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CHAPTER 24

THE JOURNEY OF EVANGELISM

PHILIP R. MEADOWS

INTRODUCTION

MUCH of the current debate in the theology of evangelism can be framed by a common set of themes. First, it is clear that 'evangel-ism' is primarily concerned with the *evangel*, the gospel, or the good news we bear in the world. How we understand the nature of the gospel is of fundamental importance. Second, the *telos*, end or goal of evangelism is properly determined by the nature of the gospel itself. Contemplating this goal is a complex matter, however, because evangelism is a human activity that bears a promise that only God can fulfil. Any theology of evangelism must, therefore, carefully distinguish between that which can be accomplished through the means of our own striving, and that which results from the gracious activity of God alone. Third, the *ethos*, character or purpose of our practice is shaped by the goal of evangelism and must be understood in terms of 'working together with God' for the spread of the gospel.

The broad evangelical tradition has preserved what may be called a 'soteriological paradigm' of evangelism, rooted in the *evangel* of personal salvation. The centre of its concern is the *telos* of conversion: a life-transforming experience that brings the assurance of sins forgiven, new birth into a personal relationship with God, and the promise of eternal life. This goal is typically understood as a radical change that takes place in a moment of time, emphasizing the initiative of God's unconditional grace. The *ethos* of evangelism is proclamation, having the character of announcement, call,

and response, with the purpose of bringing people to a point of spiritual awakening, crisis, and decision-making. The practice of evangelism is the means through which God brings conviction of sin, a spirit of repentance, and receptivity to the gift of faith. Evangelists are those gifted or trained individuals who lead unbelievers into this experience of personal salvation through a variety of means, from field preaching to faith sharing. In this paradigm, the Christian community may be the origin and the end of evangelistic outreach, but evangelism itself is usually thought of as an 'extraordinary' activity of building bridges to those beyond its borders.

Contemporary scholarship has tended to look upon this paradigm with suspicion (Abraham 1989: 40–69). First, there is often an individualism at work in the idea of personal salvation that reduces the gospel to a form of private spirituality. This neglects the social and material dimensions of the gospel, and renders ecclesial life merely incidental to the business of evangelism itself. In this way, conversion is easily sundered from discipleship. Second, it runs the risk of anthropocentrism in so far as the goal of conversion can become exclusively identified with datable moments of decision-making or certain patterns of emotional experience. The danger is that anthropocentric goals can be attained with or without the cooperation of God, or made available for consumption with or without the summons to costly discipleship. Third, pursuing such a diminished goal is often accompanied by a pragmatic inclination to calculate the effectiveness of evangelistic practices as the means of making converts (Stone 2007: 18, 29–53). In other words, there can be a mechanistic illusion that they have inherent power to produce conversion, and the assumption that any means is justified by this end. Evangelism that succumbs to these temptations also makes little demands on the faithful witness of Christian community itself.

This challenge to the soteriological paradigm also coincides with a 'missiological turn' in the theology of evangelism (Arias 1984). A new paradigm is emerging that recasts our understanding of the *evangel* in terms of Jesus' own teaching on the eschatological kingdom of God and the cosmic scope of the *missio Dei* to renew all creation. The gospel cannot be reduced to personal salvation, since the social and material reality of Christian community, whose life together is a sign, foretaste, and herald of the kingdom, is both the means and end of authentic evangelism. The logic of this paradigm exchanges the *telos* of conversion for that of discipleship as the proper response to the gospel, and the way in which kingdom life is embodied. Although it may be anticipated that unbelievers will eventually come to an experience of conversion, the purpose of evangelism is to facilitate a journey, not solicit responses as such. Indeed, conversion tends to be redefined as a life-transforming process rather than a radically transformative moment. The fundamental decision required of those being evangelized is to become a disciple; or, to seek entry into the kingdom of God through a complex process of spiritual, moral, and intellectual catechesis often compared to that of the pre-Constantinian church (Abraham 1989). The *ethos* of evangelism, then, is that of initiation into the kingdom of God, conceived as a clearly theocentric and ecclesial activity, rooted in the 'ordinary' practices of discipleship

(Jones 2003). Unbelievers are evangelized through an encounter with, and participation in, a community that bears faithful witness to the gospel, so that they may come to share in the new life of the kingdom for themselves. The task of the evangelist may be apostolic in nature, but it is also to ensure this ecclesial witness is intact, and properly coupled to intentional practices of inclusion and catechesis.

