

EVANGELISM

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Introduction

Evangelism is the proclamation or telling of the good news of the death, burial and resurrection from the dead of Jesus Christ on the third day (see I Corinthians 15:3,4). It is a concept that has become clouded with adjectives and add-ons in recent times. Today we hear of personal evangelism, compassionate evangelism, holiness evangelism, lifestyle evangelism, evangelism *and* church growth, and many more. What about just simply *evangelism*?

Evangelism is a term with many synonyms in both the *koine* Greek of the New Testament and the English language. David B. Barrett comments on the related word, “evangelization”: “The Greek verb, euangelizo, found 25 times (with cognate) in the OT, and 132 times in the NT - means “to spread the good news of the gospel - to preach, to persuade, to call to faith in Christ” – has 42 synonyms in biblical Greek, and the English verb has 700 synonyms in current English, which can be reduced to 400 distinct and different dimensions of evangelization”.¹ But the core idea is the announcing of the good news about Christ. The New Testament Scriptures give considerable insight into the idea of evangelism.

Insights from Scripture

In Matthew 4:19 and the parallel passage in Mark 1:17 we find the words: “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men”. Jesus’ point of inviting his disciples to follow him so that he will make them “fishers of men” is an invitation to do evangelism. Notice that the methodology of fishing referred to was with boats that took fishers out where the fish were, and that nets were used so that large numbers of fish were brought in at the same time. Note that *anthropoi* is used in this passage indicating that all people - all of humanity - is included in the view of “fishing”. The “fishers of people” alluded to here may well have Old Testament references in Jeremiah 16:16 and Habakkuk 1:15. It is interesting that these particular disciples fished on the Sea of Galilee which had the reputation of containing many different kinds of fish - 153 different kinds according to ancient tradition which was supposed to represent all the other nations of the earth. Perhaps this reinforces the wide variety of humanity envisioned. Galilee itself was known from ancient times as Galilee of the Nations. Adam Clarke notes that it was:

“So called, because it was inhabited by Egyptians,
Arabians, and Phoenicians, according to the testimony

¹David B. Barrett, *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 346-347.

of Strabo and others. The Hebrew *goyim*, and the Greek *ethnon*, signify nations; and, in the Old and New Testaments, mean those people who were not descendants of any of the twelve tribes. The word Gentiles, from *gens*, a nation, signifies the same. It is worthy of remark, that it was a regular tradition among the ancient Jews, that the Messiah should begin his ministry in Galilee.²

In John 4:35 (KJV) Jesus is quoted as saying: "Say not ye, There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest? behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest." The fields being "white unto harvest" is a reference to the people who are ready to come into the kingdom of God announced by the preaching of Jesus and His disciples. This passage refers to evangelism, and do the white fields represent the magnitude of the work and the vast numbers of people to be gathered in the harvest. One of the main points Jesus makes about gathering the harvest is the urgency and the timeliness for gathering the harvest, i.e., gathering people into the kingdom of God presently – not waiting until some later time.

There is an evangelism problem which Jesus discussed in the ninth chapter of Matthew's gospel, verses 37 and 38: "Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (NIV). The crux of the evangelism problem is the lack of laborers for the fields. The solution is the command of Jesus to pray to the Lord to send more laborers into the fields.

Much is made of the Great Commission found in the 28th chapter of Matthew, verses 18,19 and 20: "Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (NIV). It is interesting the this passage was not the motivating factor for the early church nor for the much of the church ages to follow. The imminent biblical scholar of the Reformation, John Calvin, though personally promoting missionary activity, did not understand this passage as the command for the world evangelization for the believers of his day.³ John Wesley, while acknowledging the passage for commanding the making of disciples chooses to emphasize the teaching and baptizing aspects of the passage and does not tie it to any universal command for world missions.⁴

The early Christian certainly did not seem to use this passage as a reason for doing world evangelization. It was hardly quoted by any of the church writers in the first few centuries of the

²Adam Clarke, *Commentary, Vol. I - Matthew to the Acts* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, n.d.), 60.

