

Evangelism in the Twenty-First Century: Mainliners at the Margins

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It is Saturday night late, too advanced an hour for someone my age to be out and about. I'm at a church outside of Birmingham, Alabama, a curious congregation that meets in a dilapidated warehouse. The church is sponsoring their monthly "Jesus Rave"—a concert featuring allegedly Christian rock bands from the area. The music is so loud that it's painful. Periodically, through the pounding percussion and the rage filled screaming of the singers, I make out a few words. "God! Open my eyes!" and something about "Damn!"

No one says anything to me except for one young man, or perhaps young woman, who asks, "You're not a narc agent are you?"

A crowd of about two hundred weird looking youth huddle motionlessly in front of the band. They are all in black, mostly leather. I cannot distinguish male from female. All of them have various parts of their bodies pierced and tattooed. One passes me wearing a tee shirt that says, "Stop Talking to Me! I can't hear you." Every now and then one of them standing in front of the band begins wildly to gyrate and scream, shaking his (or her, can't tell) long locks, in a sort of wild, ecstatic dance. Ten or twenty others join in for a few minutes. Then they resume their passive stance. I am informed that this group's real "Church" begins sometime after midnight, when they leave, log in to the website for the ministry, and open up a chat room that lasts until dawn.

"I had wanted a ministry where we evangelized college students," explained the young woman in charge of the ministry. "But none of them showed up. So we became this—a ministry with alienated blue-collar kids who are failures. These kids are so much more reachable and open to the gospel than college students."

"They look angry," I said.

"Yep. They are angry as hell," she said.

"With whom are they angry?" I asked.

"Well, they are angry with their parents because they lied and didn't keep their promise to them to stay married," she replied. "And they're pissed at you."

"Me? What did I do to them?" I asked.

"They're mad that you try to keep them away from Jesus. They believe that Jesus is as angry as they are. They think they're closer to Jesus than you are."

It was the last attempt at conversation that I had with anyone that night.

That Saturday I saw the future of evangelism in the twenty-first century. And frankly, I found it scary. Evangelism begins in heart of God. The God of Israel and the Church is a fascinating God who reaches, embraces, is determined to have a world, all of it. Here is a God who refuses to let us go, or to be driven out of Judea by other gods. Evangelism is about inviting people to walk and talk like Jesus, and I—having spent a fair amount of time trying to listen to Jesus talk and at least watching him walk—know a thing or two about the righteous anger of Jesus. Like most of you, I set out to evangelize educated, middle-to-upper-class North American people (the sort of ministry that Yale Divinity School trained me to do), only to discover how few of them

actually wanted to be invited to be with Jesus (have you seen United Methodist numbers lately?). So here I am, standing in the moderate, mainline, middle, and there's Jesus, in a forlorn, rusting hulk of a warehouse, with a bunch of failed kids whom only Jesus could love. Jesus, Messiah on the margin.

The most important ecclesial news of the late twentieth century was that we mainliners got moved to the margins. Even I, as bishop in one of the nation's largest denominations, can't get an invite to the White House for love nor money no matter how much I try to talk like James Dobson. How to respond to a post-Christendom world without begin driven by the assumptions of Christendom? How do we evangelize the world without capitulating to the world by relying upon the weapons or the crutches of the world?

The most important ecclesial agenda for the twenty-first century is that the church that is pushed to the margins in North American life ought to wake up and see that the margin is a wonderful place to evangelize in the name of an implacably subversive Savior.¹ This sort of evangelization can't be done if the church persists in staggering down two well-worn paths for evangelism in modernity: (1) apologetic establishment of the superiority of the "Christian tradition" using allegedly universal standards taken from late modernity and then claiming that they have something to do with the gospel (Robert Schuller, Marcus Borg); or (2) commending the "gospel" on the basis of its alleged usefulness in getting a deeper sense of purpose, Democrats in the White House, a positive self-image, a reason to get out of bed in the morning, or whatever it is we happen to want more than Jesus (Rick Warren, John Shelby Spong).

In his *So You Can't Stand Evangelism? A Thinking Person's Guide to Church Growth*, James Adams attempts to wrest evangelism from unthinking, right wing conservatives. Adams pleads for that evangelism that has "an open attitude toward religious doubt and intellectual curiosity....a concept of evangelism that accepts the validity of other religious traditions."² Adams notices that even "Muslims, Jews, Buddhists...seem to have access to God."³ Christians need to admit that as highly as they think of Jesus, Jesus is just the "way to God that they have chosen."⁴ Alas, our persistence in exclusive Christian truth claims "has convinced many college-educated Christians that evangelism is a lower class phenomenon."⁵ For many thoughtful mainliners like Adams and his upper class Anglican buddies, "evangelism is a tasteless business."⁶

The irony is that, like many of the conservative evangelicals whom he despises, Adams commends his pluralistic, open-minded "evangelism" because *it works*, particularly among "thoughtful" people. This is a favorite strategy among Christian apologists of the right or the left—under the guise of "inclusiveness," genuine difference, alterity, and disagreement are masked, absorbed, and trivialized. The apologist claims to have found the overall organizing principle, the essential insight that enables us to erase difference and provides a sort of Christianity-lite for the unbeliever. Now, evangelism at last succeeds in honoring that greatest of modern virtues—*effectiveness*.