By embracing this 'missiological paradigm', however, care must be taken not to throw the baby out with the soteriological bathwater. Affirming the social reality of the gospel must not cause us to neglect the full range of experience associated with evangelical conversion. The soteriological paradigm cautions us that conversion cannot be reduced to one 'aspect' among many in a process of initiation, but is a gift of spiritual power that makes the new life of the kingdom possible, and without which both discipleship and fellowship slide into the mere form of religion. There is also an important distinction to be made between witness and evangelism. Witness may be the gospel made audible, visible, and tangible in the lives of Christians, but evangelism signifies the means by which unbelievers engage with that witness in the first place, and embrace the life-transforming reality of the gospel for themselves. The very idea of evangelism as a particular charism is in danger of becoming meaningless when defined so broadly as faithful witness in an unbelieving world, or as the implicit character of any ecclesial practice.

The benefit of laying out these issues paradigmatically is that it can help clarify the internal logic of two broad directions in the theology of evangelism (see Table 24.1). The danger, however, is that the distinctions between them may become overdrawn and the paradigms seen as closed alternatives rather than mutually correcting perspectives. The argument presented here is that the history of early Methodism and the tradition of Wesleyan theology can provide a resource for a more holistic undertaking. On the one hand, the roots of the soteriological paradigm can be traced back to the very soil of evangelical revival in which the early Methodist movement was grown (Skevington Wood 1967; Coleman 1994). Wesley can easily be taken as a champion of personal salvation with its logic of proclamation and conversion. On the other hand, he claimed that the movement was raised up to spread scriptural holiness, not merely to make converts. In this way, early Methodism can also be interpreted in terms of the missiological paradigm, as a faithful witness to the kingdom of God, with the logic of initiation and

Table 24.1 Paradigms of evangelism

Soteriological paradigm	Missiological paradigm	A Wesleyan paradigm
<i>evangel</i> of personal salvation	<i>evangel</i> of the eschatological kingdom	<i>evangel</i> of holy love
<i>telos</i> of conversion	<i>telos</i> of discipleship	<i>telos</i> of communion with God
<i>ethos</i> of proclamation	<i>ethos</i> of initiation	<i>ethos</i> of spiritual direction

discipleship. Indeed, Wesley came to see the similarity between the evangelistic function of Methodist fellowship and the early church practice of catechesis for those who responded to apostolic preaching (Wesley 1958: iii. 518–19).

Assuming that the example of early Methodism does not simply place us on the horns of a dilemma, the question is how these different emphases were held together in a coherent way, and what this might contribute to contemporary thinking about evangelism. The hypothesis explored here is that Wesley does not make conversion or discipleship the ultimate end of evangelism but communion with the triune God, and that this reality can integrate and transform insights from both the soteriological and missiological paradigms.

THE EVANGEL: THE GOSPEL OF COMMUNION WITH GOD

It has been claimed that the 'catholic substance' of Wesley's theology is the theme of 'participation' in God (Wesley 1984: 99; Allchin 1988: 24–47; Karkainen 2004: 72–81). The tradition has used the theological language of 'participation', 'union', and 'communion' as more or less synonymous references to the mutual indwelling of the Christian life with the triune God (Wesley 1779: 199 ff.; WMM 1849: 801–944; Flew 1934: 313–41; Matthaei 2000: 55 ff.).

Wesley's understanding of communion with God is deeply eschatological; rooted in a vision of the new creation when the crowning glory of humanity will be 'an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three One God, and of all creatures in him' (Wesley 1984: ii. 510). The end of Christ's coming is that the communion with God known by Adam might be restored: who was 'unspeakably happy; dwelling in God, and God in him; having an uninterrupted fellowship with the Father and the Son, through the eternal Spirit' (ibid. 475–6). A life shaped by communion with God is the present experience or foretaste of this eschatological future, begun in conversion and deepened through a life of growth in grace towards perfect love. The kingdom of God is present within and among those who seek the perfect love of God and neighbour in their lives.

For Wesley, the whole way of salvation is encompassed by this communion of love with the triune God. The ultimate goal of evangelism and discipleship is that people may receive the gift of 'that deep communion with the Father and the Son, whereby they are enabled to give him their whole heart; to love every man as their own soul, and to walk as Christ also walked' (Wesley 1958: iii. 342).

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For Wesley, the gospel is first and foremost the good news of holy love (Wynkoop 1972; Collins 2007; Jones 2003), and is a summons to that divine embrace in which the experience of evangelical conversion and growth in discipleship are held together.