³John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelist, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, Reprint, Volume Third, translated by Rev. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).

⁴John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: The Epworth Press, 1950), 138.

church. Perhaps the reasons lies in how evangelism was understood and what motivated the early believers to spread the gospel. Michael Green points out that: “It is important to stress this prime motive of loving gratitude to God because it is not infrequently assumed that the direct command of Christ to evangelize was the main driving force behind Christian mission.”⁵

It has become popular with some to link the Great Commission of Matthew with the Great Command to love God and neighbors of Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30; and Luke 10:27 – “Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” (Matthew 22:37). There is nothing wrong in linking these two passages, but there is nothing particularly compelling to do so. Some seem to imply that the emphasis upon loving neighbors must not be lost in the doing of world evangelization. The implication is that this emphasis can be lost if only the Great Commission is held up as a model for doing world evangelization. This is can hardly be so in that all the teachings of Jesus are stressed in the Matthew passage.

The dynamic of the Christian witness grew out of a loving focus upon Jesus Christ himself. Jesus proclaimed this focus in Acts 1:8: “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (KJV). Whether one understands this as the KJV has it, implying the witness is about Jesus, or understands it as the NIV has it (“my witnesses”), that the witnesses belong to Jesus, the focus is still upon Jesus Christ. That focus was infused with a strong current of loving devotion and thankfulness. Roland Allen notes that the Great Commission is not a new legalism to be obeyed, but a spiritual command based upon the promise of His divine presence with His disciples. His presence “is not a reward offered to those who obey; it is rather the assurance that those who are commanded will be able to obey”.⁶

In the book of Acts we find a wonderful paradigm of the simple presentation and spread of the gospel among the nations in the New Testament church. Acts 11:19-21 records: “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.” Note that the passage speaks of “telling the message” – a reference to proclamation of the gospel. The “message” is the gospel or the God story of the coming of Jesus, His death, burial, and resurrection. “In short, the evangelistic message is based on the Word of God; it seeks to tell the story that God has already acted out.”⁷ They “began to speak” to the Greeks – another reference to evangelism. They spoke about the “good news – the *evangelium*.”

⁵Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 239.

⁶Roland Allen, *Missionary Principles* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 22 ff.

⁷Walter A. Elwell, editor, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 383.

While they were evangelizing, “the hand of the Lord was with them”. This indicates demonstrated power that the people could see and feel. “Symbolically, “hand” expresses strength and power, especially God’s great power (e.g., Ex 3:19-20) when that power is used to perform his will.⁸

Theological Reflections

Let us consider that many people respond to displays of power as they did in Jesus’ ministry. Much theological orientation today seems to assume that people will respond to a logically reasoned presentation about person guilt and salvation. In reality many cultures are not guilt cultures and will not readily respond to such presentations. Other cultures are not oriented toward the use of logical but rather intuition and emotion. Melba Maggay, for instance, has made some interesting observations about Filipino society: “Fully 80% of people attracted to the Four Square Church in the Philippines . . . came through interest in personal healing. Filipinos are interested in potency (power), not in guilt and salvation”.⁹

The power of God, expressed as the “Lord’s hand” was a significant factor in the results that are reported in this passage of Acts. The results were: the people believed, and they turned to the Lord. Apparently the telling of the message and the power of God worked together to bring the people to the point of faith, and a turning of their lives toward God.

This is, of course, the teaching of Paul found in Romans 1:16,17: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith’” (NIV). The Greek word for power in this passage is *dunamis*. This is not the power of authority but the power of dynamism. This is an explosive, moving, generating kind of power. It is inextricably bound up with Jesus himself and His death and resurrection. “Jesus himself becomes the model for God’s exercise of power. Jesus was ‘declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead’ (Ro 1:4).”¹⁰

John Wesley understood from this Roman passage that the gospel was indeed “The great and gloriously powerful means of saving all who accept salvation in God’s own way. As St. Paul

⁸Lawrence O. Richards, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 324.

