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THEOLOGY AND EVANGELISM
IN THE
WESLEYAN HERITAGE

Edited by

James C. Logan



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of God, or in particular the people of God gathered, is the *ekklesia*. The “edifice complex” of the Western Church, including Western Methodists, has meant that the task of evangelism becomes difficult if not impossible to implement. With an ever-shifting population, we end up having people where there are few church buildings, and church buildings where there are few people.

Because of being so tied to our buildings we are not flexible enough to be truly itinerant and move with the shifts in population. On the global scale of things, the fact that we Western Methodists often put seventy percent or more of our budget into the maintenance of our own buildings makes it very difficult to adequately fund many worthy projects ranging from the relief efforts of UMCOR, to the Africa University, to traditional missionary work.

Those of us who are Western Methodists must also ask ourselves, is Christ calling us to a Gospel of conspicuous consumption or of self-sacrificial giving? Certainly Wesley called his first followers to live a *simple* life style and so free up one’s resources to help others both materially and spiritually. This sort of lifestyle evangelism, especially in an America where materialism is seen as a virtue not a vice, is of critical importance as we look toward the new century.

Though Wesley’s thoughts on evangelism need to be carefully and critically sifted so we may see whether and in what way they may apply in our situation, it must be said in closing that it appears that it is not so much the case that Wesley’s ideas have been tried and found wanting, as that we have ceased to try and apply them in any consistent way. Were we to do so, we too might rediscover what it means to claim the world as our parish.

CHAPTER 4

Proclaiming the Gospel of Grace

Kenneth L. Carder

Introduction

A hint of hesitation marked my initial approach to the task of addressing the issue of Wesley’s evangelical preaching. My first, unspoken response, was a question: What does one who has always been involved in the ministry of the local church have to say to respected Wesleyan scholars and renowned connectional church leaders? Upon reflection, however, I concluded that my hesitation exposes a dangerous chasm which this volume of essays can help to bridge—a chasm between the church and the academy, and the church and connectional agencies. Unless the academy, the local church, and connectional structures converge in the proclamation of the gospel of grace, the whole evangelistic enterprise is likely to fail from either an irrelevant intellectualism, or a pietism without substance, or an institutionalism without either intellect or piety. So, I have concluded that pastors are a necessary part of this dialogue.

To discuss theology and evangelism in the Wesleyan tradition without a focus on the proclamation of grace in the context of the local community of faith would be a contradiction. Wesley’s own grace-warmed heart, his interest in “practical divinity,” his preoccupation with “holiness of heart and life,” and his conviction that God had raised up the Methodists as means of reforming the nation and the church prevent evangelism and theology from being mere topics of intellectual debate, or programmatic schemes for institutional growth, or homiletical styles polished to appeal to the masses. Evangelism and theology in the Wesleyan tradition have to do with presenting the gospel of God’s grace in

all of its redeeming and transforming dimensions. Wesley believed God wills that all should be *saved, redeemed* and *shaped* by God's grace revealed and mediated in Christ. Whether they are saved depends partly upon proclamation, response, and nurture in community. Consideration of the proclamation of the gospel of grace is, therefore, a necessary component of any serious discussion of evangelism and theology in the Wesleyan spirit.

Wesley as Proclaimer

John Wesley's enormously productive ministry as evangelist, theologian, missionary, prophet, writer, teacher, administrator, and witness/friend to the marginalized all evolve around his central identity and role as a *preacher*. In his Journal, July 28, 1757, he wrote: "About noon I preached at Woodseats, in the evening at Sheffield. I do indeed live by preaching."¹ Even before he left England for America he wrote in a letter to John Burton, "My tongue is a devoted thing."² He considered *preaching* the principal means by which converts are gathered into Christian fellowship and nurtured in faith and holy living. Wesley considered that the primary business of apostles, evangelists, and bishops in the early church was to "preach the Word of God."³ For Wesley, preaching served two basic purposes: to convert and to nurture. It would appear that his oral sermons, which were extemporaneously delivered without notes, a technique he learned at Oxford and practiced as early as November 10, 1734,⁴ were for the purpose of proclamation and invitation. His written sermons, according to Albert Outler, were for the purpose of teaching and nurture.

The primary source for understanding Wesley's theology is his preaching. His *Sermons on Several Occasions* remain among the standards for United Methodist doctrinal grounding and theological exploration, and they were important tools by which early Methodists were nurtured in the faith. Wesley described "the best method of preaching" as: (1) to invite, (2) to convince, (3) to offer Christ, (4) to build up, and "to do this (in some measure) in every sermon."⁵ Since Wesley preached to people on the move, it was important that every sermon proclaim the essential gospel. Therefore, Wesley's sermons usually contain a synopsis of the essence of his gospel message.

He considered the particular "Methodist way of preaching Christ" as the reason for the growth of the Methodist movement. The essential elements of "the Methodist way of preaching" included a "plain style" as contrasted with a classical style which depended upon image, intricate, philosophical reasoning, and evidences of classical education; and it included an emphasis on salvation by faith, preceded by repentance, and followed by holiness.⁷ Wesley considered the matter of *style* in preaching as a moral issue. He wrote, "I dare no more write in a 'fine style' than wear a fine coat. . . ."⁸ Although a learned man, he was willing to forego any outward show of learning so as not to detract his readers or listeners. He wrote in "The Preface" to the first volume of *Sermons on Several Occasions*:

I design plain truth for plain people. Therefore of set purpose I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations, from all perplexed and intricate reasoning, and as far as possible from even the show of learning, unless in sometimes citing the original Scriptures. I labor to avoid all words which are not easy to be understood, all which are not used in common life; and in particular those kinds of technical terms that so frequently occur in bodies of divinity, those modes of speaking which men of reading are intimately acquainted with, but which to common people are an unknown tongue.⁹

Style for Wesley was no substitute for substance, and one could speculate as to Wesley's commentary on the contemporary emphasis on images and narratives designed to communicate to a generation accustomed to dramatic television images and clever sound bites. One could be sure that Wesley would be unimpressed with clever sermons without theological depth designed to entertain the masses.

The effectiveness of Wesley's preaching, however, lay not in the sermon's literary style or the eloquence of the preacher. Historians agree that he was not the most exciting or eloquent preacher of his time. Wesley's own explanation for the lasting influence of his preaching was that he preached "Christ in all his offices," plus the Methodist system of pastoral care and Christian nurture which formed the people into a community that provided support and accountability.¹⁰ Preaching was not a "hit and run" operation; instead, it was re-enforced by the societies and class

meetings in which converts were taught the faith, nurtured, admonished, and held accountable.