Because God is love, to be loved by God is to be offered the gift of God's own self. It is only as God's love is shed abroad in our hearts, that we are able to love God in return, and love our neighbour as God has loved us. It is a mutual participation in which we find our life caught up and renewed in God; while God's own life is poured out and reproduced in us. Wesley describes this participation in the divine life with the mystical language of 'spiritual respiration'. It is

the continual inspiration of God's Holy Spirit; God's breathing into the soul, and the soul's breathing back what it first receives from God . . . an unceasing presence of God, the loving, pardoning God, manifested to the heart, and perceived by faith; and an unceasing return of love, praise, and prayer, offering up all the thoughts of our hearts, all the words of our tongues, all the works of our hands, all our body, soul, and spirit, to be a holy sacrifice, acceptable unto God in Christ Jesus. (Wesley 1984: i. 434, 442)

The goal of evangelism is that persons may enter into communion with God (conversion), and journey deeper into the divine embrace (discipleship). Drawing upon the tradition of Wesleyan theology, I suggest it is helpful to think of communion with God as having four distinct but mutually conditioning aspects. The first two terms, *fellowship* and *holiness*, roughly correspond to the relationship between justification and sanctification as the two 'grand branches' of salvation. The second two terms, *vision* and *witness*, correspond to the relationship between faith as 'supernatural intercourse' with divine reality, and the 'beauty of holiness' that lights up the world.

FELLOWSHIP

Entering communion begins a life of fellowship with God, by which we receive what God has done *for us* in Christ: the grace of pardoning love, by which we are freed from the guilt of sin, adopted into the family of heaven, and restored to the favour of God. This justifying grace, which effects a 'relative change', is marked by the personal conviction of benefiting from the merits of Christ, an assurance of sins forgiven, and the witness of the Spirit. Communion as fellowship emphasizes the loving union of the soul with God, or the participation of *our life in God*. It is a life of repentance from attachment to worldly ends and sinful desires; a life of resignation in which all we are and do is offered up to God as a living sacrifice; a life of abiding and delighting in God, in whose hands our past, present, and future is held.

This fellowship is marked by ceaseless prayer that catches up every moment into the life of the triune God; joyful prayer that always celebrates the gifts of past, present, and future salvation; and thankful prayer that is stayed on God's providential care over every area of daily life.

HOLINESS

Entering communion begins a life of holiness, by which we receive what God does *in us* by the Holy Spirit: the grace of transforming power in which we are brought to new birth, freed from the bondage of sin, and restored to the image of God. This sanctifying grace, which effects a 'real change', is marked by the personal experience of victory in Christ over the power of sin, the gifts and fruit of the Spirit, and loving obedience to God. The emphasis of communion as holiness is on 'partaking of the divine nature', or the participation of *God's life in us*. It is a life of 'mortification' in which our attachment to worldly ends is cut off and sinful desires are reordered by holy love; a life of hungering and thirsting after the healing power of the indwelling Spirit; a life of being perfected in love towards God and neighbour, which is the renewal of heart and life in the likeness of Christ. Holiness is marked by a purity of heart in which worldly affections are replaced by godly virtues; a singularity of intention that aims at pleasing God in all things; and a constancy of obedience that is devoted to the glory of God in loving service of others.

VISION

Entering communion involves a life-transforming vision of God, as the Spirit brings us into a fellowship of holiness with the Father who is both love and light, through the Son whose love lights up the world. Communion as vision emphasizes the engagement of our 'spiritual senses', by which we are awakened *to perceive God*. It is a life of joyful thanksgiving in which the providence and grace of God are seen in all the vagaries of daily existence. To see God is to be in communion with God, and be renewed in mind, heart, and life. Beholding the glory of God is to be changed from glory to glory. Looking unto Jesus, as the Author and Perfecter of our faith, is to be filled with the mind of Christ and to walk as Christ walked. We become what we see because our lives are filled with that which we fix our

attention upon. Faith is exercised by practising the presence of God, to set God always before us, to cultivate a 'single eye' for the triune God so that our whole body may be full of light, and we might walk in the light. 'Seeing him that is invisible', being sensible of 'the presence of the ever blessed Trinity', and developing an 'uninterrupted sense of the presence of God' in the midst of daily life is the perfecting of our faith.

WITNESS

Entering communion involves a visible witness to God, as we are caught up by the Spirit, into the mission of the Son, sent by the Father, to be the light of the world. Communion as witness emphasizes the uncontainable nature of divine love and light that fills and transforms us in order *to make God visible* in the world. A life that embodies the 'beauty of holiness' is a sign, foretaste, and herald of the kingdom. Communion with God makes us 'transcripts of the Trinity', by which we become living invitations to share in the reign of holy love. The Spirit shines in our hearts so that the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ might be made visible in the transfigured weakness of our mortal flesh. To be the light of the world is to embrace the apostolic vocation of communion with God for the sake of sharing it with those who walk in darkness. To participate in God is to participate in the *missio Dei*. Communion with God is the means and the end of evangelism.