⁹Robert C. Donahue, “International Symposium on Asian Mission” in *The Mediator*, vol. 3:2, April 2002, 114.

¹⁰Lawrence O. Richards, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 583.

comprises the sum of the gospel in this epistle, so he does the sum of the epistle in this and the following verse [17].”¹¹ That power is also always to be understood in relation to the Holy Spirit.

It is the Spirit of God who raised Christ from the dead, and is therefore at the very center of the gospel power. The promise is found in Romans 8:11 – “And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you” (NIV). The Holy Spirit is at work as the source of the dynamic power in the gospel to make Jesus known in an intimate and saving way by the peoples of the world. Donald Metz points out that: “Holiness is the dynamic of spiritual power . . .”¹²

George G. Hunter III comments about the Holy Spirit: “He gives the power for the spread of the gospel. We do not organize or engineer the work of the Holy Spirit . . . Indeed, where the people of God are most receptive, seeking that power with all their hearts, we are assured that the power will come in God’s good time.”¹³ The dynamic of the power of the Spirit within the believer works itself out in a kind of “natural” evangelism that simply flows from the believer’s new life.

Something should be said about the place of the doctrine of the Trinity in regard to evangelism. The explicit formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity was a reaction to non-apostolic teaching that was rampant in the fourth century.¹⁴ However, the doctrine of the Trinity was also central to the evangelistic efforts in the Irish Celtic church of the fifth century and beyond. This is especially illustrated in the “Confession” of Patrick of Ireland that shows Patrick made constant use of the trinitarian formula in his evangelistic efforts among the Irish.¹⁵

Much of the reason for this seems to lie in the area of understanding. If the hearers of the gospel can understand the God of the gospel story and His Son, Jesus Christ, they will more readily respond to Him. John Wesley was also eager to make salvation understood. He was careful to anchor his evangelistic preaching in a thoroughly orthodox Trinitarian understanding of Scripture. His explanations of salvation were especially careful in this regard.¹⁶ Kenneth Grider has made the point that:

“A more-or-less correct understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity will help us in our winning people to Christ. It will help people understand the offices of the three Persons of the Godhead if we say that it is the Father who sent the Son and who

¹¹John Welsey, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1950), 519.

¹²Donald S. Metz, *Studies in Biblical Holiness* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1971), 205.

¹³George G. Hunter III, *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 212.

¹⁴Roderick T. Leupp, *Know The Name of God: A Trinitarian Patestry of Grace, Faith & Community* (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 67 ff.

¹⁵See St. Patrick, *Confession*

¹⁶Albert C. Outler, editor, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 124 ff.

actually does the forgiving of us; if we say that the father is enabled to forgive us and still himself remain just (Rom. 3:23-26) because of Christ's function of dying on our behalf and being raised from the dead; and if we tell people that the Holy Spirit's special function is to apply what is said to specific persons in specific ways, to convict individuals of sin, and to help those who are forgiven of their acts of sin to yield themselves up to God in order; by faith, to receive both cleansing from Adamic depravity and empowerment."

Early Church Example

There was a very large degree to which the early Christians were influenced and affected by the "press and pull" of the ideological, material, and political ethos of their day. Certainly Jewish social and religious customs had become highly exclusionary by practice. This exclusiveness brought bitter disunity among the Jews themselves. Edersheim says, "The Pharisees and Sadducees held opposite principles, and hated each other, the Essenes looked down upon them both".¹⁷

All the Twelve Apostles and Paul imbibed of this attitude to some degree or were affected by it. It is clear that Peter was hindered by the strong separatist social notions of the Jews (see Acts 10), as were many in the Jerusalem church. This attitude did not go away, for Paul was constantly harassed by Jewish elements within the churches insisting upon adherence to current Jewish religious and social ideology.

