The Illogical Order of Effective Evangelism

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I became a conscious follower of Christ in 1955, as a teenager in Miami, Florida. I experienced, unexpectedly, the presence of God during an evening program of a Key Club convention for high school boys. An actor delivered the Sermon on the Mount. He sported a beard, and first century Galilean attire, and delivered the sermon in the original King James English! Somewhere in chapter six, I was aware that God was present. The Presence followed me back to my room. I managed to find the Sermon on the Mount in the Gideon Bible next to the telephone. I read and reread Matthew 5, 6, and 7 until I drifted off to sleep--still aware of God's presence.

I became an aggressive "Seeker." Although my parents had raised me a (very) nominal Presbyterian, I started visiting the Sunday evening youth fellowship at the Fulford Methodist Church. Fulford Church was close to our home, its pastor Orville Nelson was friendly, approachable, and interested in me, and . . . the prettiest girls in town attended Fulford Church.

The youth welcomed me, and included me, into their fellowship immediately. By the second or third Sunday, I was so accepted that they had added my name to the youth fellowship roll, without even asking! I became involved in their programs and projects and ministries. I started attending Sunday morning and evening worship services. I participated in many conversations with many people about Christianity's gospel and the life of faith, hope, and love. Orville Nelson had me reading the New Testament, and books by E. Stanley Jones.

In Fulford Church, I experienced a fellowship in which the people pulled for each other, and interceded for each other. I observed macho guys become real, and even vulnerable, with each other. I observed people seriously, and adventurously, living their lives as credible Christians. I perceived, usually through a rear view mirror, that God was present in several of these experiences. Within, say, three months I found myself believing what these people believed, and in a meeting where we focused on the invitation of Rev. 3:20, I prayed a prayer inviting the Spirit of Christ into my life "as Savior and Lord." Throughout this period, I engaged in theological reflection, and often experienced my imagination on fire. My volatile self esteem became more consistent and healthy; my identity became clearer, and I became open to God's future for me. I initiated conversations with many of my peers in high school who neither believed in Christ nor belonged to any church.
As I became interested in Evangelism however, I failed to reflect upon any wisdom from my own experience. Somehow, I learned that I should do evangelism according to a paradigm that contrasted with my experience. The prevailing paradigm of evangelism is so very deeply entrenched in Protestant Evangelical Christianity that most people (like me) act out its script even if it is contrary to their actual experience! For years I functioned according to this paradigm, or felt like I should, whether people were responding like they should or not.

The established paradigm assumes a certain sequence of steps by which people become Christians. For example, in *Seasons of Refreshing*, Keith Hardman explains the understanding of evangelism that, he assumes, pervades the evangelical tradition from Peter at Pentecost to the work of Graham and Palau in our own time. Evangelism, he reports is

> spreading the Christian message with the goal that unbelievers will convert to Christianity. Evangelism is bearing the gospel ("good news") of salvation from sin in Jesus Christ and God's free grace and love. It involves three basic steps: (1) explaining to a person his or her need of a Savior; (2) encouraging the person to make a personal declaration of trust in Christ and his atoning work on the cross; and (3) bringing the new Christian into a fellowship of believers where spiritual growth may occur.

Virtually all writings on Christian evangelism assume that very sequence. Even though I had first been welcomed into the fellowship, and worked through the faith possibility through many (two-way) conversations, I quickly became socialized into the traditional model. In the traditional evangelical model, we begin with a one time one-way presentation of the gospel to people; then we invite people to affirm it and accept Christ; If they do, and are willing to make their decision public, then we welcomed them into the fellowship of believers. The model is so obvious, so logical. We explain the gospel, they accept Christ, we welcome them into the church! Presentation, Decision, Assimilation. (The model's advocates sometimes assume that its purest form is a "cold turkey" evangelical encounter between strangers; the "most real" evangelism is not preceded by fellowship, or even friendship! In extreme forms, the model embodies virtually a "hypodermic" claim, i.e., give people a verbal "gospel shot" and they will believe! ) We can compare this conventional model with my experience rather simply:

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For years I did personal evangelism by the traditional evangelical model, and I preached some 150 local church missions that assumed it. Though my experience contrasted with it, it was the only conceptual model I ran across. I probably assumed the nonexistence of any other model. Sometimes I did serve as a link in a person’s chain of experiences that led to faith. (So I cannot deny the model’s value, or that God can, and often does, move through it.) I was aware that the model contrasted with my own experience, but I assumed that my experience was atypical and the traditional model was the way people “ought” to become Christians. From that assumption, it made sense to ignore any potential insight from my own experience and minister to prechristian people through the conventional paradigm.

