

Mission, Evangelism and the Future of the UMC

# SAVE SOULS

You Have Nothing To Do But To

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Scott J. Jones

**A**fter serving eleven years as a pastor, I have now been a seminary professor for 5 years. As I preach around the country, I often preach on Matthew 28:16-20. I frequently look the congregation in the eye and say, "God has called each of you to be an evangelist." Members of the church then respond with blank stares and discomfited squirms. They seem to think that I have just uttered something absolutely wrong.

In a similar way I begin every course in United Methodist doctrine by quoting John Wesley and saying to the students, "You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work."<sup>1</sup> Some of them immediately regret having signed up to take this required course from me.

The claims that every Christian is to be an evangelist and that every United Methodist clergy is to be consumed by the task of saving souls are often seen as unusual if not crazy. In both my sermon, and my teaching, I go on to explain that the truth of my statements depends on the definitions of "evangelist" and "saving souls" and that my understandings of these terms may be different from what they normally associate with those words.

The Christian life means that we, both as clergy and as congregations, are continually deciding what kind of Christians we are going to be. What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ? How do we live our lives so that our souls, minds and hearts are completely devoted to love of God and love of neighbor? (Matthew 22:34-40) How does our life as a church exemplify living sacrifice, spiritual worship, transformation by the renewal of

our minds (Romans 12:1-2) and our identity as "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people?" (1 Peter 2:9) The latter text says that the outcome of this identity is that we might "declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

I have been persuaded by David Bosch's book *Transforming Mission* that the New Testament is a missionary document.

Thus, as biblical Christians, the first and most important issue facing our clergy, our congregations, and our connectional agencies is to refocus on our mission. Are we going to accept God's call to be used by God for the sake of God's reign on earth, or are we going to be religious clubs operating for our own benefit?

But if we decide for the missionary existence to which God's Word continually calls us, then another question arises. How should we think of mission? How are we to think of evangelism? How are they related? United Methodism officially answered these questions in 1996 when it passed its current mission statement. Aimée Twigg reminds us that mission and evangelism are inextricably linked. There is no genuine mission without evangelism, and no genuine evangelism that is

not part of God's kingdom activity on earth. Whether that mission statement has really become the center of our life together is a different question.

## Fruitless Argument

That statement represents a holistic understanding of mission that corrects a century of mistaken thinking and fruitless argument in our denomination. How often do we construe mis-

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— John Wesley

sion as helping soul-less bodies—feeding, housing, healing, or advocating for them? How often do we think of evangelism as dealing with bodiless souls, as if getting people into heaven, or at least into church membership, was all that really mattered in their lives? How often are mission and evangelism seen as opposed to each other rather than essentially related?

Mission should be understood as loving the world in God's name and meeting the needs of whole persons. Persons need food, they need justice, they need shelter, and they need to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and to become active members of Christ's body the Church.

Evangelism is a part of God's mission, one essential aspect of loving our neighbors well. **The Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20 must be seen in the light of the Great Commandments in Matthew 22:32-40. This is the theological foundation for healing the century-long split between evangelism and social justice.** Carlyle Stewart's article helps us resolve this problem.

Thus, there is a crucial need to re-think our definition of evangelism as well as how we do it. In my forthcoming book, I argue that evangelism is best understood as that set of loving, intentional activities governed by the goal of initiating persons into Christian discipleship in response to the reign of God.<sup>2</sup> Evangelism is whatever the church does to help non-Christians become disciples.

## 7 Components

There are seven components of evangelism, each of which lays the foundation that later steps of discipleship build on.

**1** The **experiential** component of evangelism invites persons to conversion, where they experience the love, forgiveness and total acceptance of God in the power of the Holy Spirit.

**2** The **confessional** component, invites persons to believe and confess the biblical truths about the Triune God, resurrection, eternal life and other doctrines.

**3** The **moral** component invites persons to leave immoral behaviors and repent.

**4** There is an **ecclesial** component. John Wesley said that the New Testament knows nothing of solitary Christianity, and we must insist that Christian discipleship means baptism and membership in a congregation.

**5** The **charismatic** component invites persons to receive and acknowledge their spiritual gifts.

**6** The **formational** component, invites persons to the disciplines of prayer, worship, Bible study, communion, and education.

**7** The seventh component is **witness**, where evangelism lays the foundation of Christian witness in both word and deed for the rest of the new believer's life. At the beginning of their walk with Christ, new believers need to know that the Christian life requires learning to share their faith verbally with others and by doing deeds of justice and mercy.

Since evangelism focuses on initiation into Christian discipleship, it has a relationship to all of the ministries of the church. The connections to worship, spiritual formation, social action, education, pastoral counseling, preaching and other areas of ministry are obvious. Evangelism is that aspect of those ministries which focuses on helping unbelievers believe. Our motivation for it must be based on our love of God and our love of the neighbor. I believe Ruben Saenz's warnings about why we do evangelism among Hispanics are applicable to all evangelistic practice, not just our ministry to and with Hispanics.