THE EVANGELIZED: MADE FOR COMMUNION WITH GOD

Any theology of evangelism in the Wesleyan mode is likely to build upon certain basic theological convictions about the human condition (Outler 1996: 32–3).

Human beings are created in the divine image, which means having the capacity for personal relationship with God, so that the likeness of God may be reproduced in their lives. The image of God can only subsist in this communion of love, and is marred by sin through the brokenness of that relationship. The ability to know, desire, and choose a life of communion with God is dissipated by the sinful nature and its attachment to false ends. This corruption of the divine image lies at the root

of human unhappiness, and is manifest in a general state of dissatisfaction and restlessness. Wesley follows in the spirit of Augustine, by arguing that we are made for a communion of love with God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him.

This restlessness is actually God's own longing for us before it is our longing for God. The mission of holy love reaches out and embraces a fallen world in the form of prevenient grace. Notwithstanding the damage of sin, there is no one in a state of 'mere nature', for everyone is graced by the life-transforming presence and power of God, whose desire to save is fundamentally irresistible (Collins 2007: 80–1). The effect of prevenient grace is an incipient participation in God that turns every human being into a 'seeker' after that happiness which can only be found in the renewal of the divine image.

Prevenient grace is both love and light. Through the indwelling Spirit, the light of Christ preveniently enlightens everyone who comes into the world, so that they might be drawn to the Father. Our ability to perceive divine reality is rooted in the possession of 'spiritual senses' that represent the capacity to both see and seek God. (For the spiritual senses tradition, see Rahner 1979: 81–134; Von Balthasar 1982: 367 ff.). The sinful nature, however, lies like a veil over them and reduces us to a state of spiritual sleep. Rather than training our natural senses to enjoy creation in so far as it leads us to the Creator, they are occluded by an idolatrous sensuality that attends to worldly pleasure as an end in itself. Nevertheless, the enlightening gift of prevenient grace imparts within all people a rudimentary state of spiritual sensitivity that is at the root of our restlessness.

Wesley notes this spiritual sensitivity is commonly referred to as 'natural conscience'. He complains, however, that this is a vulgar and misleading expression because conscience is not inherent to the sinful nature. Rather, it is a fruit of prevenient grace that carries the promise of communion with God. It is the initiative of holy love that makes it possible to be addressed by God, in Word and Spirit, and led along the way of salvation. It is a preparation for the gospel, and the basis of our confidence in evangelism.

The idea of spiritual 'awakening' is central to a Wesleyan understanding of evangelism. Being confronted with the gospel of holy love is to have the givenness of one's life and perceptions of reality challenged all the way down. Sinful attachments to false ends become exposed for what they are, leading to the conviction of sin. If prevenient grace works on the spiritual senses to open up the perception of divine reality, then convincing grace works to involve us imaginatively in the truth of it, so that we might begin to see ourselves in the light of the gospel and respond to the summons of God's future.

Awakening to the reality of a world that exists in the hands of God is like giving sight to the blind! When the spiritual senses are fully opened through the gift of faith, there is an awakening like a new-born child into a 'new world' where nothing remains the same as it was:

he that before had ears, but heard not, is now made capable of hearing. He hears the voice that raiseth the dead... At the same time, he receives the other spiritual senses, capable of discerning spiritual good and evil. He is enabled to taste, as well as see, how gracious the Lord is. He enters into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, and tastes the powers of the world to come... (Wesley 1984: iv. 172-3)

Only by the vision of faith, in the experience of new birth, do the natural senses fulfil their design: enabling us to understand, desire, and live in a world made for communion with God. As the sinful nature is reordered, and the 'veil of the flesh' is rendered transparent to the reality of God, the eschatological kingdom of heaven is opened up within and around us.

Evangelism is a means of prevenient grace through which God simultaneously stirs up and addresses the spiritual longings of the human soul. It is also a means of convincing grace in so far as the soul is turned to God in a spirit of repentance, and seeks after the transforming power of the divine embrace.