The Theme of Wesley's Preaching

Albert Outler summarized Wesley's effectiveness as a preacher in these words: "More than anything else it was Wesley's message that struck home: people not excited by his eloquence were moved by his vision of the Christian life and his gospel of universal redemption."¹¹ The heart of Wesley's preaching was a lively sense of God's grace at work at every level of creation and history in individuals and communities. Central to his own life and preaching was "the order of salvation," how individuals and communities experience the fullness of God's prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. Holiness of heart and life was what he desired for himself and all people, and his preaching reflected such a passion formed and driven by the grace of God. His proclamation included an emphasis on law (Christ's commands) and grace (Christ's promises). He confronted people with God's judgment as a call to turn toward God's justifying and sanctifying grace.

Wesley's preaching elicited the most positive response among the poor and marginalized. His message of universal redemption and sufficient grace in all and irresistible grace in none opened the door for men and women who had been marginalized by eighteenth-century English society. The poor were excluded from the political process and from many of the protections of common law. Victims of social and economic dislocation were relegated to the outskirts of the great cities and the mining communities in Cornwall and the North. Exploitation and deprivation stripped them of dignity and self-respect and many escaped in drunkenness and sensuality. Wesley went among this new underclass, warned of the judgment of God and proclaimed a gospel of justifying grace which bears fruit in holy living. He gathered those who responded to the gospel of grace into new groups in which each person found acceptance, a new sense of dignity, and a community which held them accountable.

Wesley's preaching was heard by the poor partly because of his relationship with them. He preached equality among God's children, and his love for the poor provided fertile soil in which

preaching the gospel of grace took root and flourished. Whereas Whitefield and most of the other evangelists found their constituencies largely among the rising middle class and lesser nobility, Wesley planted the Methodist societies in pockets of poverty and nourished them with the gospel of justifying and sanctifying grace. In a letter to Dorothy Furlly, dated September 25, 1757, he declared: "I love the poor; in many of them I find pure, genuine grace, unmingled with paint, folly, and affectation."¹² To Ann Foard he wrote in 1769: "I bear the rich and love the poor; there, I spend almost all my time with them."¹³ The poor, therefore, were not only beneficiaries of Wesley's proclamation of grace, they were channels of that grace to Wesley. The poor and marginalized helped to shape the central theme of his preaching: God's prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace which transforms individuals and societies.

Challenges to Wesley's Proclamation of Grace

The Methodist way of preaching grace, however, was in jeopardy in Wesley's own lifetime. Proclaiming the gospel confronted several threats, which continue among the twentieth-century heirs of the Wesleyan revival. One of the threats originated with the so-called gospel preachers. These "gospel preachers," Wesley believed, emphasized the promises of Christ without the commands. They preached grace apart from law, justification without sanctification:

The gospel preachers, so-called, corrupt their hearers; they vitiate their taste, so that they cannot relish sound doctrine; and spoil their appetite, so that they cannot turn it into nourishment; they, as it were, feed them with sweetmeats, till the genuine wine of the kingdom seems quite insipid to them. They give them cordial upon cordial, which make them all life and spirit for the present; but, meantime, their appetite is destroyed, so that they can neither retain nor digest the pure milk of the word.¹⁴

Wesley described one such preacher, James Wheatley, as one "who never was clear, perhaps not sound, in the faith. According to his understanding was his preaching, an unconnected rhapsody of unmeaning words, like Sir John Suckling's 'Verses, smooth and soft as cream / In which was neither depth nor stream.'"¹⁵ Wesley considered such preaching of grace without law deadly even

though it received popular following. Such popular preaching, according to Wesley, harms the preachers by fostering personal exaltation and self-righteousness, and it harms the hearers by substituting superficial religiosity for sound doctrine and holy living and by creating temporary excitement without sustaining power.

In a "Letter on Preaching Christ," dated December 20, 1751, Wesley gives his most concise and provocative challenge regarding grace. He makes a rather strained and potentially misleading distinction between "preaching the gospel" and "preaching the law." He defines preaching the gospel as "preaching the love of God to sinners, preaching the life, death, resurrection, and intercession of Christ, with all the blessings which, in consequence thereof, are freely given to true believers."¹⁶ Preaching the law, on the other hand, is "explaining and enforcing the commands of Christ, briefly comprised in the Sermon on the Mount."¹⁷ Wesley contends that the right method of preaching is this:

At our first beginning to preach at any place, after a general declaration of the love of God to sinners, and his willingness that they should be saved, to preach the law, in the strongest, the closest, the most searching manner possible; only intermixing the gospel here and there, and showing it, as it were, afar off. After more and more persons are convinced of sin, we may mix more and more of the gospel, in order to 'beget faith', to rein into spiritual life those whom the law hath slain; but this is not to be done too hastily either.¹⁸

Preaching the law, according to Wesley, avoids "healing the wounds of the people lightly." Although he affirms that "the law is not to be preached as the cause of their acceptance with God but the fruit of such acceptance," it appears, on the surface at least, that the law is the prelude to grace. However, Wesley's concept of "covered commands" avoid the trap of making the law as the prelude to justification. For Wesley, all commands of Christ are "covered" by God's grace which empowers us to live the commands. The commands, then, are part of the promises and privileges of grace, rather than preconditions for grace. Furthermore, preaching the law avoids limiting grace to justification and a superficial pious narcissism which substitutes subjectivity for holiness of heart and life. As he expressed in "Thoughts Concerning Gospel Ministers": Who is a gospel preacher? "Not

every one that preaches justification by faith; he that goes no farther than this, that does not insist upon sanctification also, upon all the fruits of faith; upon universal holiness, does not declare the whole counsel of God, and consequently is not a Gospel minister."¹⁹

Wesley further avoided legalism in his emphasis on preaching the law by stating explicitly that the preacher is "to declare, explain, and enforce every command of God; but, meantime, to declare, in every sermon, (and the more explicitly the better), that the first and great command to a Christian is, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ'; that Christ is all in all, our 'wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption'; that all life, love, strength, are from him alone, and all freely given to us through faith."²⁰ The *commands of Christ*, therefore, are *gifts of a relationship with Christ*.

The "gospel preachers" of Wesley's day preached a love of God which failed to include the judgment of God. Theirs was a "cheap grace" which made no demands and which ignored God's wrath. In other words, grace without law, promises without commands, removed the dimension of accountability to God and the broader community. Membership in the societies, however, was open to all, "who desire to flee from the wrath to come." Wesley knew that without a clear sense of accountability to God, preaching grace loses some of its transforming power over persons and structures. Some of Wesley's assistants, and possibly Wesley himself, at times, went to an extreme in preaching God's wrath at the expense of God's love. Wesley warned that leaning to such an extreme results in the loss of the joy of faith. He contended that preaching the "terrors of the Lord to those who know they are accepted" is folly; "for love is to them the strongest of all motives."²¹

Another hindrance or obstacle to the preaching of grace faced by Wesley and the eighteenth-century Methodists is identified in Wesley's sermon dated July 2, 1789, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity." The Christian gospel has within it the seeds of ineffectiveness. Christian faith leads to diligence and frugality, which in turn often result in wealth and worldly success. Wealth and success then lead to the presumption of self-sufficiency and independence. In other words, affluence and success made the early Methodists less responsive to the gospel of grace. It is at this point, where Wesley bemoans the growing unresponsiveness of

the long-time Methodists of his era, that contemporary preachers of grace face their most formidable challenge, at least in the American church.