However, we now know that this very logical evangelical sequence contrasts with the actual conversion process of many people, not just my own. Many people experience the welcome, hospitality, and inclusion of the fellowship before they believe. Many people experience the fellowship before much gospel explanation takes place. When the gospel is explained, many more seekers work through it through multiple two-way conversations than through single one-way presentations, and much more often within some form of Christian community rather than outside it. British Methodism’s Donald Soper is right! For many people, at least, Christianity is “more caught than taught.”

I began (re)discovering this in my field research with converts out of secularity into faith. In interviews, I often ask new believers this question: “When did you feel like you really belonged, that you were welcomed and included, in the fellowship of this church?” More and more converts, including a large majority of “boomer” and “buster” converts, comment that they felt like that before they believed, and before they officially joined. Indeed, many new believers reflect that the experience of the fellowship enabled them to believe, and to commit. For many people, the faith is about three-fourths caught and one-fourth taught.

Lord Soper developed ways to express this reality in ministries. For example, Soper created The Order of Christian Witness in order to practice and demonstrate an approach to evangelism informed by this reality. For years, Soper would descend, with 20 to 30 members of the Order, upon a city to lead a “Campaign.” The OCW Campaign began as the visiting team joined with a group of local Christians to form into a community. In community, they bonded with each other, developed a common vision, prayed for each other and for the Campaign, celebrated the Eucharist together, and rehearsed and refined the short speeches they would be giving in settings across the city. In the second phase, they scattered across the city, speaking in parks and other public areas where people gather. The speakers would briefly explain some theme of Christianity, or interface Christian insight with some human struggle or social issue.
What was their "evangelistic invitation"? To come and share a meal and an evening, and experience the fellowship from which the witness comes. (I have interviewed people who became Christians in, or following, an OCW campaign to their city.)

OCW's approach reflects Donald Soper's belief that, for most people, fellowship precedes faith, and fellowship also sustains faith. One day, I asked Soper how he became so clear about the role of fellowship in awakening and sustaining faith. He replied that he observed this relationship in a distinctive way through his open air speaking at London's Tower Hill and Speakers Corner. While many of the attenders (and the "hecklers") in his open air meetings were completely secular in their background, others had once believed and been active in churches. They dropped out; years later, they discovered they no longer believed. Furthermore, Soper replied that he learned from John Wesley that "Christianity is not a solitary religion," and so Wesley had based the expansion of eighteenth century Methodism upon reaching people through Methodist fellowships. That comment served as provocation, some years later, to check out the principle's roots in early Methodism's vision and practice. I have exposed these roots at more length in To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit. 2

Wesley did, indeed, observe that fellowship usually preceded faith, and he believed that the connection was causal. The principle became central in his understanding of the Order of Salvation, and he predicated Methodism's outreach upon it. Basically, the process of a person's salvation took place in four stages.

In the first stage, people were "Awakened" to the fact of their lostness, their sins, their need for grace and for God. The salient purpose of Mr. Wesley's field preaching, and of the Methodist people's ministries of witness to their peers, was to "awaken" people to their need and to help them become conscious seekers of truth, grace, God, and new life.

In the second stage, an awakened seeker was welcomed into the fellowship of a Methodist class meeting. In the weekly class meetings, they heard and discussed the gospel, they shared in the prayer life, they experienced people praying and pulling for them and each other. They observed the credibility of the Christians as they reported their progress, and their failures, in the quest to live as Christians by "doing good, avoiding evil, and availing of the means of grace." If seekers remained serious for three months, they were welcomed into the membership and fellowship of the larger Methodist society—whether or not they yet experienced or believed anything!

Third, the class meeting's leader taught them to expect to experience the next stage— their "Justification," i.e., God's acceptance and the gifts of faith and new life. Typically, people who

did not drop out did experience, at a time and in a manner of God's choosing, justification and second birth.