EVANGELISM: JOURNEYING INTO COMMUNION WITH GOD

Although it was George Whitefield who first persuaded Wesley to preach in the fields, there arose a famous distinction between their respective methods of evangelism. Like other so-called 'gospel preachers' (Wesley 1958: xi. 486 ff.), who offered the benefits of free grace without the requirement of costly discipleship, Whitefield's manner of revival preaching aimed at the immediate fruit of evangelical conversion, with little concern for the organization of his converts into religious societies. Whitefield was later to observe, however, that 'Wesley acted wisely. The souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in societies, and thus preserved the fruit of his labour. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand' (cited in Ayling 1979: 201; also Logan 2005: 25-47). Wesleyan theology retains the instinct that 'conversion is never more than the bare threshold of authentic and comprehensive evangelism... The scope of evangelism was never less than the fullness of Christian experience', or holiness in heart and life (Outler 1996: 21).

Wesley insisted that his preachers must offer the unconditional love of Christ along with the summons of Christ to a life of loving obedience. Indeed, he even recommended that an emphasis should be placed on proclaiming the law of Christ, as command and promise, in order to show that evangelical conversion is not an end in itself, but the foundation upon which a life of holiness is to be built. Advising his preachers to begin with a general announcement of God's love and

desire to save, they should keep the gospel 'afar off' to ensure that it was received only by those who were convinced of sin and yearned for holiness. He notes that 'it is only in private converse with a thoroughly convinced sinner', or in the context of disciplined Christian fellowship, 'that we should preach nothing but the gospel' (Wesley 1958: xi. 487).

For Wesley, the most important fruit of evangelistic preaching and proclamation was not conversion as such, but the awakening of sinners to the need of salvation. Those who responded to the promises of the gospel were initiated into a Methodist society; or, if needed, a new society was planted for the purpose. Awakened seekers were incorporated into class meetings as the basic unit of society membership, and the primary means by which they made the journey into communion with God. Research has shown that it could take up to two years of participation in Methodist society before evangelical conversion was experienced (Albin 2003).

A good account of the journey into communion with God can be found in Wesley's *Collection of Hymns* (Wesley 1989). The wide range of hymns and spiritual songs in the *Collection* was sufficient to accompany every step on the way of salvation. Singing through the first few sections inscribed seekers into a prayerful journey of awakening and conversion: from turning towards God, to finally proving the truth of holy love and saving grace in their own experience. The newly awakened seeker is one that senses the promises of God through a veil of sin and unbelief. They are blind but long to *see* God face to face; deaf but long to *hear* the word which raises the dead; hard of heart but long to *feel* the embrace of forgiving love and *taste* the goodness of God (Wesley 1989: hymns 1, 2, 75, 81, 83, 85, 109, 113, 118, 122, 124, 133). The prayer that courses through these hymns is to have the veil of sin taken away, so that one may enter the holy place of communion with God, whose 'mystic name' is Love. This prayer expresses a longing to be 'lost in the ocean of God', to have that 'mystic fellowship of love' shed abroad in the heart, and receive the 'mystic power' of life-transforming union with God that conquers sin and imparts holiness (ibid. hymns 9, 18, 27, 78, 96, 98, 144, 145).

In these hymns, the journey of awakening and entering into communion with God is marked by two attitudes. First, awakening implies a conviction of sin. It is a 'double grace' by which conscience is reproved in order to make way for the gift of repentance; the 'wound' of divine conviction to be healed by the 'balm of pardoning love' (ibid. hymns 84, 89, 105, 106). Second, awakening brings a sense of spiritual struggle in which one labours under the oppression of sin while wrestling for the gift of salvation. On the one hand, a deep sense of 'displacence' and restlessness arises among the *poor in spirit* who seek the kingdom of God. They are held captive to the promises of the gospel as 'prisoners' of faith, hope, and love (ibid. hymns 105, 123, 144, 150). On the other hand, there is a deep appetite for communion with God in the prayerful soul that groans and 'gasps' for the breath of life; that *mourns* and cries for the comforting witness of sins forgiven; that *hungers* and *thirsts* for the righteousness of new birth (ibid. hymns 99, 100, 101, 110, 119, 121,

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134, 137, 147). This language deliberately draws upon the Beatitudes, describing those who seek the happiness that comes from entering the kingdom of God.

The hymns frequently draw upon the biblical imagery of the Emmaus road to describe the journey of awakening and conversion: travelling in the company of One we barely recognize but whose presence and word enchant our souls, instils a restless longing to know more, makes our hearts and homes hospitable to the truth, and finally blesses us with the vision of faith. When the seeker is struggling for vision, God is frequently addressed as the One who sees before being seen, and must not withhold the grace of divine self-revelation (*ibid.* hymns 101, 106, 117, 130, 135). The account of Jacob wrestling the 'angel' at Jabbok becomes a celebrated pattern for this spiritual journey. The importunate spirit of a seeker that wrestles with God for the blessing of salvation turns out to be God's own way of loving us back to himself (*ibid.* hymn 140; also 151, 155, 156).

