Theology’, 110

⁵² Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 13

⁵³ Pinnock, ‘Systematic Theology’, 110

⁵⁴ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 160 Cf., Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 163-167 Cf., Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 54-58, 151-153 Cf., Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 12-16 Interestingly, while not engaging in outright contradiction, there is considerable disagreement between Maddox and Collins regarding subtler details of Wesleyan historical theology on these matters. That disagreement does not, however, alter the essential agreement that risk is involved in divine-human and human-human relations.

⁵⁵ The importance of this point stems from my belief that in the practice of evangelism, generally speaking, Christians have not always been disposed to give freedom to the other.

workers through the power of the Holy Spirit in God's leading of creation toward God's intended purpose. This is a call to responsibility and obedience. Clark Pinnock

summarizes the challenge aptly:

How will the poor be helped if we do not help them? How will the nations be evangelized if we do not tell them? We bear responsibility for much of what has gone wrong in the world and we can be the part of the solution. Creaturely decisions, as well as divine decisions, affect the course of history. Obedience is important to the realization of God's purposes...Our action or inaction can influence another person's relationship with God...Do people hear the gospel or not? It has been decided by God that they should hear and it is up to us whether they do.⁵⁶

Such responsibility and obedience are often costly when undertaken from a stance of embrace, as those toward whom one extends open arms may not be easy to embrace; it may feel foreign and disorienting, uncomfortable and even dangerous.

Returning to a trinitarian conception of God's self-giving, Moltmann extends that understanding beyond creation to God's self-donation on the cross.⁵⁷ The fullness of Moltmann's thought regarding the cross is a dual theme of Christ's solidarity with victims *and* atonement for perpetrators.⁵⁸ Volf draws heavily on Moltmann in this respect, stating, 'Just as the oppressed must be liberated from the suffering caused by oppression, so the oppressors must be liberated from the injustice committed through oppression.'⁵⁹ It is impossible to understand the fullness of God's self-giving love without both of these aspects. It is impossible as well to understand the holistic nature of Christian life and witness without these twin themes. The cross provides solid grounding for the metaphor of embrace because it includes both Christ's self-giving love, which overcomes human

⁵⁶ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 169

⁵⁷ Cf., Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998)

⁵⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* [1992], trans. M. Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 129-138

⁵⁹ Volf, 23

enmity and the creation of space within Christ to receive estranged humanity. Like the circular nature of embrace, these two dimensions, the giving of self and the receiving of the other, are intrinsic to the internal life of the Trinity and therefore ground Christian life and witness.⁶⁰

Luke Timothy Johnson correctly asserts that a consistent aspect of the identity and mission of Jesus runs through the canonical Gospels. That consistent aspect is,

...the *character* of [Jesus'] life and death. They all reveal the same *patterns* of radical obedience to God and selfless love toward other people. All four Gospels also agree that discipleship is to follow the same *messianic pattern*. They do not emphasize the performance of certain deeds or the learning of certain doctrines. They insist on living according to the same pattern of life and death shown by Jesus.⁶¹

Drawing on Johnson, Volf concludes, 'the meaning of the ministry of Jesus lies at its ending, and the abbreviated story of the ending is the model Christians should imitate.'⁶²

At the core of Christian faith is the self-giving love that is both manifested on the cross and demanded by it. This core grounds the metaphor of embrace and provides the center from which embrace emanates. Because Christians are remade in the image of Christ through baptism, they receive a new center for their life and being. (Rom. 6.1-9) That new center is self-giving love, which was manifest on the cross and which 'opens the self up, makes it able and willing to give itself for others and to receive others in itself.'⁶³ This is so because, as Volf profoundly contends, 'Inscribed on the very heart of God's grace is the rule that we can be its recipients *only if we do not resist being made*

⁶⁰ Volf, 127-128 Cf., Coakley, *Powers*, 3-39

⁶¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 158 (emphasis original) Cf., James D. G. Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 15-34

⁶² Volf, 24 Cf., N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2, *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 607

⁶³ Volf, 71

*into its agents; what happens to us must be done by us. Having been embraced by God, we must make space for others in ourselves and invite them in.*⁶⁴

It must be reiterated that this self-giving love is not without cost, as the cross clearly shows. The cross is about the awfulness of sin, which implies that embrace is not an easy task Christians engage in comfortably with others who are similar in culture, attitudes, and background. In that case, embrace would be a cheap, feel-good concept with little resemblance to the self-giving love revealed through Jesus Christ and him crucified. Rather, embrace is a costly endeavor imbued with passionate vulnerability, risking humiliation, suffering, and rejection in its space making and invitation. Further, while it is not possible in this context to deal adequately with the subject of the atonement, it is important to note that I do not intend the metaphor of embrace to carry the entire weight of any specific atonement theory; nor am I suggesting that atonement is equivalent to or an automatic byproduct of embrace. Christians are not the *source* of divine forgiveness through their stance of embrace. Rather, in deliberately taking that stance, they make space for the Holy Spirit to work in ways in which divine and human forgiveness might be experienced and extended.