Obstacles to Preaching Grace in the Contemporary World

Contemporary American preachers of grace confront a secular culture in which both law and grace have been severed from theological roots. Traditional theological concepts of salvation, works righteousness, the judgment of God, and justifying and sanctifying grace have been replaced with their secular counterparts. Self-esteem, self-fulfillment, self-actualization, peace of mind, and the gospel of prosperity are contemporary substitutes for salvation. Success, achievement, winning are secular versions of works righteousness. Salaries, titles and degrees, scores on standardized academic and psychological tests, prestigious positions and political power are the outward and visible signs of personal worth and well-being. Failure is feared more than sin; shame and embarrassment for not measuring up are more painful than guilt. And a just God who holds people accountable is relegated to the superstitious past or to the unsophisticated religious fringes.

Grace when preached in contemporary American culture tends to be little more than narcissistic self-indulgence or a form of superficial self-acceptance based on the illusion of "I'm okay and you're okay." Hope, in this secular version of salvation through success and self-fulfillment, emerges from a blind optimism based on thinking positive thoughts and an escapist lifestyle, rather than being considered a gift from God who shares the world's tragedy and transforms crosses and tombs into doorways into a new heaven and a new earth. In our culture, happiness results from having, and Wesley's notion that happiness and holiness are inextricably linked is foreign to dominant modern Methodist thinking.

The institutional church has been captured by the secular value of success, achievement, power, and prominence. The current survival mentality and preoccupation with statistical growth are evidences that The United Methodist Church defines itself more as a social institution competing for its share of the religious market than as a community of grace devoted to personal and

social transformation through living out God's graceful vision for the world. Preaching is judged more by its ability to attract the masses than by its theological integrity. The sociology of church growth has replaced the theology of personal and social transformation. It is indeed a sad commentary on the state of contemporary preaching that United Methodist preachers are more familiar with pop sociology than with the theology of John Wesley. This preoccupation with institutional power and statistics contributes to preaching that is heavy on institutional promotion and narcissistic self-help and light on individual and communal salvation.

Another obstacle to proclaiming grace in contemporary American culture is the presence of a political, economic, and technological triumphalism. Recent events in eastern Europe and what was the Soviet Union, coupled with military conquests in Grenada, Panama, and the Persian Gulf have reinforced an idolatrous notion that salvation results from having a superior political and economic system supported by technological sophistication and military might. This triumphalism was expressed by a president of the United States in a State of the Union address. He said, "By the grace of God we won the cold war." Then he proceeded to immediately extol the power of the American military. Is the "grace of God" to be casually reduced to rhetoric by which we sell our political agendas? A culture that worships regularly at the altars of political and economic ideologies and military conquest has difficulty hearing a message about the transforming and renewing power of unconditional, suffering love freely given to all people. People who everywhere are valued for what they know, what they produce, how they look, and where they fit in have enormous difficulty hearing, much less believing, a message about self-worth rooted in being claimed and empowered by the holy and loving God. When the religious airwaves are filled with slick messages of hope based on "be happy attitudes" and success through positive thinking, it is near impossible to hear a word of hope from a cross or a graveyard. But the difficulty of the task of preaching grace makes it all the more important. In this culture, the word of grace is a prophetic word for it challenges the prevailing values. In the proclamation of a gospel of grace the evangelist and social activist join voices.

Preaching Grace Today

How is the gospel of grace to be preached today? Here we can learn from Wesley without imitating him. First, grace in its full dimensions must be the central underlying theme of our preaching. A recovery of our theological and doctrinal moorings is necessary. Wesley was asked "Why is it that people under our care are no better?" He responded that the chief reason is "because we are not more knowing and more holy."²² He proceeded to admonish the preachers to study at least five hours every day and devote time every day to prayer and reflection. The current trend among pastors and congregations is to devote prime time to institutional maintenance and administrative tasks, and the hierarchy of the church tends to reinforce and support such use of time. In my thirty years as a pastor I have had one district superintendent and one bishop to admonish me to study. I have yet to have any connec-tional leader seek to hold me accountable for the theological integrity of my preaching. Wesley held his preachers accountable for the understanding of and proclamation of the gospel of grace. He was not timid about challenging a preacher who substituted appealing platitudes for sound doctrine. If grace is to be preached, *preachers must know* from personal experience and intellectual discernment *what grace is*, be supported in their preaching of it, and be expected to exhibit theological integrity. If the gospel of grace is to be proclaimed, it will be done by preachers who take such a gospel with utmost seriousness. And, local congregations must be vital centers of doctrinal clarification and theological exploration.

Second, proclaiming prevalent, justifying, and sanctifying grace requires that the preacher be aware of the secular form in which the need for that gospel is couched. The consequences of salvation sought through success and achievement and triumphalism are the same as those resulting from works righteousness—alienation, stress, meaninglessness, shame—which masks guilt, self-justifying behavior, and the marginalizing of persons who fail to measure up. Middle-class, upwardly mobile, success-oriented adults and youth who comprise our church membership are a fertile evangelistic field for the message heard and experienced of an identity rooted in God's gracious gift and a life devoted to living out that identity.

Third, the proclamation of the gospel of grace must be supported and lived out in the structures of the congregation's life. Recovery of small groups in which unconditional love and accountability are experienced is necessary in order for preaching to have sustaining power. Covenant disciple groups, Bible study groups, and support groups are all hopeful signs. The inclusiveness of a church's fellowship provides a climate for experiencing the depth and breadth of grace as barriers crumble and diversity becomes a means of nurture and a prophetic witness to a fragmented world. Church growth based on homogeneity must, therefore, be resisted as a deterrent to the proclamation of the gospel of grace.

Fourth, a relationship with the poor and marginalized is necessary if we are to preach effectively the gospel of grace. The poor may be the means to our salvation. Wesley's own relationship with the poor helped to shape his preaching. The poor and marginalized, which is one of the fastest growing segments of the world's population, may be our best hope for the recovery of the message of grace.

The church that I served for several years before my election to the episcopacy is being changed by a small group who gather on Thursday evenings for worship. Most of the thirty to forty who attend live in the streets and local shelters. They come to the soup kitchen each week and are greeted by a staff of volunteers and one of the clergy. Preaching to these persons represents a challenge to those of us who every Sunday preach to middle-class, well-educated, predominantly professional persons who comprise Church Street's membership. But those services are among the most grace-filled which I have ever experienced. Permit me to share a couple of incidents that have altered my own experience of grace and the preaching of it.

One cold winter evening a man came to the service barefoot. Immediately we all noticed. The more affluent among us began to scurry around to find shoes for him. We couldn't find any in the church. The stores were closed, so we couldn't go out and purchase them. Another man who lives in low-income housing and who joined Church Street, went to the shoeless man and said, "Take my shoes. I have another pair at home." He did spontaneously what those of us who have several pairs of shoes never thought of doing. Why? He knew what it was to be shoeless.