At first Peter seems to have represented those who strongly supported the status quo. Paul, on the other hand, seems to have been representative of those who were willing to challenge the prevailing Jewish status quo in this area of separatist attitude for the sake of Christ and the furtherance of the gospel. Paul's attitude was: "I am made all things to all, that I might by all means save some"(I Corinthians 9:22b).

It appears in Acts that the early church tended to be made up of the poorer classes. Yet, in Acts 4, there is a description of a community of believers sharing their wealth. There were those of more substantial means; Barnabus is an example of a wealthy believer who sold land and presented the proceeds to the apostles for distribution to help the work of Christ. The church among the Jews was less Sadducean (with an on emphasis on this world, its pleasures, and its material comforts. It tended be more Essene with an emphasis on spiritual matters and other-worldly concerns. Paul expressed this thought in Philippians 4:11: "I have learned in whatsoever state I am therewith to be content". Jesus had instructed His first evangelists (the seventy) to not take extra provisions with

¹⁷Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life In The Days of Christ*, Reprint (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 25.

them. This attitude toward material things probably led to the very aesthetic lifestyles made famous in the following centuries.

The early Christians were evangelists within the context of their political realities. There is some speculation that Simon Zealotes had been connected with the radical nationalistic Zealot movement. Political involvement was expected of the church by most Jews. However, Christians did not participate in the Jewish rebellions of A. D. 70 and 135. This refusal to be involved in nationalistic political action caused the Christians eventually to be viewed as traitors to their own Jewish people.¹⁸

This was true also of many of the Gentile Christians as well. Both Paul and Peter pointed toward the reign of Christ which would put an end to the political system of the world. The *Revelation* seems to paint this same theme in broad strokes. The Christian evangelists and their converts were looking for the collapse of the whole world political system, and although they might use it and even honor its leaders as Paul did, they generally did not seem to be much interested in it.

Political terminology was used in relationship to evangelism: king and kingdom, rulers and powers. Ekklesia was, a term referring to the political body of citizens in a city-state, was used in connection with God's people. Jesus is referred to as a "king", yet His kingdom is not of this world.

The cultures and civilizations in which the early Christians lived had a strong influence upon their perceptions. In Philippians 3:5 Paul makes a special proud, and approving reference to his own personal Jewish background. He seems to accept his Jewish culture and civilization as superior. On the other hand, Paul was appreciative of the cultures of others as seen in his reference to a Greek writer during his speech on Mars Hill. As to the Gentile cultures, Paul intimates their origin was in grave ignorance of the living God (Romans 1). Roland Allen has observed that demon worship was really the "operative religion of the vast mass of people of the empire".¹⁹

In reference to the Gentile nations, Matthew speaks of them as those "which sat in darkness saw great light . . ." (Matthew 4:16). Paul understood the nations to be morally corrupt and spiritually blinded (Romans 1). "The Gentiles have no excuse for their 'ungodliness . . .'"²⁰ The nations were perceived as unable to find God, and hence were in need of the good news of Christ who came to bring God and humanity together in His own person. The hope of salvation is held out to the

¹⁸Leonhard Goppelt, translated by Robert A. Guelich, *Apostolic and Post-Apostolic Times*, Baker Book House edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 121.

¹⁹Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St Paul's Or Ours?* American edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 28.