Then the class leader taught them to expect to experience a fourth stage in the order of salvation--their Sanctification. They were to live expecting that The Holy Spirit would complete the work begun in their justification, that God's grace would free their hearts from sin's power and free them to live for God's agenda in this life. In time, many earnest Methodist Christians did experience this "second work of grace."

Notice that, in Wesley's understanding of the process, it all took place (especially) within the smaller Class Meeting fellowship and (also) within the larger Methodist Society fellowship. Indeed, a special version of small group called the Methodist "Bands" met weekly for people who had experienced justification and were earnestly seeking its completion. Furthermore, for believers who "backslid," the path back into active Methodist membership was through the fellowship of the "Penitent Bands." At every stage, for early Methodism, Christian koinonia provided the realm of redemption. Faith was discovered, maintained, and strengthened within fellowship because, as Wesley explained, "Christianity is not a solitary religion."

We can summarize much of Wesley's entire strategy for the spread of Methodist Christianity in four maxims:

1. Preach in as many places as you can, and converse with as many people as you can.
2. Go most where they want you most, where the people are most receptive.
3. Start as many classes as you can provide class leaders for.
4. Do not preach and converse with people in settings where you cannot involve awakened people in classes.

Why did Wesley counsel against witnessing or preaching without bringing people into fellowship? He believed that sheep, especially young sheep, need a shepherd and other sheep. George Whitefield, by comparison, neglected to incorporate his responders into fellowships, and he later regretted that his converts were "a rope of sand." Wesley reports, in a Journal entry of 1763, "I was more convinced than ever that the preaching like an apostle without joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer." In the Minutes of Several Conversations, his preachers asked Mr. Wesley:

Q. Is it advisable for us to preach in as many places as we can, without forming any societies?
A. By no means. We have made the trial in various places; and that for a considerable time. But all the seed has fallen as by the highway side. There is scarce any fruit remaining.

At a deeper level, Wesley believed that *koinonia* is the indispensable catalyst of the kind of apostolic power that distinguishes Christianity when it is contagious. In *To Spread the Power*, I suggested these features of Wesley's apostolic vision:

Wesley was an astute student of "the primitive church" as reflected in the New Testament, particularly the pastoral epistles. He was also an astute observer of the eighteenth-century Church of England. He saw the primitive church’s contagious compassion, powerful faith, unswerving hope, daring apostolic courage, and vision for humanity. He did not see that kind of love, faith, hope, courage, and vision in his generation’s established church. Indeed, [Howard Snyder tells us that] Wesley came to see the Church of England as a "fallen church," because for him "true apostolic succession came to mean . . . the continuity of apostolic spirit and witness in the Christian community."4

Wesley also observed that certain normative behaviors were characteristic of life in the primitive church. They met together "to stir up one another to love and good works . . . encouraging one another" (Heb. 10:24-25). They seem to have taught, admonished, exhorted, and prayed for one another. They rejoiced with those who rejoiced, and wept with those who wept (Rom. 12:15). Their behaviors toward one another ranged from telling one’s sins to another (Matt. 18:15-18) to building one another up (I Thess. 5:11). And Wesley believed the earliest churches followed the script of James (5:16): "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed." With regret, Wesley did not see such behavior in his Anglican Church. One of the causes of this, he believed, was the lack of small groups, a deficiency not present in the early church’s house churches.

Wesley ventured a revolutionary hypothesis: that the occurrence of the first phenomenon (faith, hope, power, etc.) depends on the second. That is, as you gather Christians and seekers together to confess their sins, encourage one another, rejoice together, and so forth, the life, love, faith, hope, and power of the Apostolic church emerges. He sensed that if he drew people together in cells to challenge and encourage each other to live daily as Christians, that, through their protracted experiences, the contagion and power of the Apostolic church would move in human history once again. And it happened!