He identified with the one with no shoes. The sermon that night was infused with new power because grace created a climate of divine presence and power.

During the Thursday service each week, there is a period of community prayers. On a typical evening these were among the petitions: Royetta, whose children are in custody of the Department of Human Services because she doesn't have the mental or financial means to care for them, prayed: "O God, help my children's new parents to love them better than I can." Eleanor, who staggers because of brain damage, said: "Lord, make people stop treating me like I'm drunk when I stagger." Fred pleaded: "O Lord, help me get through another day without drinking." A professor at the university then prayed: "O God, thank you for your grace which makes us all your children." The sermon that night was from 1 John 3:1-2, "Beloved we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be but when he appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is." The prayers preached grace before the preacher said anything.

Recovery of an ongoing, personal relationship with the poor may be the best means of proclaiming the gospel of grace in this age. Wesley believed the biblical theme that God is among the poor. It is the poor who strip us of our idols of self-sufficiency, achievement, and success and put us in touch with grace.

Further, proclaiming grace in a generation of secular works righteousness involves identifying idols more than preaching the law. Wesley is correct in insisting that grace and law, promises and commands, are part of the same fabric. However, an emphasis on the commands of God in this secular age will only be dismissed as moralism or treated as another means of being successful; or it will intensify shame and fear more than motivate authentic repentance. A more effective homiletical approach is the identification of the success orientation as the counterpart of preaching the law, providing insight as to how grace heals our whole narcissistic orientation, and sharing God's vision of life and the world transformed by grace. Preaching which avoids false dichotomies between grace and law, faith and works, and which maintains "promises" and "commands" as indivisible manifestation of Divine Grace will counter the "cheap grace" and "the gospel of prosperity" heard too frequently in our culture.

Finally, proclaiming the gospel of grace requires that

preaching focus on the transforming reality of grace in the lives of persons and societies rather than reducing preaching to a means of institutional promotion. Growth based on preaching "cheap grace" or in the words of Wesley "Promises without commands," or growth based on clever and entertaining sermons will be at best shortlived and at worst demonic. Wesley compared the rapid growth and equally rapid decline of the societies led by the "gospel preachers" with the societies in Yorkshire under the care of John Nelson:

From the beginning they [those under Nelson's care] had been taught both the law and the gospel "God loves you; therefore, love and obey him. Christ died for you; therefore, rise in the image of God. Christ liveth evermore; therefore, live to God, till you live with him in glory. This is the scriptural way, the Methodist way, the true way. God grant that we may never be turned away therefrom, to the right hand or to the left."²³

Conclusion

Preaching the gospel of grace has always been a primary and formidable task of the church. One of the earliest proclaimers of grace wrote: "God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21, NRSV). Both the method and the message have always seemed foolish by the prevailing culture. Proclaiming the gospel in the latter decade of the twentieth century faces no less formidable obstacles than were confronted by Paul in the first century or Wesley in the eighteenth century.

Preaching grace effectively today calls for a renewed emphasis on theological depth, integrity, and accountability on the part of church leadership. If grace is to be proclaimed in its personal and prophetic power, the emphasis at all levels of church leadership must shift from the survival mentality and success orientation of institutionalism to faithfulness rooted in grateful response to God whose grace seeks the transformation of the world.

Bringing together diverse representatives from the church's academy, bureaucracy, and local congregations to struggle with theology and evangelism in the Wesleyan tradition has the potential of contributing to the renewal of Methodism's mission of

reforming the nations, beginning with the church, and spreading scriptural holiness throughout the lands. God grant that it will be so!

Introduction

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CHAPTER 6

Evangelism and Religious Pluralism in the Wesleyan Heritage

G. Howard Mellor

Introduction

A discussion about the Christian faith in a plural world should begin by recognizing that our first response needs to be one of repentance. There has been too much evidence in ecclesiastical history that the laudable ideal of winning the world for Christ has also been tainted by the structure of power, the desire for control, and the longing for wealth.¹ Repentance is appropriate because (to take an example from my own context) when people from the new Commonwealth came to Britain, they were not welcomed by many English people. We should be ashamed to note that Asians have very little experience with British people as a people of prayer and devotion. Indeed, the Christian Church is seen by them as being corrupt and Western culture as decadent.

The focus of this essay is evangelism, considered in the context of religious pluralism and from the perspective of the Wesleyan heritage. The interface between evangelism and religious pluralism brings into sharp focus the issues in each discipline. First let us note some of the issues that affect or irritate that interface.

The Cultural Setting

The speed of travel and its widening availability to people in the West, as well as the enforced movements of people through war, hunger, and disease, has meant the presence of people of other faiths in every culture. It is very difficult to say today, as did

Wesley, that "the Mahometans . . . are in truth a disgrace to human nature and a plague to all that are under the iron yoke."² In all of our major cities are people of other faiths who are quite clearly good citizens, decent human beings, whose emphasis and love of family life, hard work, and morally respectable lives are often a testimony to those who see themselves as belonging to a Christian country. It is this very plurality of culture which has assisted the rise of the ideology of pluralism. "If what matters about religious beliefs is not the factual truth of what they affirm, but the sincerity with which they are held . . . then there are certainly no grounds for thinking that Christians have any right—much less any duty—to seek conversion of these neighbours to the Christian faith."³

Lesslie Newbigin points out that not only do we live in a plural culture, but it is "pluralist in the sense that this plurality is celebrated as something to be approved and cherished." "Pluralism is conceived to be a proper characteristic of the secular society, a society in which there is no officially approved pattern of belief or conduct."⁴

A Shift In Philosophy

The issues of truth and its nature have been a matter of debate for centuries, but the influence of philosophical thinking from the eighteenth-century philosophical revolution initiated by Descartes and Locke is now all-pervasive in our culture, not least in the written and visual media. The dominant philosophical trends of the Enlightenment, in turn, have led to secularism and modernity. Lesslie Newbigin has carefully charted the roots of pluralism, seeing their genesis in the work of Descartes and his cry, *cogito, ergo sum*, which in turn gave rise to a distinction between thinking reality (*res cogitans*) and reality extended in space (*res extensa*). Newbigin concludes that in our culture today "skepticism about whether our senses give us access to reality is the background of major philosophical thinking since Descartes."⁵ Therefore we are left to ponder whether our Christian faith is an "experiment in living," one of the available "worldviews," or a "coherent and emotionally satisfying picture of reality."⁶

A Divergence in Theology

Despite the confident call by John R. Mott, as Chairman of the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, that Christians should unite "For the evangelization of the whole of this multi-tude," the stage was already set for the withdrawal by evangelicals from the newly-born ecumenical movement.⁷ This polarization has remained through most of this century and despite there being accommodating ripples between the World Council of Churches' Consultation on Evangelism at San Antonio, and Lausanne II in Manila, one could not confidently predict that the two movements would jointly sponsor a conference on world mission.⁸

It has become commonplace to categorize different theological approaches to religious pluralism as exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist. We shall use this typology of views here, even though they are somewhat blunt instruments.