A final element in the discussion of the self-giving love of the Trinity that is important for evangelism is best illustrated by Volf's discussion of the story of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15.11-32), which I will briefly summarize. Volf focuses on the perspective of relationship because that is how each character is identified: father, son, brother. For Volf, the interrelated designations, for example, *his* father (v. 11), *your*

⁶⁴ Volf, 129 (emphasis added) Volf addresses the gender issues raised in this approach to kenotic self-giving and the Trinity, 167-190 Cf. Coakley, *Powers*

brother (v. 27), signal that the identity of each of these characters is intimately connected to the identity of the others.

The intimate nature of the relationships makes the son's breach with the family surprising. Taking *all* he had and setting off for a *far* country (v.13) makes it total. Volf describes the severity of this behavior as the son's project to 'un-son' himself. In departing, the son was not engaged in 'an act of separation required for the formation of a distinct identity, but an act of exclusion by which the self pulls itself out of the relationships without which it would not be what it is, and cuts itself off from responsibilities to others and makes itself their enemy.'⁶⁵

Paradoxically, by pushing others out, the son finds himself 'away from *himself*,' and likewise when he 'comes to himself' it is in remembering those to whom he still belongs: 'How many of *my father's* hired servants have bread enough to spare...' (v. 17)⁶⁶ For the son, the road to repentance begins with the memory of belonging.

This memory of belonging is connected to the foundational element of relationship in human identity. From the vantage point of an evangelism grounded in the self-giving love of the Trinity, *all* humans, others *and the Christian*, resemble the prodigal. Through Christ's self-donation on the cross, space has been made within Godself to receive humanity back where it has always belonged, in fellowship with God. The Christian is the one who has acknowledged this state and returned to fellowship. For evangelism, the significant point is to recognize that though the Christian may be the one

⁶⁵ Volf, 158

⁶⁶ Volf, 158 Volf correctly indicates that the point of the memory of belonging is independent of any discussion of the idiomatic usages of the phrase 'came to himself.' (e.g. 'came to his senses') or language implying a certain re-discovery of the proper self, as is commonly mentioned in numerous commentaries.

who has returned, the other still *belongs*. It is for the community of faith to be about the business of *welcoming back*.⁶⁷

Moving to the perspective of the father, one surprising element is that he allows the son to take ‘all he had’ and leave (v. 13) in the first place.⁶⁸ For this discussion, however, the most significant element is that ‘the father who lets the son depart *does not let go of the relationship between them*.’⁶⁹ That the father went out while his son was ‘yet at a distance’ (v. 20) indicates that he had kept the son in his heart all along: he had held the son in his memory even as he was ‘in a far country’ (v.13). It was this holding the son in memory that caused the father to respond with compassion, running to meet him, throwing his arms around him and kissing him (v. 20). Volf describes what I believe to be the significant point of the metaphor of embrace for evangelism:

Without the father’s having kept the son in his heart, the father would not have put his arms around the prodigal. No confession was necessary for the embrace to take place for the simple reason that the relationship did not rest on moral performance and therefore could not be destroyed by immoral acts. The son’s return from ‘the distant country’ and the father’s refusal to let the son out of his heart sufficed.⁷⁰

The father’s unconditional acceptance of the son preempts the son’s strategy of return, which included confession *first*, then acceptance into service (vv. 18-19). That does not, however, negate the need for confession. Confession was necessary for a full embrace and the ensuing celebration to occur, but it is the order that is significant.

⁶⁷ Cf., Richard Hays, whose provocative study of Gal. 3.1-4.11 asserts that Paul is describing a representational Christology in which Jesus’ own faith is also salvific, not only an individual’s faith *in* him. *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1 - 4:11* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2nd ed. 2002), specifically 106-111, 141-162, 209-229 Against James D. G. Dunn, ‘Appendix I: Once More, ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ’, in R. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1 - 4:11* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 249-271 While Dunn disagrees on the issue of biblical translation and interpretation, he affirms its *theological* value.

⁶⁸ See Sirach 33.19-23 for a more traditional answer to the son's request.

⁶⁹ Volf, 159

⁷⁰ Volf, 159

When evangelistic practice takes place from a stance of embrace, the possibility of relationship with the other is not contingent on moral performance. As the father kept the son in his heart while in a far country, Christians keep those beyond the boundaries of the church in their hearts so that when they return, Christians are not only waiting with open arms, but have gone out to meet them.

The son's confession is not a requirement for his father's acceptance; however, it is a significant part of the transformative outcome of the father's embrace. The father preempts the son's strategy for return a second time in the midst of the son's confession. As he returned, the son had a vision of himself as a 'son-not-worthy-to-be-called-a-son.' (...treat me as one of your hired servants. v. 19) However, in the midst of the son's confessing his wrongdoing, the father interrupts again (But the father said... v.22), transforming the 'son-not-worthy-to-be-called-a-son' into 'son of mine.' As Christians evangelize from a stance of embrace, they become conduits of God's transformative renaming of those whose vision might possibly be 'not-worthy-to-be-called-a-child-of-God' into God's beloved children.