²⁰Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 327.

nations. It is not just a personal spiritual salvation of . the soul alone which is offered. “Redemption is total: body, spirit, structure, world, cosmos”.²¹

Making the gospel known to the peoples of the world means that the written gospel is essential. It was so in the first centuries of the early church. The gospels written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were the “tracts” of that day which presented the gospel of Jesus in a marvelous way. They told the story from different vantage points of the life, death, burial and resurrection of the Christ. These gospels were early translated from the common “trade” language, koine Greek, into the vernaculars of peoples everywhere. This continues today and has had a profound effect in spreading the gospel among multitudes of people all over the world. The translation and re-translation of the gospel is necessary to help people make sense of the divine story of God. “Evangelism is never proclamation in a vacuum; but always to people, and the message must be given in terms that make sense to them”.²²

There was a burning zeal to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to others. This was evident in the records of the churches of the book of Acts. It continued for a long time as characteristic of that early church period. Writing about the fervor of evangelists of the second century, Michael Green comments:

“Then they set out on long journeys, doing the work of evangelists, eagerly striving to preach Christ to those who had never heard the word of faith, and to deliver to them the holy gospels. In foreign lands they simply laid the foundations of the faith. That done, they appointed others as shepherds, entrusting them with the care of the new growth, while they themselves proceed with the grace and co-operation of God to other countries and other peoples”.²³

The evangelists of that early church gave a basic model for evangelism that was world-embracing and Spirit-led. The model was free flowing, deeply spiritual in nature, and totally dependent upon the unction and power of the Holy Spirit. It is most significant that “the early Christians depended less on human wisdom and expertise, more on divine initiative and guidance”.²⁴ The itinerant ministry of roving evangelists, supported by the local congregations, and directed by the Spirit of God was the model of early church period. This model was to be largely revived in the Evangelical Awakening in which John Wesley played such a large role.

²¹Ibid.

²²Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 115.

²³Michael Green, 169.

²⁴J. Herbert Kane, *Christian Missions in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 73.

Wesleyan Roots

Perhaps we should look back at the story of our own Wesleyan roots in regard to evangelism. Perhaps here we may discover the dynamic and simplicity of the power of evangelism. John Wesley's own conversion to Christ may provide an important illustration of evangelism for us to consider.

It was a troubled young missionary named John Wesley who took note of the calm assurance and bold witness of a group of Moravian believers. They were on board ship during a storm while crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. These joyfully committed Moravian believers had set sail to be missionaries, motivated by an outpouring of the Holy Spirit to continuous prayer which eventually propelled them across the world as heralds of the good news of Christ.²⁵

These Moravians apparently did not give up on even this young Anglican priest, for members of their group continued to meet with John Wesley upon his return to England. It was to a largely Moravian society meeting that John Wesley went on the evening of May 24, 1738 for a reading from Martin Luther's preface to Romans. It is instructive to read the account of this evening given by Wesley himself in his *Journal*:

"About a quarter before nine while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation: And an assurance was given me that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death . . ."²⁶

For Wesley the gospel became applicable personally through faith in the merit obtained by Christ through His death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit was the divine agent working through faith in the human heart to give a new heart and a witness of assurance of the divine work and acceptance. Until the evening of May 24, 1738, the evangel had not been operative for salvation in Wesley's personal experience. It was faith in Christ which he heard from the reading based upon Romans which was instrumental in his inward conversion. John Wesley's personal conversion experience is a powerful reminder of the central place of faith in Christ. That faith is based upon the hearing of the Word of God. We are also reminded of the importance of the Word of God. It is the Word of God that the Holy Spirit takes to human heart to create that faith. This idea is expounded in the tenth chapter of Romans verses 13-17. James Moffat gives this translation:

"Everyone who invokes the name of the Lord shall be saved. But how are they to invoke One in whom they have never heard? And how are they ever to hear,

²⁵Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 70-71.