Exclusivism has historically been the dominant position of the Christian church. It maintains that the central claims of Christianity are true, and where these claims are in conflict with those of other religions or philosophies, the latter are to be rejected as false. This would be represented by the Lausanne Covenant, which in paragraph 3 states: "We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies . . . to proclaim Jesus as 'The Savior of the World' is not to affirm that all people are either automatically or ultimately saved, still less to affirm that all religions offer salvation in Christ, rather it is to proclaim God's love to the world of sinners and to invite everyone to respond to him as Savior and Lord in the wholehearted personal commitment of repentance and faith. Jesus Christ has been exalted above every name: we long for the day when every knee shall bow to him and every tongue shall confess him Lord."⁹ More recently Harold Netland in *Dissonant Voices* has given a well reasoned defense of the exclusivist position.¹⁰

Inclusivism, like exclusivism, maintains that the central claims of the Christian faith are true, but adopts a much more positive view of religious pluralism than does exclusivism. The revelation of God in Christ is held to be in some sense unique, normative,

and definitive, but it is claimed that God is also actively revealing and providing salvation through other religious traditions as well. There is a tension in holding these truths together, which is reflected in the writing of Pietro Rossano, Secretary of the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians: "As for the salvific function of these religions, namely, whether they are or are not paths to salvation, there is no doubt that 'grace and truth' are given through Jesus Christ and by his spirit (cf. John 1:17). Everything would lead one to conclude, however, that the gifts of 'grace and truth' do reach or may reach the hearts of men and women through the visible, experiential, signs of the various religions."¹¹ Karl Rahner, whose influence has been enormous in this century, is best known in missiology for his writings about the "anonymous Christian." By this he argues that a person could be regarded as anonymously or implicitly Christian and thus benefit from salvation, even without having any contact with the preaching of the gospel or the visible church. The implication would be that any person of faith, any faith, would be included as an "anonymous Christian."¹²

Pluralism rejects entirely the premise that God's revelation in Jesus Christ is in any sense unique or definitive and therefore parts company both with exclusivism and with inclusivism. John Hick and Paul Knitter, in publishing *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, intended it to serve as a kind of "crossing of a theological Rubicon." They hoped for a rejection of both exclusivism and inclusivism and in the essays they "were exploring the possibilities for the pluralist position—and moving away from insistence on the superiority or finality of Christ and Christianity toward a recognition of the independent validity of other ways."¹³ Paul Knitter explains "that Jesus is unique, but with a uniqueness defined by its ability to relate to—that is, to include and be included by—other unique religious figures." He views Jesus "not as exclusive or even as normative, but as theocentric, as a universally relevant manifestation (sacrament, incarnation) of divine revelation and salvation."¹⁴ The devotional statements of certain faith he views as the "love language" of devoted people.

John Hick considers that the variety of religions is not only inevitable but desirable because of the variety of human types and needs.¹⁵ He is very skeptical that we have any reliable knowledge of the historical Jesus as being truly God. Jesus is the man infused

with God who dramatically impacted those around him.¹⁶ While it is quite proper for Christians to be devoted to Jesus, he wants recognition to be given also to the object of devotion for others.¹⁷

The Privatization of Religion

Newbigin has delineated as one of the chief characteristics of the Enlightenment the sharp distinction between the public realm of facts and the private world of values, opinions, and preferences. It is assumed that truth belongs to the public realm of facts, particularly the physical sciences, and not to the private world of relative issues such as values and preferences. In the private world, Newbigin asserts, questions of truth and falsity are not relevant. The implications of this to our discussions are spelled out by Newbigin: "In contrast to traditional societies, modern western society leaves its members free, within very wide limits, to adopt and hold their own views about what is good and desirable, about what kind of life is to be admired, about what code of ethics should govern one's private life."¹⁸ As a natural extension of this, it is assumed by a large number of Christians that the principle of pluralism applies here also. The rival truth-claims of the different religions are not felt to call for argument and resolution; they are simply part of the mosaic—or perhaps one should say, kaleidoscope, of different values that make up the whole pattern.

Religion, as a result, has become not a matter of truth, but a matter of taste. The primary questions seem to have less to do with Christian faith and more to do with buying a suit, for the primary question is no longer "Is it true?" but "Does it fit?" Indeed, it follows that religious pluralism is not only welcome but essential, for what fits one person does not necessarily meet the need of another.

The Plurality of the New Age

Religious pluralism is set to increase at an exponential rate, due to what is popularly called the New Age Movement. The New Age is definitely not a religion, nor is it a belief system in the traditional sense, and it is certainly not a cult. There is nothing to join, it does not have a headquarters, and New Age people might be doing literally anything. Its gurus are much more likely to be

from the theater than from theology, e.g. Shirley MacLaine, the colorful high priestess of New Age, who has popularized the practice of "channeling" (or spiritualism) in several best sellers. The 1960s "Age of Aquarius" was always regarded as the preserve of the long-haired, open-sandalled, wholefood-eating, joss-sticks-burning curiosities who read the works of Eastern mystics. Now New Age is big business. It is fashionable to be green and spiritual, which all evangelists and apologists should note. For to point someone to Christ, is in fact to point to the one in whom all things have their being (John 1:3, Col. 1:15-17), whether created or invisible.

The New Age has a bewildering variety of options. Color analysts, transpersonal psychologists, and New Age musicians abound; university courses in consciousness studies compete for customers with Eastern gurus and Gnostic priests. They claim to offer personal transformation and self-discovery through therapies that range from healing with crystals, past life recall, and advice from entities in outer space or some other spirit world. That most are concerned about the future of our polluted planet is revealed by their membership in environmental pressure-groups, pilgrimages in remote places, or attunement to Gaia, the earth goddess. The Californian New Age Directory, *Common Ground*, states: "There are undoubtedly as many paths to personal transformation as there are people . . . whether a resource is useful to your personal transformation is a matter of attunement—it is a matter of resonance between what the resource is and who you are at this moment in time."¹⁹

Clearly the New Age, without creeds and demands, is finding a ready response to those longing for a spiritual reality, without moral imperatives. They are assuming that it cannot be found in a Christian church tainted by hypocrisy, division and alignment with the power structures in society.²⁰