The third component of the prodigal story involves the older brother. His response is instructive as a warning for evangelistic practice. The significance of relationship and the damage of exclusion can be seen again as the older brother shifts from viewing the prodigal as 'his brother' to 'this son of yours' (v. 30). Volf explains,

Unlike the father, the older brother did not keep the younger brother in his heart while this one was in a far country. He refused to readjust his identity to make space for a brother blemished by transgression; the brother's transgression, not the memory of his former presence, has come to occupy the space vacated by the brother's departure.⁷¹

⁷¹ Volf, 161

In response to the father's embrace of the prodigal, the older brother now 'un-sons' himself. It is clear that the older brother refuses to be a brother-to-a-prodigal (this son of yours, v. 30); and because the father reestablishes a relationship with the younger son, he chooses to exclude himself from a relationship with the father. Again, Volf helpfully explains,

The younger brother has become a 'non-brother' because he was not the brother he should have been; the father has become a 'non-father' because he acted as a father should not – he failed to disown a rebellious son. (Deuteronomy 21.18-21)⁷²

It is important not to paint too negative a picture of the older brother because he is not operating out of an oppressive system that stifles life; rather, his demands are based a set of rules that make a great deal of sense for the maintaining of civil society (e.g. the one who works should be rewarded rather than the one who squanders).⁷³ However, two issues are significant. First, while arguing with the father about upholding the rules, the older brother omits some important information. Although he may have 'served' his father (v. 29), doing so was also in his own best interest as heir. He claims that the prodigal devoured the *father's* living, but what the younger brother squandered actually also *belonged* to the younger brother. Second and most important, the older brother projects onto the prodigal evil that he did not commit. The younger son is described in the story as having squandered his property, but no specifics are mentioned other than 'dissolute living.' The older brother, however, asserts that the younger brother has devoured his father's property 'with prostitutes.' (v. 30)⁷⁴

⁷² Volf, 161 Cf., Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke, Vol. 2: Chapters 13-24* in R. Phillips and P. Ryken (eds.), *Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2009), 154-156

⁷³ Interestingly, the two brothers base their expectations and demands on the same logic: the prodigal expects to be received back only as a hired hand and the older brother demands the same. Volf, 162

⁷⁴ Volf, 162

The older brother's reaction serves as a warning for evangelistic practice. It is easy to become overly focused on rules and moral categories; however, such a focus often leads to self-righteousness and the possibility of demonizing the other. I recall the funeral of a woman who had grown up in the church I was serving, but who had not been involved in many years. Her adult children, who had no obvious faith commitment, told me that she had left the church when she was made to feel unwelcome because she operated the bar that had been established by her father-in-law decades before. It was clear that the sense of being rejected by the church had affected not only the woman, but also her children.

Life is made up of a complicated mix of autonomous individuals interacting with one another that often leads to a great deal of moral ambiguity. Obsession with rules and rigid moral categories makes it impossible to account for that ambiguity, creating new polarizations and exacerbating existing ones.⁷⁵ In such an environment, embrace is impossible and it is not difficult to understand why those beyond the boundaries of the church would respond with negativity and mis-distrust.

During the same years that I was responsible for the worship service that met at the local theater, a group of Christians planted a congregation in a lower income area of my community. The choice of location was strategic because the core group wanted to be deliberate about embodying the presence of Christ in an area where many faced economic, social and other life challenges, such as addictions and reentry to the community after prison sentences. Harvest Chapel has flourished in the years since its inception, remaining faithful to its original calling to be a compassionate presence for the people in that neighborhood.

⁷⁵ Volf, 163

I recall a conversation with a member of the larger, more affluent (yet aging and declining) congregation at which I served and that ‘sponsored’ the service in the theater. I commented that we might be able to learn some valuable lessons about evangelism by observing Harvest Chapel. His response was telling: Harvest Chapel was a church for ‘those’ people. We had a different group at our church. I understood in that moment why I was seldom successful at integrating those who attended the New Road service into the life of the ‘big church.’

A final word about the father’s response to his two sons is necessary to provide closure for the story and for a grounding of embrace in the self-giving love of the divine Trinity. As welcoming as the father was to the returning prodigal, it is important to note that the ensuing relationship was not *exactly* as it had been before. Because the father tells the older son, ‘all that is mine is yours’ (v. 31) it is clear that the prodigal will not get a second inheritance. The ring signals the father’s generosity, not a decision to give the younger son claim to all the property. The father’s love for the prodigal is unconditional, but does not negate or deny the past as though it was insignificant. Moreover, the father’s love for his older son also remains unconditional (‘Son, you are *always* with me, and *all* that is mine is yours.’ v. 31), even though the dynamics were now different as both adjusted to the return of the younger son.