Where did John Wesley first learn of the role of fellowship in helping people experience faith and power? To my knowledge, we do not know, though we can speculate. He may have reflected upon the sequence in his own experience—the fellowship experiences in the Epworth home and the Oxford Holy Club and with Moravian groups, and the conversations with people ranging from Suzanna Wesley to Peter Bohler, before experiencing justification, faith, assurance, and apostolic empowerment in 1738. Again, he may have observed what was already

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3 Ibid., pp. 124-125.
happening "naturally" in the earliest class meetings. Furthermore, he was probably aware of an impressive precedent in the missionary practice of ancient Celtic Christianity.

In recent studies like John Finney's *Recovering the Past*, we are rediscovering a branch of the Christian tradition long obscured by centuries of mist and myth. Finney contends that the "propositional" approach to communicating the faith is rooted in Roman Christianity. The culturally Celtic branch of the Church, however, "was both more traditional and more adventurous than the contemporary Roman Church." (p. viii) The Celtic Church spread Christianity throughout much of Europe through the extravagant multiplication of a Celtic version of the monastery. Celtic monasteries were colonies of lay people devoted to prayer, discipline, practical love, evangelism, and hospitality. The monks engaged in evangelistic missions in the countryside that surrounded the monastery. They communicated Christianity to prechristian populations through story-telling. They invited responsive people to spend time with their monastic community, to experience its fellowship, worship, and life of service, where they could ask questions and explore the Christian possibility.

The Celtic monasteries also sent out peregrinate ("wanderers") across much of the known world. "They often traveled in groups. Where they stopped they evangelized and maintained as far as possible their monastic life of prayer and contemplation. If their mission to the area bore fruit they would settle and a new monastery would be born." (Finney, p. 57) That base then permitted widespread ministry and evangelism in the region. Finney reports that "Time and again it was the quality of life of the monks which drew others to their community, moved the hearts of kings and opened doors for new work. . . . Monasteries multiplied at an astonishing rate." (p. 68-69) Where the people's receptivity was high, the monks aimed to evangelize the whole community.

John Finney, who headed the Church of England's Decade of Evangelism for several years, contends that the Celtic Way is more effective with post-modem Western populations than the Roman Way (and its more recent version--the traditional evangelical way). Finney cites data showing that more people come to faith gradually (the Celtic model) than suddenly (the Roman Model). Furthermore, the ongoing contagious common life of the congregation that permits people to discover faith for themselves, at their own pace, is more influential than special event preaching evangelism. Finney asks (p. 46-47)

> What is a typical modern journey of faith? The details are as diverse as the number of individuals but the research showed that a frequently used pathway is:
> 1. X is introduced into the church through a member of their family, through friendship with some Christians or through a minister;

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• they begin to ask questions;
• they are invited to explore further and come to a knowledge and practice of the faith (often this is through a nurture group or some form of catechumenate);
• they discover they have become a Christian, and mark it publicly through baptism or confirmation or whatever is appropriate to their denomination.

Professor Robin Gill sums it up when he says, 'Belonging comes before believing.' . . .

Evangelism is about helping people to belong so that they can believe. . . . Probably the greatest change in the 'New Evangelism' is the change in the typical setting of evangelism—instead of a great gathering with a speaker there is a smallish group of people seeking God together.

The changes are all moving from a Roman to a Celtic model. The best modern evangelism goes where the people are and listens, binds together prayer and truth, celebrates the goodness and complexity of life as well as judging the sinfulness of evil, and sees truth as something to be done and experienced as well as to be intellectually believed.

My fresh (re)discovery of this perspective has reminded me of the foundational literature of Peter Berger, which I read years ago and understood at one level, but failed to integrate into my understanding of how the world works. His Social Construction of Reality⁶ unpacks a sophisticated case that is much too elaborate to summarize here, but three conclusions are especially important for this discussion: (1) One's view of reality is largely shaped, and maintained, within the community into which one has been socialized. (2) The possibility of conversion, i.e., changing the way one perceives essential reality, is opened up through conversations with people who live within a contrasting view of Reality, and (3) one adopts and internalizes a new worldview through resocialization into a community sharing that worldview. We have many grounds, therefore, for repositioning evangelism as primarily a ministry of the Community of Faith, rather than primarily a ministry of the specialist or of people who "go in for that sort of thing."