The Arrogance of Affirmation

A certain hope in Christ as Savior of the World is seen as both arrogant and intolerant. The most influential contemporary critic of the traditional or Chalcedon Christology is John Hick, who quite clearly sees the implications of this orthodox teaching in relation to a plural world: "If Jesus was literally God Incarnate,

and if it is by his death alone that men are saved, and by their response to him alone that they can appropriate that salvation, then the only doorway to eternal life is Christian faith. It would follow from this that the large majority of the human race so far have not been saved."²¹ There are an impressive group of theologians and missiologists who take Hick's line in relation to this scandal of particularity. Dr. Diana Eck, who is Professor at Harvard and Moderator of the WCC Program of Dialogue, speaks of the astonishment of a Hindu at the idea that God had only one incarnation, and continues: "this exclusive understanding of revelation, which speaks of it as an event of the past and imprisons it in the first century, is also folly to many Christians."²² Stanley Samartha, the distinguished Indian theologian, writes of the precarious nature of human existence and the present situation of social unrest, environmental pollution and the threat of nuclear disaster: "since this is a threat to all humanity, to proclaim that one religious tradition has the only answer to such a global problem seems preposterous."²³

There is not only the danger of theological arrogance, but also of national arrogance. The inter-religious issues are often compounded by inter-racial ones; since we are all aware that racism infects us so deeply, there are strong emotional reasons for regarding religious pluralism as something to be accepted and welcomed. Lynn De Silva, a pioneer in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, writes: "People of all faiths have a vital role to play in bringing about racial harmony, since it is acknowledged that the government alone cannot achieve this end by legislation and other measures."²⁴

We do well to remind ourselves that the Christian message is endowed with a doctrine of creation in which humankind is made "in the image of God." It would follow logically that those so created have the ability to think, decide and act for themselves. To be committed, then, both to the integrity of the Christian message, as well as the integrity of others to decide, should be sufficient caution against arrogance on the part of Christians.

I have tried briefly to sketch a wide range of theological reflection which, as we have seen, leads Christian theologians, missiologists and practitioners to a variety of conclusions on how to act and react as Christian missionaries in a plural world. We are left asking the question: "Where can we find help to begin to point

us in the right direction?" As Methodists coming boldly from the evangelical tradition, we shall look first at some of the biblical material and then reflect on our Wesleyan heritage before attempting some conclusions.

What Guidance Does the Bible Offer?

Colin Chapman at Lausanne II in Manila reminded his evangelical audience that they have "tended to emphasize passages in scripture which present other religions in a very negative light."²⁵ There are clear passages which show Yahweh as a jealous God: "I am the Lord your God . . . you shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:2-3). During the Exodus, God brings judgment on the gods of Egypt (Num. 33:4). The Israelites are warned from Canaanite religious practices, "because every abhorrent thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods" (Deut. 12:31). The Psalmist is in turn clear that, "all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens" (Ps. 96:5).

Similarly we can find uncompromising attitudes in the New Testament. Jesus' initial response to the Syro-Phoenician woman seems very sharp and uncompromising, though her persistence is rewarded (Mark 7:24-30). To unbelieving religious leaders he answers: "You are of your father, the devil" (John 8:44). In Lystra, Paul has to explain to those who think he and Barnabas are gods that they should "turn from these worthless things to the living God . . ." (Acts 14:15).

However, is this the total picture? Kenneth Cracknell points to Genesis 1-11 as containing a picture of the nations in which Yahweh is concerned with all the nations: "Genesis 10 teaches that the expansion over the then known world of the peoples is within the purposes of God."²⁶ This is echoed by the Psalmist: "For all the nations belong to you" (Ps. 82:8). The claim in Malachi 1:11 is even more shocking: "For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name." The prophet is telling his hearers that sacrifices offered by their pagan neighbors are more acceptable than their own ritual, carelessly followed and evidently devoid of commitment.

There are many to whom the God of Abraham communicates. Job has no dealings with Israel, but has personal dealings with

Yahweh (Job 38:1; 40:1; 42:1). Amos knew that the Lord had moved the Philistines and Syrians according to his purpose (Amos 9:6-7). Isaiah knew that Assyria would be the instrument of God's wrath to a rebellious Israel (Isa. 10:6). Jeremiah speaks of God intervening in the affairs of the nations. Jonah, the reluctant missionary, finds that the people of another nation are far more willing to respond to Yahweh than his own people. Indeed, he is offended at their complete obedience and at God's willingness to be merciful.

The New Testament picture is challenging also. Jesus commends the centurion for his faith: "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (Luke 7:9). There is the striking example of Peter's conversion from being a racist and separatist to being the open and inclusive Peter who explains his moment of disclosure to Cornelius: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him" (Acts 10:34-35). The confirmation for Peter that salvation is universally available comes when the Spirit descends, following the preaching of the Christian message.

Anyone approaching the scriptures with the topic of religious pluralism must have to do with John 14:6 and Acts 4:12 and the logos theology in John. We can only touch upon them briefly here. John's splendid cleverness in uniting Hebraic and Hellenistic thought, by claiming Jesus to be the logos, has also given us insight into the work of Christ in all creation and for all time. It would follow that if He is the true light which enlightens everyone, then that which has become light for anyone finds its source in Christ. As William Temple put it:

So it may truly be said that the conscience of the heathen man is the voice of Christ within him, though muffled by ignorance. All this is noble in the non-christian systems of thought, or conduct, or worship is the work of Christ upon them and within them. By the Word of God—that is to say, by Jesus Christ—Isaiah and Plato and Zoroaster and Buddha and Confucius conceived and uttered such truths as they declared. There is only one divine light, and every man in his measure is enlightened by it.²⁸

It is one thing to affirm the work of God in all creation and all cultures, and quite another to claim, as does John Hick, that the offer of salvation in any religion affords saving grace from the

logos of God, Jesus Christ himself.²⁹ This I consider to be a bridge too far.

Many religions speak of their spirituality as "the Way" (John 14:6).³⁰ Let us not lose sight, though, of the fact that John, writing in a religiously plural world, is keen to express the view that Jesus is the Way; in him is truth and life, for he is the Word who has tabernacled among us; he is the exegesis of God (John 1:14); to see or perceive him is to see the Father; it is through him, the logos of God, that people will come to the Father.

The Acts incident (Acts 4:8-12) does confront us with the translation of *sozo* and derivatives as "to heal, make whole, save." The crucial thing about the context is not merely that a man is healed, but that the healing points to Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 4:8-12). Peter declares that what they call a notable sign points to the salvation found in the name of Jesus.³¹

The Wesleyan Heritage

I want to say with John Munsey Turner that religious pluralism "was just over Wesleyan's horizon."³² Maybe as a result, teasing out the Wesleyan heritage does not in itself give us a crystal clear picture. It has been demonstrated that John Wesley was somewhat ambivalent about other faiths.³³ His earlier views on other faiths, noted above, were tempered in later life and he argues against a summary damnation of Muslims.³⁴ Like his contemporaries he organized religions into four categories: Christianity, Judaism, Mohametanism, and Paganism.³⁵ He identified a variety of pagans (Greek and Roman; the tribal religions of Africa and America; Indian religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism) and in later life "held out the hope that many of them might have found a true saving relationship with God by responding to the light that they received."³⁶ His view of general revelation fluctuated, but he certainly thought that knowledge of God was available to humankind either by influence or by interference, through the works of God, or directly, as prevenient grace via the "spiritual senses." This led him logically to the view that God would judge such people not by the light of Christ but by the light they had received.³⁷