Evangelizing from a stance of embrace is not about offering ‘cheap grace.’ Confession is necessary; repentance is vital. However, evangelizing from a stance of embrace recognizes the proper place for confession and repentance. As Abraham asserts,

‘some things cannot be said until after other things are said.’⁷⁶ Evangelism from a stance of embrace goes out to meet the other with open arms *before* all else.

That embrace is independent of any issues of judgment, confession or repentance may seem to disrupt the present order of things in the same way that the circumstances in the story appear to disrupt the assumptions of the older brother: that by welcoming the returning younger son, the father has abandoned a commitment to the order that underlies and sustains the household. What the father has actually done, however, is ‘re- order the order.’⁷⁷ Rather than ignore the ‘must’ that exists in all rules, even good ones, the father inserts a *new* ‘must’: the must of embracing the returning transgressor. The reordered order now includes not only the ‘must’ of following the rules, but the “‘must” of receiving back the one who has broken these rules. In addition to celebrating with those who are already “in” (“friends,” v.29), one must celebrate with those who want to return.’⁷⁸

Of special importance in the father’s ‘reordering of the order’ for my model is that ‘relationship has priority over all rules. Before any rule can apply, [the father] *is* a father to his sons and his sons *are* brothers to one another.’⁷⁹ The difference between the approach of the older brother and the approach of the father is that the former uses moral categories through which to view the situation (his brother is *bad* for leaving/he is *good* for staying), and the latter uses relational categories (the prodigal was *lost* but now *found*, *dead* to him but now *alive*). For the father, moral categories are not helpful. The older brother certainly is ‘good’ in the sense that he remained, worked and obeyed; but he is

⁷⁶ Abraham, January 2010 (informal conversation)

⁷⁷ Volf, 164

⁷⁸ Volf, 164

⁷⁹ Volf, 164 (emphasis original)

also ‘bad’ in the sense that he refuses to welcome his brother back. The prodigal certainly is ‘bad’ in the sense that he demanded his inheritance and left; but he is also ‘good’ in that he returns and confesses.⁸⁰

That relationship is prior to moral rules does not imply that moral behavior is unimportant; it is not. Volf astutely observes, however, that,

...moral performance may *do something* to the relationship, but relationship is *not grounded* in moral performance. Hence the *will* to embrace is independent of the quality of behavior, though at the same time ‘repentance,’ ‘confession,’ and the ‘consequences of one’s actions’ all have their own proper place.⁸¹

The priority of relationship over rules enables the father to passionately engage his sons, adjusting his own identity in relation to them, and transforming their broken identities and relationships as well. He does not give up on rules and order, but would rather reconfigure them than give up on his sons, ‘whose lives are too complex to be regulated by fixed rules and whose identities are too dynamic to be defined once for all.’⁸²

As the story of the prodigal and his return home point to the self-giving love that characterizes God’s relationship with creation, so it is when one engages in evangelistic practice from a stance of embrace: one becomes a reflection of the self-giving love of God. In this sense it is crucial that Christians remember that relationship always trumps a rigid focus on rules. Christians must always be willing to ‘reorder the order’ so that the other might be received (or received back) into fellowship, in order that identities might be transformed and relationships healed.

From the perspective of evangelism, this reordering the order can be difficult because of the tendency to place moral categories above relationship (as I learned from

⁸⁰ Volf, 165

⁸¹ Volf, 164

⁸² Volf, 165

my fellow church member's attitude toward Harvest Chapel). It is far easier to welcome back with conditions than without. It is far easier to place others on a moral scale, make judgments about good and bad, and impose one's own vision of how the 'welcome' should progress; but then that would not be a true welcome at all.

Noninnocence

It is easy for Christians to slip into the stance of the older brother, failing to recognize that *all* of humanity is contained within the prodigal; in other words that *all* humanity belong to the fellowship of the triune God, but sojourn in a far country until they return to be welcomed unconditionally on the basis of relationship rather than moral categories. This tendency highlights the need for Volf's concept of *noninnocence*. He unpacks the meaning behind this important idea with the profound assertion that 'in a world so manifestly drenched with evil, everybody is innocent in their own eyes.'⁸³ This innocence is, however, a *contrived* innocence because the more accurate reality is that 'in addition to inflicting harm, the practice of evil keeps re-creating a world without innocence. Evil generates new evil as evildoers fashion victims in their own ugly image.'⁸⁴

That Paul understood this absence of innocents is reflected in his assertion that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.' (Rom. 3.23) His claim reflects the intertwined nature of wrongdoing committed and suffered, which binds both victim and

⁸³ Volf, 79 Schreier foreshadows Volf's assertion with his apt question, 'How do you seek reconciliation with someone who does not think he has done anything wrong?' *Reconciliation: Mission & Ministry*, 2

⁸⁴ Volf, 81 Cf., Marjorie Suchocki, who correctly asserts: 'To break the world cleanly into victims and violators ignores the depths of each person's participation in cultural sin. There simply are no innocents.' *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 149

perpetrator in the *solidarity of sin* (1 Jn. 1.8).⁸⁵ This concept of solidarity of sin is disturbing, however, because ‘it seems to erase distinctions and unite precisely where the differences and disjunctions matter the most – where dignity is denied, justice is trampled underfoot, and blood is spilled.’⁸⁶ It is disturbing because it appears to imply an equality of sin, and when all sins are equal, perpetrators do not have to be held accountable.