²⁶John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley: A Selection*, edited with an Introduction by Elisabeth Jay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 34, 35.

without a preacher? And who can men preach unless they are sent? – as it is written, How pleasant is the coming of men with glad, good news! But they have not all given into the gospel of glad news? No, Isaiah says, Lord, who has believed what they have heard from us? (You see, faith must come from what is heard, and what is heard comes from word of Christ.)²⁷

A. Skevington Wood sites Dr. Henry Bett as one who traced the exact passage in Martin Luther's preface to *Romans* which John Wesley heard the night of his conversion. Luther was dealing with the idea of faith in Christ:

“Wherefore let us conclude that faith alone justifies, and that faith alone fulfills the law. For faith through the merit of Christ obtains the Holy Spirit, which Spirit makes us new hearts, exhilarates, excites and influences our heart, so that it may do those things willingly of love, which the law commands; and so, at the last, good works indeed proceed from the faith which works so mightily, and which is so lively in our hearts.’ Thus John Wesley was converted by reading in *Romans* – and the Evangelical Revival was inaugurated.”²⁸

The faith that worked so mightily in John Wesley in conversion and consequently in the great Evangelical Revival itself was faith in the work of Christ – His death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead. This “gospel of glad news” is the Word of Christ set forth in Scripture. “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith” (*Romans* 1:16,17 – NIV).

Wesley apparently did not have just the saving of the soul in mind, but holiness of life was his object. The goal of evangelism for Wesley was holiness. He fully expected the converts to experience the sanctifying grace of God not only initially but entirely. A. Skevington Wood quotes from John Wesley's letters to his brother Charles: "If we duly join faith and works in all our preaching, we shall not fail of a blessing. But of all preaching, what is usually called gospel preaching is the most useless, if not the most mischievous; a dull, yea or lively, harangue on the sufferings of Christ or salvation by faith without strongly inculcating holiness. I see more and more that this naturally tends to drive holiness out of the world."²⁹

This holiness was not a purely individual matter. It was a personal lifestyle of righteous living which was to be accomplished within the framework of a community of like-minded persons pursuing

²⁷James Moffat, *A New Translation of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1922), 197.

²⁸A. Skevington Wood, *Life by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1963), 10-11.

²⁹A. Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart: John Wesley, the Evangelist* (Exeter, Devon, England: The Paternoster Press, 1967), 149. P. 345. The reference is to Wesley's *Letters*, Vol. V. To Charles Wesley, 4th November, 1775.

holiness. It was to be a lifestyle which directly affected the larger society. In Wesley's view, "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness by social holiness."³⁰

The idea of what is preached in evangelistic proclamation was all encompassing for Wesley. It was a view which brought all things under the Lordship of Christ and aimed at holiness of personal life and in society. He brings the whole of gospel to bear in his evangelistic preaching with a conclusion of sanctified living held out before the people. In a letter to Ebenezer Blackwell, dated December 20, 1751, Wesley writes in this vein:

There must be clear association of God's sovereignty with man's responsibility; of Christ's sufferings on the Cross with man's involvement in what was purchased there for him; of the precious promises with the terrors of God's wrath; of the invitation to receive Christ with a deep conviction of sin; and of justification by faith with its scriptural corollary in newness of sanctified living. Only when all of these are held together and proclaimed together, is the whole gospel set forth. Otherwise . . . evangelism will be no more than a futile endeavour . . .³¹

The idea of social holiness is well illustrated in John Welsey Bready's work: *England: Before and After Wesley - The Evangelical Revival and Social Reform*, which details the many applications of the gospel to slavery, education, prisons, penal code, war, use and abuse of money, liquor, politics, legal affairs, affairs of State, economics, dress, social work, recreation, medicine, children, labor and trade.³² John Wesley's idea of evangelism seems to have been much involved with society reform and social righteousness.

While Wesley practiced a centripetal kind of evangelism at first as his almost exclusive approach, within less than a year after his Aldersgate experience he was preaching in the fields to the poor miners at Bristol. This was a practice he was to continue as his primary method of evangelizing³³ Wesley was quite concerned to take the gospel to the people where they were rather than expecting them to enter a church building to hear the good news. He went out into the secular society to confront people with the gospel and proclaim its truth. David Watson reminds us: "The most effective method of evangelism in Wesley's day was in fact field preaching . . ."³⁴

³⁰John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *List of Poetical Works With the Prefaces Connected With Them*, 1738, 1739 (Albany, Oregon: Books for the Ages, Ages Software, The AGES Digital Library Collections), 437.