In the Methodist society, the desire for salvation was evidenced in a willingness to abide by the General Rules. This was not merely a test of sincerity, but an immersion in the means of grace, by which one enters the divine embrace. It was through them that seekers took hold of the One who had conveniently taken hold of them, and 'waited' upon the One who had been waiting for them.

For Wesley, the language of convincing, justifying, and sanctifying grace is a way of describing the manner in which God works within people according to their spiritual need. Apart from field preaching, he did not identify a specialized set of practices associated with evangelizing seekers, and another for saints pursuing holiness. Rather, the same means of grace—prayer, searching the Scriptures, participating in the Lord's Supper, and works of mercy when suffused by these ordinary means—were the common practices by which people journeyed through the whole way of salvation together (Meadows 2001: 223–39).

Joining a Methodist society was more like taking on a new way of life shaped by the means of grace; a scriptural form of life capable of being filled with the loving presence and power of God. In that sense, works of piety and mercy cannot be reduced to spiritual techniques because they are meant to constitute a pattern of whole-life discipleship fit for the kingdom of God. Nor can such discipleship be finally interiorized or privatized because this new life is essentially social in character. In Wesley's words, 'there is no holiness but social holiness'. The life of communion with God is inseparable from a life of communion with neighbour: first in the friendship of those sharing a common spiritual journey; and, second, in the faithful witness of a community whose life together is shaped by the reign of holy love (Wesley 1958: xiv. 437; 1984: i. 533–49).

A Wesleyan approach to evangelism means inviting seekers on a journey into communion with God as they participate in Christian fellowship: clothing themselves in a form of life that encourages spiritual awakening, repentance, and wrestling with God; and engaging in the means of grace through which the experience of entering communion with God can be anticipated.

EVANGELISTS: SHARING OUR COMMUNION WITH GOD

Evangelists are those who lead people into the divine embrace so that they may embark on the journey into communion with God. One way to interpret the complex process of evangelizing the seeker in early Methodism is through the lens of 'spiritual direction'.

Although spiritual direction is typically identified with a relationship between two people, it can refer to any relational practice that helps a person 'hear, see, and respond to God' (Bakke 2000: 18). As a form of spiritual direction, evangelism does not aim at producing decisions, or patterns of experience, or making converts as such. Rather, it is a process of 'seeking God, seeking fuller communion with the Holy Spirit, and seeking to trust God for and in whatever unfolds'. As a theocentric practice, the essence of spiritual direction is a 'deepening love and communion with God' which involves attending to, waiting on, and pursuing a personal relationship with God in the anticipation that grace may abound (ibid. 35). As such, evangelism may be thought of as 'initial spiritual direction' (Johnson 1991); which, from a Wesleyan perspective, aims at introducing seekers to the means of grace by which God may be sought and found.

EVANGELISM AS SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Although God may act sovereignly to awaken sinners, Wesley notes that there is an 'ordinary' pattern of experience in the spiritual journey. The seeker 'is going on his own way, not having God in all his thoughts, when God comes upon him unawares, perhaps by an awakening sermon or conversation'. The awakened seeker then 'begins searching the scriptures' and praying to God with other believers; 'thus he continues in God's way, in hearing, reading, meditating, praying, and partaking of the Lord's supper, till God, in the manner that pleases Him, speaks to his heart' (Wesley 1984: i. 393-4).

A Wesleyan approach to evangelism as initial spiritual direction would have three inseparable dimensions. First, there is the dimension of *proclaiming* the gospel, which broadly characterizes any activity having the form of call and response. Obviously, this is the case for evangelistic preaching, whether in the fields or in the great congregation; but it may also include the instruction of moral and intellectual catechesis, the mutual exhortation of small-group ministry, or sharing testimony in personal conversation (Klaiber 1997: 193-208). What matters is that the gospel of

holy love is communicated as a means of convincing grace; an invitation to participate in the truth of the triune God for oneself.