The solidarity of sin does not, however, imply the *equality* of sins.⁸⁷ All *are* sinners (solidarity), but all sins are *not* equal. This can be clearly seen in the way that the prophets and Jesus addressed sin. For them, sin was always specific; concrete sins were never lost in ‘an ocean of undifferentiated sinfulness;’ condemnation was not cast upon anyone and everyone.⁸⁸ Volf elaborates perceptively:

The aggressors’ destruction of a village and the refugees’ looting of a truck and thereby hurting their fellow refugees are equally sins, but they are *not* equal sins; the rapist’s violation and the woman’s hatred are equally sin, but they are manifestly *not* equal sins.⁸⁹

While all have sinned, there remain perpetrators who are the sinners and there remain victims who are the sinned against (their noninnocence notwithstanding).

Volf’s understanding of noninnocence is important because it guards against self-righteousness as well as the potential of inflicting evil in the name of supposed goodness.⁹⁰ Especially in light of the current discussion, I believe a keen sense of

⁸⁵ Cf., Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 85

⁸⁶ Volf, 82

⁸⁷ Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, who appears to be striving for the same concept, but takes a less straightforward route by asserting the equality of sin and the inequality of guilt. Niebuhr’s juggling of sin and guilt seems unnecessarily awkward, as ‘all sins are equal’ does not necessarily follow from ‘all have sinned.’ Similarly, ‘neither is innocent’ does not necessarily lead to the conclusion ‘the sins of both are equal.’ *Human Nature*, vol. 1, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941), 219-227

⁸⁸ Volf, 82

⁸⁹ Volf, 82

⁹⁰ Cf., Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 71 Wink rightly asserts that solidarity in sin frees us ‘from delusions about the perfectibility of ourselves and our institutions.’

noninnocence is valuable because it emphasizes that salvation never flows from a foundation of the moral assignment of blame and innocence.⁹¹ I agree with Volf that the question is not who is innocent and who is guilty; it is ‘how to live with integrity and bring healing to a world of inescapable noninnocence that often parades as its opposite.’⁹²

Volf’s answer:

In the name of the one truly innocent victim and what he stood for, the crucified Messiah of God, we should demask as inescapably sinful the world constructed around exclusive moral polarities – here on our side, ‘the just,’ ‘the pure,’ ‘the innocent,’ ‘the true,’ ‘the good,’ and there, on the other side, ‘the unjust,’ ‘the corrupt,’ ‘the guilty,’ ‘the liars,’ ‘the evil’ – and then seek to transform the world in which justice and injustice, goodness and evil, innocence and guilt, purity and corruption, truth and deception crisscross and intersect, guided by the recognition that *the economy of underserved grace has primacy over the economy of moral deserts.*⁹³

Applying Volf’s understanding of noninnocence to the evangelistic task necessitates the reminder that others ‘need not be perceived as innocent in order to be loved, but ought to be embraced *even when they are perceived as wrongdoers.*’⁹⁴ Once again, embrace precedes all else. When one evangelizes, care must be taken to distinguish between God’s judgment in the eschaton and human judgment in the present. Additionally, evangelism from a stance of embrace begins not with the recognition of the other’s ‘lostness’ or sin; it begins, rather, with the recognition of the other’s

⁹¹ Cf., Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 238

⁹² Volf, 84

⁹³ 81 Volf, 84-85 (emphasis original) Cf. Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. by J. F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 48 Welker is correct in contending that social moralism ‘confuses God’s reality with the constitution of moral market.’

⁹⁴ Volf, 85 (emphasis original) Against, Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Random House, 1995), xvii, 179-184 Pagels asserts that the dominant view of Scripture and Christian tradition suggests a rigid demarcation of ‘children of hell’ (Mt. 23.15) and the demand to ‘love your enemies.’ (Mt. 5.44) Volf contrasts her view by recognizing that these two appear together in the Gospel because ‘the story of the cross is about God who desires to embrace precisely the “sons and daughters of hell.”’

'belongingness;' that through the cross, space has *already been made* for the other; the father is *already* awaiting the prodigal's return.