³¹A. Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart: John Wesley, Evangelist* (Exeter, Devon, England: The Paternoster Press, 1967), 150.

³²John Wesley Bready, *England: Before and After Wesley - The Evangelical Revival and Social Reform* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1938).

³³G. Holden Pike, *Wesley and His Preachers: Their Conquest of Britain* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1903), 15, 16.

³⁴David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985), 149.

Wesley was keen to associate with the poor even though he was a recognized scholar and an ordained priest in the Church of England, and therefore a member of the establishment of his day. This was something of a spectacle and a curiosity though a few others were known to do similar things as well.³⁵ He certainly made use of his position to do all he could to gain a hearing for the gospel he preached. “Surveying the unshepherded crowds at Bristol, he determined ‘preaching the gospel to the poor’ must take precedence over custom and ‘propriety’ . . . this was ‘the very thing’ the New Testament church was all about”.³⁶

Application and Conclusion

A story is told about a watermelon vendor:

It was in a Korean village, and my wife came up to ask him how much a watermelon cost. He was so surprised at finding a long-nosed foreigner who spoke Korean that at first he was struck dumb. He even forgot to tell her the price. There was something more important he wanted to say. He asked, “Are you a Christian?” And when she replied, “Yes,” he smiled all over. “Oh, I’m so glad,” he said, “because if you weren’t I was going to tell you how much you are missing.”³⁷

The Christian watermelon vendor illustrates what Christian evangelism can be, and should be. Evangelism is simple; it is something anyone can do. It springs from the power of the Holy Spirit within, and from a personal inner joy of salvation that Jesus has provided. It is a joyful story of new life and wonderful new beginnings.

Today there is much focus on various methods of evangelism. Many of these methods demand memorization, such as the “Four Spiritual Laws”, and the “Evangelism Explosion” program. There are any number of specialized approaches to evangelism each with its own special knowledge and techniques. There are many categories of evangelism as well. There is pastoral evangelism, crusade evangelism, small group evangelism, Sunday School evangelism, open air evangelism, lifestyle evangelism, vocational evangelism, visitation evangelism, camp evangelism, youth evangelism, radio and television evangelism, literature evangelism, Jesus Film evangelism, and personal evangelism just to name a few. All of these various approaches and categories may illustrate the breadth of the evangelistic endeavor but perhaps the simplicity of evangelism is

³⁵George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne (Ireland), a contemporary of Wesley, was especially noted for his work with the poor Irish who were otherwise greatly despised by the English establishment of the time.

³⁶Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley & Patterns for Church Renewal* (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 38.

³⁷Samuel Hugh Moffet, “Evangelism: The Leading Partner,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, Third Edition, edited by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999), 577.

obscured. It is the simplicity which puts the work of evangelism into the hands of the great general membership of the church, and keeps it from becoming the exclusive domain of the professionals.

Yet there is a need for considering a return to the itinerant preaching in the style John Wesley used to effectively in his day. Small groups who regularly go out and evangelize in ever growing circles from urban centers would make as much sense in today's increasingly urbanized societies as it did in Wesley's Britain which was just beginning to move toward large scale urbanization.

A modern Asian example of vigorous evangelism done in a largely Wesleyan frame of reference is the evangelistic ministry of the late Dr. John Sung of China. He itinerated through perhaps hundreds of cities large and small in China and Southeast Asia over a fifteen year period from about 1926 to 1941. Many thousands came to faith in Christ, and the fruit of his work remains with many prominent Christian leaders across the region tracing their conversion to his preaching. His preaching was strongly anchored in Scripture with an emphasis upon holiness. In every place that he preached he organized gospel Preaching Bands of those who committed themselves to continuous evangelistic work and works of charity. Some of these bands are still active today.³⁸