## Relationships

Two crucial aspects of this ministry are important to highlight. Because evangelism focuses on that stage of the way of salvation we call justification, it is highly relational. We are talking first and foremost with persons about their relationship with God. Ministries of evangelism help people understand their broken relationship with God (sin), the possibilities of fixing that relationship (repentance) and the means to

do so (salvation by grace through faith). There is a strong relationship between Christian doctrine and this whole process.<sup>3</sup>

Evangelism is also relational in the sense of relating persons to each other in Christian community. Initiation into the Christian life requires participation in community. This also meets one of the most pressing needs in American culture today, the need for community to overcome the isolation of modern life. Junius Dotson's article focuses on how important it is for the UMC to start new congregations. He outlines a number of reasons why this does not threaten existing churches but energizes the whole denomination.

## Context

Evangelism is also highly contextual. Since evangelism is based on loving real persons, and persons are different because of ethnicity, social class, education levels, regional settings, age and other factors, evangelism is different in different contexts. A church seeking to reach 20-29 year olds in urban, southern California will look and feel very different from a church in rural Nebraska whose main audience is older. A church seeking to reach Mexican immigrants in Texas will be different in some crucial respects from a church aimed at fourth-generation Norwegians in Minnesota. As ethnic lines become blurred in some areas of the United States, a new multicultural reality may be more significant. Ruben Saenz's article on ministry in the Hispanic context and Kevin Ruffcorn's discussion of rural American are both helpful in looking at some of the issues in these specific places. George Hunter's discussion of urban evangelism is a way of pointing out some of the methods that have worked for one particular congregation and the lessons that can be drawn for other urban congregations.

The contextual nature of evangelism should raise a warning flag for all pastors. The methods or approaches that worked in one place may or may not work in a different situation. The successes of a particular church cannot be duplicated elsewhere. Each situation has its unique features.

Nevertheless, there is one gospel, one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. Further, there are many similarities that unite people because of our common

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humanity and, in the United States, our common culture. Thus the discussion about particular methods can be said to be largely helpful for all congregations, while their specific value in particular contexts may vary widely. Some of the methods discussed in this issue, such as Lacey Warner's views on empowering the laity for evangelism, are so broadly important that they apply everywhere. I also believe that there is no part of the United States that is not touched by digital communication patterns, and the Igniting Ministry program discussed by Jaime Potter-Miller is crucial to any contextually appropriate practice of evangelism in the U.S. today.

Ruben Saenz's ideas about how to reach new Hispanic immigrants are helpful, but one should ask whether they are applicable in one's specific context. Yet, his ideas about sensitivity, trust and prayer in small groups are probably transferable to most other contexts. Similarly, Jim Lane's experience with the *Witness* program was clearly positive in his congregation. Precisely where else it will work is a matter for careful investigation and discernment, but it is worth trying! If you are not using *Witness*, then what better instrument have you found to help laity share their faith verbally with others? Not every congregation will have the position in a media market and the resources to do their own radio advertising ministry. But Steve Rhode's experience in Richmond could easily be emulated by many other congregations or groups of congregations across Methodism. Other congregations may find it better to buy pre-packaged radio spots and use them.

A great deal of what is at issue here is rethinking the way we do ministry. Too many of us were raised in a maintenance-oriented denomination. Others have only partial views of social justice or evangelism. Others are tied to methods that worked 50 or 100 years ago and we pretend we still live in those time periods and then wonder why we are not successful.

Instead, we need to rediscover our mission. We need to understand that a missional church will always be evangelistic. Then we need to study our mission field and adapt to whatever our context requires for us to love the people evangelistically and love them well! We need to have a passion for doing whatever it takes to reach the unchurched.

A number of years ago my colleague

William Abraham made a speech about the future of the United Methodist Church. He said something like the following: "God is at working saving the world. God is going to accomplish God's purposes. That is certain. The only interesting question is whether God will find the United Methodist Church a fit instrument to use in this activity, or whether God will give up on us and find someone else to use."

The more I have studied John Wesley and the history of United Methodism, the more I have experienced vital, alive, missionary Methodist congregations all over the world, the more I have talked with leaders in annual conferences who are truly seeking how to be evangelistic and mission-minded, the more optimistic I have become about our future. I think God is using United Methodism. We are being renewed. As our renewal progresses, God will find us more and more a fit instrument for God's purposes.

I will continue to preach on Matthew 28:16-20 and tell United Methodist Christians that God is calling them to be evangelists. I will continue to tell my students that they have nothing to do but save souls. I look forward to the day when I get an *Amen!* shouted in response. Then I look forward to the day when our congregations and our clergy have accepted and understood their mission from God so well that I will never again need to make such obvious points. □

<sup>1</sup> "Large Minutes," *Works of John Wesley* (Jackson edition) 8:310.

<sup>2</sup> See the book which is tentatively titled *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor: A Theology of Witness and Discipleship* (Abingdon Press), due out in October of 2003.

<sup>3</sup> See my *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Abingdon Press, 2002).

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