This is not to say that there is no place for discussions of sin; however, in an environment of mis-distrust, it is of paramount importance how those discussions are framed and when they occur. Abraham is again correct in his reminder that some things cannot be said until other things are said. Keeping one's personal noninnocence firmly in mind is vital when addressing the issue of the sins of others. Moreover, as a white American engaged in evangelism, it behooves me to be very cautious about how I relate to outsiders given the cultural sins of which I am complicit by virtue of my nationality and race. It does not invalidate my interaction, nor does it disqualify me from the evangelistic task; but it does color my activity, and that alone is sufficient reason to be mindful of noninnocence.

I recall a recent conversation among academics regarding the question of whether there is such a thing as the 'right' use of power. Very quickly, a woman commented that this was a discussion that assumed one had power in the first place, which was not an assumption women or members of minority groups could automatically make. This comment resonated with me; however, the longer I listened, the more uncomfortable I became. I realized that the source of my discomfort was my inability to escape the category of 'oppressor' no matter how valid my inclusion in a category of 'oppressed.' I am a woman, yes. But I am also white, enjoy privileged economic status, and am a citizen of a country that is not hesitant to exercise its power on a global scale. In other words, my noninnocence is ever before me.

As Christians evangelize in a culture of mis-distrust, it is imperative that they keep their noninnocence ever before them, remembering with thanksgiving and humility that the economy of underserved grace has primacy over the economy of moral deserts.

Double Vision

From the outset of his discussion of the metaphor of embrace, Volf makes the twin assertions that justice and truth are impossible outside the will to embrace, and that full embrace is not possible until the truth is spoken and justice is done.⁹⁵ Such an assertion, however, makes it necessary for him to distinguish between human justice and truth and God's justice and truth.

Human justice and truth are always relative in cultures like the West where autonomy is privileged and where the stance that Adam Seligman describes as 'sincerity' dominates. Sincerity, according to Seligman, is 'the belief that truth resides within the authentic self.'⁹⁶ The sincere model rests on 'the internal, humanly defined core of experience, on the perception of the world as arising out of self-generated categories of order, rather than as a created, external, and heteronomous – essentially, transcendent – reality.'⁹⁷ In this type of society, individuals will have their own sense of justice and their own view of truth.

For Christians, however, a foundational understanding is that humans *are not* God. In the arena of truth and justice, therefore, individual human truth (however real it may seem) cannot be *the* truth, nor can individual understandings of justice (however

⁹⁵ Volf, 29

⁹⁶ Adam B. Seligman, 'Modernity and Sincerity: Problem and Paradox', *The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture* 12, no. 1 (2010), 54

⁹⁷ Seligman, 'Modernity', 59

well intentioned they may be) ever be *the* justice. Human sin makes that impossible. Only God is able to contain perfect truth and justice.

In keeping with his contention that embrace requires that one make space within oneself for the other, Volf outlines a practice of ‘double vision’ to counter the particularity of both justice and truth. In the arena of justice, the classic Christian understanding is that God’s justice transcends all cultural construals of justice. In relation to this Volf rightly points out that the issue is not whether ‘God’s justice is universal, [or] whether God can infallibly judge between cultures irrespective of their differences. The question is whether *Christians* who want to uphold God’s universal justice can judge between cultures with divine infallibility.’⁹⁸ I agree with Volf; the answer is they cannot. Therefore what is needed is double vision, or an ‘enlarged way of thinking,’ as Hannah Arendt has described it, which enables one to both enrich and correct one’s notion of justice and ideas about what is just or unjust.⁹⁹

Because human understanding of God’s justice will always be imperfect, and because of the human inclination to sin, people will always have a tendency to pervert justice even as they seek to do it. When people enlarge their thinking, they allow the voices and perspectives of others, especially those with whom they may be in conflict, to influence them in such a way that they are able to see justice from *the other’s* perspective, not just from their own. To continue the language of embrace, one makes space within oneself for the perspective of the other on the issue of justice.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Volf, 198

⁹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* [1954] (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 220-221 Drawing on Kant, Arendt describes enlarged thinking as being the way one ‘transcend[s] [one’s] own individual limitations.’ It is thinking that requires the presence of others and makes ‘sharing-the-world-with-others’ possible.

¹⁰⁰ Volf, 213

In like manner, double vision is important when speaking of truth. The belief in an all-knowing God may engender the desire to search for truth, but the limitations of humanness should make people exceedingly cautious about asserting that they have found it. It is a matter of ‘knowing in part,’ or ‘seeing through a glass dimly,’ (1 Cor. 13.12) rather than knowing in full. It cannot be overstated; humans are not God. Human beings may know God, but they will never know all that God knows – at least not now. Human limitations make knowing *the truth in full* an impossibility; therefore it is important to practice double vision – the art of seeing the truth ‘from here’ and the truth ‘from there.’ To put it again in the language of embrace: being willing to make space within oneself for the truth of the other. In other words, I temporarily step outside myself in order to see myself from the perspective of the other; I cross social boundaries in order to inhabit the world of the other, using my imagination to understand both the other’s perception of themselves and their perception of me.¹⁰¹

Double vision in the arenas of truth and justice is crucial for evangelism. Regarding truth, Christian faith hinges on understanding Jesus Christ as ‘*the way, the truth, and the life*’ (Jn. 14.6); in evangelistic practice this is often the core of the message proclaimed. However, it does not follow from this that there is *no* truth to be found anywhere else. Saying ‘yes’ to Jesus Christ does imply a ‘no’ to *some* things, but not to *all* things. There are elements in the truth of others to which Christians can say yes. Further, it does not follow from ‘Jesus is the way, the truth and the life’ that Christians will be able to *fully comprehend* the entire depth of that statement.