Second, evangelism as initial spiritual direction involves *equipping* seekers with the means of grace, both works of piety and mercy. It is the role of the evangelist to discern and recommend these means according to the particular need of the seeker. Evangelists must 'work together with God', to 'second the motions of the blessed Spirit', and thereby lead the seeker 'step by step, through all the means which God has ordained; not according to our own will, but just as the providence and the Spirit of God go before and open the way' (Wesley 1984: i. 394–5). Wesley commends a form of spiritual direction, artful in its response to the needs of the seeker, and prudential in the application of particular disciplines for the journey: 'the means into which different men are led, and in which they find the blessing of God, are varied, transposed, and combined together, a thousand different ways... for who knows in which God will meet thee with the grace that bringeth salvation?' (ibid. 395).

Third, evangelism as spiritual direction involves *journeying* alongside the seeker as those sharing the common goal of entering and deepening communion with God. Evangelists do not lead seekers into their own private spiritual experience, but invite them to share in Christian fellowship, as brothers and sisters in the family of God, and fellow participants in the kingdom of heaven. Evangelism is, therefore, an ecclesial activity in so far as the divine embrace does not come apart from the embrace of the body of Christ, gathered and filled by the Spirit.

EVANGELISM AS FAITH SHARING

In early Methodism, evangelism as initial spiritual direction was both a personal and social practice. Faith sharing as a personal practice was essentially a work of mercy; a relational activity in which people were led into communion with God through specific attention to the needs of both body and soul (Wesley 1984: ii. 166). Faith sharing, therefore, involved a holistic approach, where one might say the soul was the centre if not the circumference of the evangelistic concern: 'Having shown that you have a regard for their bodies, you may proceed to inquire concerning their souls. And here you have a large field before you; you have scope for exercising all the talents which God has given you... Ask of God, and he will open your mouth' (ibid. iii. 391).

In an important sense, all faith sharing is personal in so far as each person must enter into communion with God. To have a personal relationship with God, however, is not to have a private, individual relationship with God. The truth of social holiness implies a responsibility towards all those with whom one is joined in

Christian fellowship, as travellers together on the journey (Swanson and Clement 1996; Knight and Powe 2006). Faith sharing as a social practice could be found in the evangelistic matrix of mutual accountability in early Methodist societies and class meetings: watching over one another in love; reproving, encouraging, and exhorting one another to grow in grace and good works; striving with one another to enter and deepen their communion with God.

EVANGELISM AS PRUDENTIAL PRACTICE

The early Methodists also took up and adapted a whole range of practices with evangelistic potential in response to their unfolding missionary context (Hong 2006: 147–62). Much to the chagrin of institutionalized sensibilities, and in defence of Methodist innovations, Wesley claimed that ‘the end of all ecclesiastical order’ was the salvation of souls (Wesley 1958: xii. 80–1). Today, we would say that the church is essentially missionary or evangelistic in nature. In other words, the actual shape of the church’s life must be determined by the goal of salvation that, for Wesley, meant both evangelical conversion and the pursuit of holiness. This did not make him a pragmatist, but it did reveal the exercise of prudential wisdom. He had the ability to discern and respond to divine providence by adapting ancient and modern practices as prudential means of grace for the evangelistic needs of the moment. The development of the class meeting is one such example. Others include field preaching, love feasts, and the covenant service, each of which contributed to the awakening and spiritual direction of seekers on their journey into communion with God.

The quasi-sacramental nature of the love feast was important in building up Christian fellowship, but it was the evangelistic use of personal testimony that Wesley often described in detail. The covenant service, however, marked the need for decision-making. Entering and affirming one’s covenant with God was done personally, but also face-to-face among those who were resolved to help each other follow Christ; whether a seeker wrestling for conversion or a saint pursuing holiness.

CONCLUSION

The Wesleyan paradigm of evangelism proposed here has sought to integrate themes from both the soteriological and missiological approaches through the logic of communion with God. It is rooted in the gospel of holy love. The triune

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God who is love, loves the world into being and, when that communion is broken, graciously loves it back into a reconciling and re-creating communion of love once again. The gospel of salvation is that God has made a way of communion in which we are set free from sin and death, and filled with holy love. The kingdom of God is nothing other than a threefold cord of love that binds each person to God and their neighbour. It is really present in the Christian community, but awaiting fulfilment in the eschatological reunion of heaven and earth.

The goal of evangelism is that humanity may enter this communion with God, which is at once intensely personal and inescapably social. It is a life-transforming intimacy with God taking flesh in a life of loving fellowship with neighbour. The experience of conversion is to have the love of God shed abroad in the heart, overflowing in a life of holy love towards others, and thus returned to God in joyful obedience. Entering the reign of God, and the new life of the kingdom, means taking up a life of discipleship that is nothing less than a participation in God's saving embrace of the world: a missionary movement of grace in which the love of God flows out to every person, overflows from one to another, and returns to God in the communion of a new creation.