So there are grounds for considering an alternative to the presentation-decision-fellowship model for doing Christian evangelism in which many of us are steeped. I have proposed a fellowship-conversations-belief, then commitment sequence that reflects perspectives from the ancient wisdom of Celtic mission, the strategic consciousness of John Wesley and Donald Soper, contemporary Sociology of Knowledge, and from my own experience and the experience of many other converts in the post-modern West.

I must acknowledge that the model I propose, like the more traditional "hypodermic" model, is simplistic. My emphasis upon a sequence of three essential factors ignores the complexity of

people's transition into faith by omitting other factors that are often, or usually, involved. For example, friendship often energizes new discipleship; seekers often become involved when friends (or relatives) invite them, and they stay involved through their friendships in the church. Scripture often plays a role in reaching people, though the approaches that enable seekers to discover scriptural truth for themselves, and the approaches that help people to memorize scripture verses and passages, seem to impact seekers more than conventional Bible studies. Again, prayer is often a crucial factor; typically, new believers were prayed for long before they began turning, they were prayed with at key points in their search, they themselves tried praying before they were sure there is a God to whom they matter, and one or more experiences of answered prayer often make it possible for them to believe. Ministry is often a factor; the church often ministers to the person before they believe, and the person sometimes even participates in some ministry before she or he believes.

Still other factors play prominent roles in making Christians. For instance, the traditional model is right that decision, or choice, is an important factor. Most people do not, however, choose to believe. Rather, they discover that they believe, and now they decide to follow Christ and commit to His Body, the Church; often this period of serious decision involves repentance. In churches who regard the Sacrament as a "converting ordinance," some seekers experience, in The Lord's Supper, the grace that awakens faith. The perceived credibility of the local church and of the members whom the seeker knows best, or observes closest, is usually a factor, and when seekers observe changed lives in the church, that amplifies the church's credibility. Converts almost always report that perceived, or experienced, love, or caring, or acceptance, or affirmation helped them to believe.

Undoubtedly, other factors are often involved, but for now we oversimplify: Essentially, churches reach prechristian people in a process involving a) fellowship, b) intentional conversations, and c) the discovery of faith, followed by decision and commitment. Thousands of churches (more or less) unconsciously follow this model already; thousands more could experience new conversion growth by teaching and implementing the "Celtic" model.

Two forms of traditionalism, however, prevent this from happening in most of our churches. First, many traditional churches have not known, at least within memory, the meaning of William Temple's observation that "The Church is the only society in the world that exists for its non-members." These traditional churches exist for their members (who never feel they get enough attention), and so they do not give priority to reaching prechristian people; they do not plan to, do not expect to, they never "get around to it", and they would be astonished if it ever happened! In time, the traditional denominations of traditional churches may jettison their original mission and redefine their main business as passing resolutions on social issues!
These churches may be living, more than they realize, in immense spiritual peril. Emil Brunner once observed that "The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning. Where there is no mission there is no church; and where [there] is neither church nor mission, there is no faith." For example, in an increasing number of "mainline" (or "old-line," or "side-line") churches and denominations, Christian faith is now a "problem." Indeed, some churches and denominations now contend that faith is naive (or "intolerant," or "fascist") and that religious doubt (or affirmation of all religions) is the new virtue. They suggest that people with theological doubts are more "honest," or "courageous," or "prophetic" than people who believe the gospel. The doubters, in disproportionate numbers, are even elevated to leadership roles, including the episcopacy. An examination reveals that these churches and denominations have had no appreciable priority mission to prechristian populations for years, or decades. "No mission, ... no faith."

Second, some churches who hear about evangelism through fellowship quickly reply "We already do that!" When asked to describe what they do, they typically respond something like this: "We invite people to Sunday morning church. If they come, we shake their hand. After the service, we invite them to stay for the coffee fellowship." Such churches remind us that not all "fellowship" is created equal! We observe, everywhere, that when "fellowship" goes no deeper than a greeting, and sharing a pew, followed by pleasantries over tea or coffee, not much happens--except for reinforcing the superficial image of "organized religion."

When, however, Christians care enough and dare enough to become vulnerable, and welcome prechristian people into their groups and their churches and their lives, and begin where they are, and pray for them, and minister to them, and converse with them, they discover for themselves that "Evangelism is about helping people to belong so that they can believe," and that "Faith is more caught than taught."