The approach to people of other faiths could be nowhere bettered than in the openness of "The Catholic Spirit"; "his heart

is enlarged towards all mankind, those he knows and those he does not; he embraces with strong and cordial affection neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies. This is catholic or universal love." Such refreshing openness is not an indifference to all opinions, which would be the "spawn of hell, not the offspring of heaven." Wesley enjoins on the person who adopts such creative love to be securely "fixed in his religious principles, on what he believes to be the truth as it is in Jesus."³⁸

In his *Journal* for 18 May 1788 we see Wesley's commitment to wide-ranging tolerance: "The Methodists alone do not insist on your holding this or that opinion, but they think and let think."³⁹ It is this kind of attitude and openness which so many Methodist scholars who are involved in inter-faith work have found a source of strength and direction: "For my part the openness and commitment spoken of here is the reason why I return again and again to my Methodist roots as I enter into inter-faith dialogue . . . Wesley himself would have recognized faith and love and hope in the people that I have to deal with and would have walked the same way with us."⁴⁰

Wesley, then, had a remarkable capacity for openness in the pursuit of truth. Let us also recall his urgent desire, on every occasion, to "offer Christ," for all people need Christ. As he says in the best-known passage of all dealing with this topic:

Christian faith is then not only an assent to the whole gospel of Christ, but also a full reliance on the blood of Christ; a trust in the merits of his life, death, and resurrection; a recumbency upon him as our atonement and our life, as *given for us*, and *living in us*. It is sure confidence which a man hath in God, that through the merits of Christ, *his* sins are forgiven, and *he* reconciled to the favour of God; and in consequence hereof a closing with him and cleaving to him, as our 'wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption', or, in one word, our salvation.⁴¹

The object of saving faith, as he regularly made clear, is Christ himself. He did not call upon people in the first place to embrace truth, but to "look unto Jesus." In that sense I suggest that Wesley had a very suitable stance for his theology and evangelism in a plural world, a mixture of openness toward people and certainty of message, which is one we would do well to follow.

Where does this place Wesley in the topology of views noted

earlier? My conclusion is that he does not fit easily and so I suggest the following: that he is *at* the interface of the exclusivist and inclusivist position. His Christology is exclusivist, saving faith is in Christ; but his exclusivism is not myopic. His openness to others and the pursuit of truth, his view that God would judge by the light that people had received, all move toward the inclusivist position. To place him simply in this latter category would be an injustice to his doctrine of regeneration and saving faith. Therefore I suggest he is at the interface of the two.

Sharing Faith in a Plural World

Part of British Methodism's response to *A Decade of Evangelism* is the production of *The Good News Works*⁴² and there I have argued that the Methodist people are well placed to witness to their faith in Jesus among people of other faiths. It is partly to do with our history, for the mission and care and help of the people called Methodist has been to all. It is partly to do with the characteristic life of the local churches which have at their best been welcoming and opening to new people and ways.

The report *Faithful and Equal*⁴³ has prompted profitable discussion on racism within the church, for our hand of friendship to those of other faiths cannot be racist. We are well placed also because some of our churches are present among people of other faiths. Churches now in the Asian communities are in the right place and as a church we have a responsibility to ensure that such churches are encouraged to see the possibilities that are open to them. How then are we as Methodists, or indeed any Christian, to share our faith with those of another faith? There are a number of principles and assumptions that need now to be considered if we are to share our faith effectively.

Dialogue is a fundamental part of any kind of mission in which there needs to be openness and interaction. It is in the dialogue that we learn about people, their customs, their religious awareness, their values and basic assumptions of life. The term has been used widely to describe discussion between adherents of two different religions.

In his *Toward A New Relationship*, Kenneth Cracknell gives a thorough exploration of *dialogical* and *dialogizomai*, affirming not only that dialogue is a word with biblical roots, but that it is

primary meaning is "argue-reason-content." Cracknell emphasizes the importance that Paul placed upon dialogue, in that he was prepared to remain at Ephesus (Acts 19:8-10) and spend over two years in reasoning and persuading. This Paul does, Cracknell notes, first of all in the synagogue, and then in the hall or school of the Greek philosophers, teaching there when the school was not otherwise in use:

Paul at Ephesus shows us that the way of dialogue is a way of patience, often very time consuming. It shows us that the way of dialogue means meeting the other person on his or her own terms and really attending to what they say, believe, feel. We also see that it is a way seeking to share persuasively the best of our own conviction, to share that which has most persuasively the best of our own conviction, to share that which has most persuasively laid hold of our own minds and hearts.⁴⁴

This raises the question of how we view the nature of dialogue. Is it a method to win others to Christ? Or in the dialogue do we meet as equals in the sense that neither partner needs, nor must be thought to need, the religion, the savior of the other partner? If we are to be open and vulnerable then, "to enter into dialogue is not only difficult, it is dangerous . . . our faith is at stake."⁴⁵

In this essay the term carries its missionary connotation, that the debate, or dialogue, is a fundamental part of the missionary task, even with the risk just noted. When in Athens, Paul starts where people are, debating on their ground, taking up their issues (Acts 17:17). At the Areopagus he cleverly weaves strands of their philosophy into his address before introducing the essential points he wants the audience to consider. He may start where they are, but he gets to Christ in the end. Such dialogue and building up of relationships in mutual friendship and trust over a period of time is the only way to share faith with people of other faiths. Reference to Athens gives me opportunity to reflect that we must not assume that dialogue is simply a one-to-one or even a small group experience. Paul does all this in the synagogue and marketplace, but also in the preaching arena of the Areopagus. I note this here, for it has implications when we come to think about our sharing and proclaiming of faith today.

My impression ten years ago was that interfaith dialogue included a suspension of sharing Christ. A different note is sounded by Cracknell and others more recently:

For the vast majority of Christians, including those most energetically engaged in dialogue, Jesus is not merely a background figure, he is central to Christian faith. Not only do the Christian dialoguers recognize this, but so do their Muslim, Buddhist, Shinto, Hindu and Jewish conversation partners. Wherever one starts . . . any honest dialogue between Christians and others will sooner or later—and in my experience, usually sooner—have to deal with the figure of Jesus.⁴⁶

The British Council of Churches has helpfully distilled the various documents from the World Council of Churches and offered in its *Relations with People of Other Faiths* four principles of dialogue:

- (1) Dialogue begins when people meet each other.
- (2) Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust.
- (3) Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community.
- (4) Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness.⁴⁷

Generally in Britain, Christians have been at best hesitant to engage in dialogue with people of another faith. Strangely, they are more hesitant to do this than to do mission among people with no faith. This is undoubtedly because Christians in Britain have come to fear other faiths with their different ideas, customs, and food. However, avoidance of relationships based on ignorance and fear is an entirely inappropriate response.