There is much confusion about the social versus evangelism models of gospel propagation. Some argue for a purely presence model of evangelism which emphasizes the doing of good deeds. This is contrasted with an often perceived obnoxious, objectionable or ineffective proclaiming of the gospel story and witness. Samuel Hugh Moffet has observed: "There is nothing quite so crippling to both evangelism and social action as to confuse them in definition or to separate them in practice."³⁹ Though the proclamation of the gospel may always be the leading partner, evangelism and social action always go together in the propagation of the gospel. The late Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple gave special attention to this issue in a lecture he delivered:

"Our social witness, apart from its own intrinsic value as a contribution to social welfare, is an indispensable introduction to effective evangelism on a wide scale or as directed to those who stand quite apart from the Church.

Of course this must not be interpreted as a suggestion that it is a substitute for evangelism. On the contrary, a Christian approach to questions of social justice will lead us back to a renewed belief in the need for individual conversion and dedication. The essential Gospel does not change. From generation to generation, it is the proclamation of the Holy Love of God disclosed in His redeeming acts. Belief in that Gospel sends us forth to remedy conditions which

³⁸Timothy Tow, *The Asian Awakening* (Singapore: Christian Life Publishers, 1988), 51-53. See also, Leslie T. Lyall, *John Sung, Flame for God in the Far East* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1954).

³⁹Samuel Hugh Moffet, "Evangelism: The Leading Partner," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, Third Edition, edited by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999), 576.

degrade . . . The Gospel itself impels us to the task of social witness; our social witness leads us and all who hear us back to the gospel”.⁴⁰

Modern evangelism seems to emphasize an individualistic spiritual response to a proposition without much social concern or society application. Much of modern evangelism seems to be centripetal in nature, that is, unbelievers are expected to come to an evangelistic event or come into the church meeting in order to hear the gospel. There is danger both of these approaches. The mere propositional approach will fail to produce large numbers of serious imitators of Christ who are inwardly motivated by a Christ-centered, Spirit driven dynamic to spread the good news and change their societies. If we wait for the post-modern generation to come to our church meetings we may well have a long and fruitless wait. As in the first century, and as in Wesley’s time believers must move out in the dynamic of the Spirit to embrace the people of the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed.

It is not a propositional gospel that is needed. Rather, we need to return to the straight forward itinerant proclamation of a clear Scriptural presentation of the gospel. There is a need to create kinds of “religious orders” within our established church structures as Wesley did with his corps of itinerant preachers and his class meetings. Although the class meetings primarily for discipleship for Wesley, they are being adapted today by many for both discipleship and evangelism. The cell group and cell-church movements are manifestations of this phenomenon. A renewed practice of radical discipleship that “provides supportive affirmation for the alternative lifestyle offered by the gospel . . . is the decisive Christian challenge to the world”.

“As Bishop B. F. Westcott once observed, the great danger of today is that we will allow the ministerial offices to supercede the general power bestowed upon the whole church”.⁴¹ We must beware lest the special offices of the church end up doing the work designed for the general body of believers, i.e., evangelism assigned almost exclusively to evangelists and pastors and not primarily to all of the members of the Body of Christ. In many of our churches today the idea is prevalent that evangelism is primarily the work of specialists. Many so-called lay members of our churches are afraid to become involved in evangelism. Evangelism has become one of the things in which many of our people fear to personally involve themselves. The early church had taken up the work of evangelism as an appropriate work for all. As Michael Green points out: “To spread the gospel was a task seen as common to all in the Church”.⁴² This was the genius of evangelism in the first century, and can be the genius of evangelism for the twenty-first century as well.

⁴⁰William Temple, *Social Witness and Evangelism* (London: The Epworth Press, 1943), 9.

⁴¹Robert Charles Donahue, “The Great Commission for the 21st Century”, in *The Mediator*, vol. 3:1 (Metro-Manila, Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary), 112.

⁴²Michael Green, 175.