In evangelistic practice, it is imperative that Christians stand under the umbrella of the validity of Jesus Christ as the way, the truth and the life; however, it is equally

¹⁰¹ Volf, 250-253

crucial that Christians make it evident that they understand that this is a truth that is larger than they are. Bosch describes this understanding well. It necessitates,

...an admission that we do not have the answers and are prepared to live within the frameworks of penultimate knowledge, that we regard our involvement in mission and dialogue as an adventure, are prepared to take risks, and are anticipating surprises as the Spirit guides us into fuller understanding. This is not an opting for agnosticism, but for humility. It is however a bold humility – or a humble boldness. We know in part, but we do know. And we believe that the faith we profess is both true and just, and should be proclaimed. We do this, however, not as judges or lawyers, but as witnesses; not as soldiers but as envoys of peace; not as high pressure sales persons, but as ambassadors of the Servant Lord.¹⁰²

Bosch's words are significant in an environment of mis-distrust. Moreover, as one proclaims Christ as the way, the truth and the life, one must remain aware that the way of this Christ is the way of the *crucified Messiah of God* – the one who is defined by self-giving love. Thus the evangelistic task must be implemented from a stance of embrace, marked by space making within the self, which allows the other to come in and respects the truth the other brings.¹⁰³

For evangelism, double vision in the arena of justice is equally crucial. Although not speaking directly to issues of justice, Jeffrey Conklin-Miller describes evangelism as leaning in two directions at once: into the world and into God. For Conklin-Miller, this 'intercessory' evangelism leans deeply into God through what is known in the Wesleyan tradition as the means of grace: Scripture, prayer and sacrament among others. In leaning toward God, one's stance is firmly grounded in order to then be able to lean deeply into

¹⁰² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 489

¹⁰³ Cf., Kenneth Cracknell, *In Good and Generous Faith: Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 143-176

(but without ‘falling into’) the world: enlarging one’s thinking, making space within oneself for the ideas, perspectives, and understandings of others.¹⁰⁴

Volf is right in claiming that people ‘do not argue about justice (or anything else, for that matter) as disembodied and a-social “selves” suspended by some sky hook above the hustle and bustle of social conflicts. Social location profoundly shapes our beliefs and practices.’ He also correctly asserts that most people ‘stand in more than one place.’¹⁰⁵

The question then is not whether Christians stand in a certain place as they understand justice, they do. At stake for evangelism is not *where* they should stand, but ‘how they should stand where they stand.’¹⁰⁶ The concepts of double vision and Conklin-Miller’s leaning in two directions at once support an understanding of evangelism as grounded in the space-making process of embrace, where one’s thinking is enlarged by the encounter with the other.

Can Embrace Bear the Weight?

Having drawn extensively on Miroslav Volf in adapting the metaphor of embrace to the context of evangelism, it is important to note that his assertions are not without difficulty. Volf has undertaken a massive task. In reviewing *Exclusion and Embrace*, Ellen Charry writes that ‘Twentieth-century violence calls tribalism, individualism, and their confluence in the neo-Nietzschean will to power to account before the bar of

¹⁰⁴ Jeffrey Conklin-Miller, ‘Evangelism: Leaning Toward Both God and World,’ in A. Thompson, (ed.), *Generation Rising: A Future with Hope for the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon press, 2011), 41-51

¹⁰⁵ Volf, 207

¹⁰⁶ Volf, 208 (emphasis original)

Christian reconciliation. Love must temper the demand for justice. Volf calls on Christian theology to *reconstruct culture*.¹⁰⁷

In addressing such a demanding task, one will find it not surprising that there are weaknesses in what Volf is offering. Charry rightly points out that his arguments are persuasive in theory, but translating them into practice is entirely different.¹⁰⁸ That Volf recognizes this is suggested in his Preface when, reflecting on whether he could embrace a ‘četnik’ (the ultimate other for him as a Croat), he writes, ‘No, I cannot – but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to.’¹⁰⁹

Charry notes also that Volf fails to explore the issue of anger, which she asserts is ‘the emotion at the root of the inability or refusal to embrace.’¹¹⁰ Further, from Charry’s perspective Volf’s proposal appears somewhat Pelagian:

Embracing the other appears to be an act of will. In truth, however, such an ability is really a miracle that happens only by the grace of God. Reconciliation is the supreme work of God. Sin and the psychic [sic] desire for revenge, the need to be vindicated are too deep in the human heart for victims to set aside lightly.¹¹¹