Understood this way, I have suggested that the general ethos of evangelism is best described as initial spiritual direction; or leading people into communion with God. Evangelism has the character of initiation in so far as the promise of communion is sought by participation in a community of disciples, and by taking up the life of discipleship as a means of grace. It also has the character of proclamation in so far as the unbeliever is continually urged to seek God through these means, and to anticipate the gift of new life along the way. Evangelism as initial spiritual direction, then, may be understood theologically as a human endeavour in and through which the work of the Spirit is discerned, drawing others to Christ, who is the way to the Father.

Facilitating the journey of awakening and seeking communion with God, however, presents us with particular challenges in contemporary Western culture. In the eighteenth century, the early Methodists addressed a culture on the cusp of modernity and in the midst of Christendom. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we find ourselves in an emerging post-modern and post-Christendom culture in which there is both widespread ignorance of the gospel story, and a general suspicion of any claims to truth and reality. Under these conditions, however, the idea of evangelism as a journey, in the form of spiritual direction and in the context of Christian fellowship, has undergone a revival in recent years.

The Wesleyan emphasis on prevenient grace, spiritual sensitivity, and the initial stages of evangelism as a journey of awakening can provide a much-needed theological resource for the theology of evangelism in what some are calling an increasingly 'spiritual age' (Croft 2005). It would seem that the postmodern condition is accompanied by a new openness to the re-enchantment of everyday

life in the aftermath of modernity. From a Wesleyan perspective, one might conclude that the 'veil' of practical atheism inherent in the modern world-view has worn thin in places, making it possible for dormant spiritual senses to penetrate the tightly woven fabric of techno-scientific culture and imagine what lies within and beyond. This is not merely a renewed fascination with the supernatural, but a response to the missionary initiative of holy love in the hearts of those who have been made for communion with God.

Postmodern culture, however, has no resources in itself to direct the spiritual seeker, except perhaps for offering fragments of ancient religious traditions as useful fictions for individual consumption. At the end of modernity, the challenge of evangelism is how to connect the gospel story—as one story among many—with the reality of God as its Author and End. The Wesleyan tradition presses us to consider how the church's life of communion with God can become a 'hermeneutic of the gospel' that reunites the truth we *proclaim* about God with the *reality* of God's life-transforming presence and power. Evangelism, therefore, presupposes a community of 'real' or 'authentic' Christians whose life together makes visible the truth of its communion with God.

It may seem ironic to suggest that early Methodism can inspire a form of evangelism suited to life after Christendom. Nevertheless, Wesley would probably have sided with the Anabaptists rather than the 'magisterial' Reformers in the debate about Constantine. For him, the 'Christendom synthesis' marked the fall of the church and a fatal compromise of its vocation as a holy witness in the world. It is frequently argued that Christendom has resulted in the interiorization, privatization, and marginalization of the church's life and faith. Fellowship with God is reduced to an individualistic 'personal relationship'; holiness is reduced to a therapeutic sense of emotional well-being; the vision of God is reduced to a post-mortem state of heavenly bliss; and witness is reduced to various forms of chaplaincy, seconded by the world to help people get through in the meantime.

Evangelism in a post-Christendom culture will emphasize the calling of the church to be a faithful, visible, and costly witness in a world of unbelief. It must embody the social and material reality of the gospel so that the world may come into contact with the truth, beauty, and goodness of God (Outler 1996: 22 ff., 57 ff.; Stone 2007: 277 ff.). Wesley insisted that the biggest stumbling block to the spread of the gospel was the lives of Christians (Wesley 1984: ii. 495), but he was also wary of striving for an outward form of life—either personal or social—apart from the inward power of renewed hearts. The church must not exchange Christendom for fresh expressions of nominal Christianity.

The challenge facing Methodist evangelism in a postmodern and post-Christendom age lies in cultivating an authentic embodiment of the holy love that arises from a genuine communion with God. The need is for communities of disciples whose *fellowship* with God is embodied in hospitable, reconciling, and peaceable relationships; whose *holiness* is embodied in a disciplined life of piety and

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mercy; whose *vision* of God is embodied by an imaginative participation in the *missio Dei*; and whose *witness* is embodied by a fellowship of holiness that makes the eschatological kingdom both visible and tangible as a living invitation to the world. From a Wesleyan perspective, this is why evangelism and renewal must always coexist. The kind of Christian life that awakens seekers and facilitates the journey of evangelism arises only among those who participate in the real presence and power of the triune God.

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