Engaging in dialogue brings an openness, interest, and sharing which is dynamic. As a Community Relations officer in the Bolton and Rochdale District comments, "In our Inter-Faith group we have recently discussed Salvation in the Bible and the Quran, and What does Jesus mean to me, a Muslim? a Christian? This group have known one another for some time and we regularly discuss our differences and controversial areas. My experience is that Muslims have a greater respect for Christians who truly follow Christ."

Starting Where People Are

The doctrine of incarnation is crucial to our understanding of evangelism with its insistence that the gospel is about a With-Us

God. If we wish to be alongside people of other faiths, whether Eastern or New Age, let us recognize that hospitality is of enormous importance. Jesus spent much time in giving and receiving hospitality and we would do well to copy this model. Unless we take time to listen, to open our homes, we shall forfeit the right to speak about our faith.

The importance of dialogue and the setting of hospitality was understood well by E. Stanley Jones and described in his *Christ of the Round Table*.⁴⁸ To his Round Table Conferences, Stanley Jones would invite about fifteen adherents of other faiths, many of them educated people such as judges, government officials, doctors, lawyers, and religious leaders, and also five or six Christians, mostly Indians. He insisted upon fairness and mutual respect in the sharing and at the beginning of each conference would say, "Let everyone be perfectly free, for we are a family circle; we want each one to feel at home, and we will listen with reverence and respect to what each man has to share."⁴⁹ This kind of openness, depth of sharing and hospitality is as important today to our missionary strategy as it was between the wars in India. Jones concludes that "no one could sit through these conferences and not feel that Christ was master of every situation, not by loud assertion, or through the pleading of clever advocates, but by what he is and does."⁵⁰

The only way that many people are going to hear the good news of Jesus is if someone goes to them and creates friends amongst those of other cultures and faiths. Evangelism here may mean being alongside a person who cannot come to church because of the opposition of another member of their family. Women may feel hesitant about coming to church because they will undoubtedly meet men that they don't know. Therefore hospitality for women, given by women, is vital.

What Approach to Evangelism Is Required in A Religiously Plural World?

The nature of religious pluralism brings into sharp focus the problem confronting the evangelist. For evangelists "are concerned not merely to articulate a truth in such a way that another mind can grasp it, but to impart conviction in such a way that others can share it."⁵¹ This is the area in which I have conducted

most of my research into evangelistic ministry.⁵³ It must be quite clear that in an age of cultural and theological plurality, a directive approach to evangelism is not appropriate. George Morris and Eddie Fox discuss this in *Faith Sharing*, describing the directive approach as both information transmission or manipulative monologue. In both cases, the recipient is assumed to be passive and, in the case of the latter, often the subject of an emotion appeal.⁵³

Both these cases, which I would broadly consider a directive approach, cause us to use methods which can bring compliance (by the weak) and defiance (by the rebellious and by those with any sense of their own worth) rather than facilitate a meeting of minds or effect an inner change. Such an approach would seek to control people or the situation rather than encourage their personal and spiritual development.

The third category is described as "non-manipulative dialogue"; such an approach involves a two-way process involving honest interaction through establishing a relationship between the speaker and the hearer. This is something the evangelist does "with the listener," rather than "to them." "Here the relationship between the evangelizer and the hearer approximates to that of a friend to a friend. The goal of the relationship is that of sharing love and faith with the other person."⁵⁴

Christian evangelism must, in my view, adopt an approach which resonates with the content of that evangel. That is, it is about relationships, with a triune God, and past, present, and future relationships with other people. The research that I have undertaken suggests that we must take very seriously that no person can take or make an interior or spiritual decision for another person.

The parabolic method of Jesus gives some guidance to us in our evangelism: "In the parables, it is not so much that we are instructed by Jesus, but that we must stand with him and view life through his eyes . . . We are not told what we must see there, rather, the scene is set in sparse terms and we are invited to view what is before us."⁵⁵ By the use of parables, Jesus engaged his listeners in an inner dialogue with him. It is as if Jesus uses parables to create a window and invite his hearers not merely to look upon it, but to look through it and see the significance for themselves.

Eta Linnemann shows how the effectiveness of the parable was dependent as much upon the hearer and their response as on the skill of the storyteller: "It is the essence of a parable that there is achieved in it a *dialogesthai*, a conversation, a dialogue between the narrator and the listener."⁵⁶ Alexander Findlay notes that there is within the parables of Jesus both an element of risk and of surprise, both of which have the effect of creating a dialogue experience.⁵⁷ "The parable does not teach a spectator a lesson; rather it invites and surprises a participant into an experience."⁵⁸

It is remarkable that Jesus takes the risk of using, to carry his urgent message, a form of communication which demands the cooperation of and deliberate engagement in the dialogue by the hearer. There is no manipulation or indoctrination there. "Anyone who risks a parable in such a situation is risking everything; but this is the only way he can win everything."⁵⁹

I am convinced that the approach to evangelism required in our modern plural world is one which is characterized by risk and development, the kind of faith and striking openness that characterized Wesley's ministry. It will not seek to control the hearers nor their decisions. It involves freedom of participation, giving the listener the capacity to think and decide and act for themselves. Sharing will be a reciprocal relationship which embodies two-way communication, with each open to be influenced by the other.

Those engaged in such evangelistic ministry will ensure, as far as possible, that they are using words, symbols, pictures, to which the listener can relate. In a dialogue, as the listener becomes more active in the process by hearing, interpreting, thinking about the words proclaimed, an inner dialogue begins to take place. This inner dialogue not only interprets and assimilates the proclaimed word, but also allows it to challenge present thinking and assumptions. This process is not merely relevant person to person, but also has implications for preaching. My research shows that this approach is relevant to all forms of evangelistic communication, but we cannot explore that fully here. Let us note here, however, that this approach is appropriate in persuasive proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Such evangelistic ministry which, I contend, is an appropriate form of proclamation in a plural world, will be as vulnerable, as creative and as dynamic in the hearer and proclaimer as were the

parables of Jesus. It was appropriate in the religiously plural culture in which Jesus ministered and in which the early church grew and is appropriate today. The evangel will be shared with conviction and forcefulness and yet in a way that does not impose belief. The need of the hearer to decide is not violated, and the need of the evangelist to declare the message is not compromised. The risk undertaken by the evangelist is no greater than that undertaken by Jesus in his parables, namely, that the hearer may think, discuss, decide, and act for him or herself. This, I propose to you today, is consonant with the Wesleyan heritage and is an entirely appropriate approach to evangelism in a plural world.

This essay opened with a recognition of the need for repentance. It might have been noted then that repentance was due for the many times, through fear or neglect, that we have failed to evangelize. Let us now pray that God will give us humility and boldness—humility as we offer Christ to others through the art of sensitive listening, both to God and those with whom we share; and boldness to proclaim “the mystery of the gospel.” God grant us the joy of that kind of evangelism in our plural world.

Introduction

The subject of the sermon is the Lord's Supper. The words of the Lord's Supper become a religious, their system of religious, and dialectic the same the topic of this essay by my do

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