Volf appears aware of these issues at several levels. Though not dealing with anger directly, for example, his understanding of the Christian approach to nonviolence requires the belief in divine vengeance. Additionally, he allows that ‘consistent nonretaliation and nonviolence [may] be impossible in the world of violence.’¹¹² Furthermore, he admits that final reconciliation is a ‘messianic problem [that] ought not to be taken out of God’s hands.’ In the meantime, however, he appears committed to

¹⁰⁷ Ellen Charry, review of *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), by Miroslav Volf, in *Theology Today* 56, no. 247 (1999), 248 (emphasis added)

¹⁰⁸ Charry, ‘Review’, 249

¹⁰⁹ Volf, 9

¹¹⁰ Charry, ‘Review’, 249

¹¹¹ Charry, ‘Review’, 249

¹¹² Volf, 304-307

exploring ‘what *resources we need to live in peace in the absence of the final reconciliation.*’¹¹³

Although Volf’s understanding of reconciliation is not without problems, I do not believe the weaknesses are great enough to discount the significance of what he has offered. Further, the resources he offers regarding reconciliation are extremely valuable, despite their challenging nature. Moreover, when embrace as a metaphor and the various points that undergird it are shifted from the context of reconciliation in situations of enmity to the context of evangelism, the weaknesses are minimized.

At the beginning of this paper I expressed my desire to offer a rendering of evangelism that speaks to the theological stance that undergirds its practice. Volf’s work provides a point of departure for that rendering. Moving from the specific context of reconciliation, I have adapted Volf’s metaphor of embrace so that it points to a *theological stance* rather than to a specific act (in Volf’s case, the act of reconciliation). I believe that the strength of the metaphor of embrace, grounded as it is in the relational activity of the Triune God and in a robust understanding of identity and belonging, makes it well suited as a foundation from which to engage the evangelistic task. It is not without risk; however, in undertaking evangelism from the stance of embrace, the integrity of Christian witness is strengthened and renewed, opening a wide space in which the Holy Spirit might work its transformative power.

The scope of this paper does not allow for a complete discussion of the ways in which embrace as a theological stance for evangelism is rooted in the various creedal

¹¹³ Volf, 109 (emphasis original) While Volf does not believe it is the task of humans to accomplish final reconciliation, the issue is of great importance to him. Cf., Miroslav Volf, ‘The Final Reconciliation: Reflections on a Social Dimension of the Eschatological Transition’, *Modern Theology* 16, no. 1 (2000), 91-113

components of Christian faith. This much, however, can be said in conclusion. Tensions permeate all aspects of Christian faith: immanent/transcendent, earthly/eternal, particular/universal, human/divine, personal/communal, temporal/eschatological. The church at its best holds these tensions together meaningfully and creatively, always aware of the looking-through-a-glass-darkly nature of spiritual understanding. I believe that embrace as a theological posture provides a foundation for evangelistic practice that recognizes the importance of these tensions and works to maintain balance between them.

Evangelism engaged from a stance of embrace is empowered to make known that the gospel of Jesus the Messiah is good news for all creation. As Christians embody embrace, they work and wait with expectant hope that those outside the church will come to know a God who is steadfast and faithful in keeping God's promises; a God who desires that no one be left out of the one family of Abraham; a God who shares with humanity all that it means to be human; a God present through the Spirit within and among believers, going before them into the world and working through them for redemption; a God who is working, even now, to eliminate evil and bring to fruition the justice and peace of the kingdom inaugurated in Jesus of Nazareth. As Christians embody embrace, they work and wait with expectant hope that those outside the church will come to understand the good news for their future as they encounter the hope of eternal life: first in the presence Christ as he is now seated at the right hand of God, and finally in resurrected bodies when he returns to establish God's kingdom in a world transformed and remade into new creation – a world where all of creation (not only humanity) is redeemed and restored to its intended wholeness.

Evangelism engaged from a stance of embrace takes seriously that the gospel is not a message to be privatized, but that it has been entrusted to the body of Christ. Christians are to make it known to the world through their communal life: through their embodiment of Jesus' expansive welcome and invitation; their solidarity with the poor and suffering; through the creation of unboundaried communities where the presence of the Holy Spirit of Jesus can be met and experienced in communal sacramental life; through their proclamation; and as they live as witnesses to the faithfulness of Jesus of Nazareth through their own faithful obedience to the one who sent him.

I have entitled this project 'restorative witness' because I believe that in a climate of mis-distrust, embrace as a theological foundation has the potential to restore wholeness to the Christian message, integrity to evangelistic practices, and reconciliation in relationships. With a restored witness, it is my hope that the body of Christ will be empowered to more fully enact what God has inaugurated in Jesus the Messiah, making known to the world the whole-creation nature of salvation.

Restorative Witness
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