The encounter with otherness that is a part of any genuine evangelism must be inviting, joyously hospitable, but also completely open to rejection and refusal. If you are working with Jesus, you have got to be willing to be ineffective. We must honor the unbeliever's doubt enough to consider that, even after our apologetic appeal, the appeal may be rejected. While urging an evangelistic approach that honors question-

ing and analysis among people who want to “understand Christianity in terms of their personal philosophy and how the church can support them in what they are already doing.” Adams rarely questions whether or not these thinking persons’ “personal philosophy” or “what they are already doing” is at odds with Jesus. While encouraging active questioning of all of Christianity’s basic claims, Adams refuses to question the sovereignty of the individual experience of the modern, affluent, North American “thinking person.” Adam’s “thinking persons” critically think about everything except their own thinking. The modern, Western self remains unscathed in the process of Adams’ evangelization. All power and authority remains entrenched in the individual subject and its choices. Adams thus advises us to treat the resurrection as a “metaphor” for “what happens to people when they encounter Jesus.” That is, “They discover the capacity to get themselves together, to get up and get going.”⁷

The essentially accommodationist, Constantinian quality of Adam’s project could not be more clear. The main duty of the Christian evangelist is to tailor the gospel to whatever the market (in Adam’s case, that market segment that reads *The New York Times*) can bear. The point of evangelism is to render the gospel less strange than it is presented in the New Testament,⁸ to make our message effective.

Evangelism in the twenty-first century among those, of the right or the left, who have been infected by nineteenth century liberalism, must learn again to delight in the strangeness, the distance of the gospel from who we are. As John Howard Yoder notes, it would have never occurred to the Jews in Babylon to try

to bridge the distance between their language world and that of their hosts by a foundationalist mental or linguistic move, trying to rise to a higher level or dig to a deeper one, so that the difference could be engulfed...which would convince the Babylonians of moral monotheism without making them Jews.... They did not look for or seek to construct common ground. Jews knew that there was no larger world than the one their Lord had made and their prophets knew the most about.⁹

Today, some tell us mainliners that our strength is that we occupy the moderate, unthreatening, civil center.¹⁰ We are where everyone else ought to be if they were as skillful as we in discovering the heart of Christianity, the true essence of the faith, the peaceful center of what Jesus was trying sincerely, but ineptly and ineffectively, to communicate. This is yet another attempt to recover the social significance of the church in a world that mostly ignores us. We mainliners fear the margins because we fear that, by working the margins, nobody will write about us in *Time*. We will be guilty of the worst of all possible Niebuhrian fates—behaving irresponsibly in a democratic society where a beneficent democratic government obligates us to use our power to make everything turn out right, as long as we don’t disturb the beneficent democratic government.

Pick up the Acts of the Apostles or the Letters of Paul and you will quickly discover that Christians are eccentrics, those whom a fanatical Jesus has thrown off balance, off center, on the margins. Acts teaches us to fear the center as that rather arrogant location for those who think that a faith is best judged, not by its fidelity to its subject (God) but rather by its social utility to the Empire.¹¹ God in Christ was driven from the center by the important and the powerful thinking people like Felix and Agrippa who always

think that wherever they happen to be, and whatever undergirds the Empire's peace is the official center of everything.

Our temptation, as preachers who attempt to be evangelists or apologists, is to suppress the peculiarity of the gospel and the community it engenders, to attempt to make the peculiar story of this peculiar people a story and a people that signify a universal quest, a metaphor for something that is more significant than the Kingdom of God, a primitive way of symbolizing the existential condition of everyone.¹² Most of us preachers have been trained to de-marginalize the gospel, to make the odd and the outrageous seem normal. In fact, this is the predominate tendency of homiletics as we have been taught the subject—to normalize the gospel.

It is the normalizing tendency on the part of us modern preachers that Kierkegaard called “nauseating” – the urbane preacher,

who in pretty language, with the utmost ease, with graceful manners...knows how to introduce a little Christianity, but easily, as easily as possible. In the New Testament, Christianity is the profoundest wound that can be inflicted upon a man, calculated on the most dreadful scale to collide with everything...introducing Christianity in such a way as it signifies nothing.... But this is nauseating!¹³

Evangelism is the invitation proffered to “come and see” (John 1:46). In our homiletical attempts to do more than that, to make the gospel reasonable, in our lust for sure “results” in our evangelistic efforts, in our desire for predictably “effective” sermons, we unconsciously scale down the gospel to whatever a narcissistic culture can comprehend, whatever the market can bear.

Thus Bryan Stone describes faithful evangelism as

an invitation to be strange, to become a member of a prototypical but inevitably deviant community intended by God for the whole world....Evangelism then does not seek “customer satisfaction” but is carried out as a response to the new world that in Jesus of Nazareth has broken in and because of which things can never be the same.¹⁴

The great evangelistic challenge is not to attract the world to the gospel but rather for an accommodated, acculturated church to be attracted to the world in the same strange way that Christ is attracted. The “world” for which Christ died is not the world we thought we wanted to inhabit, certainly not a world worth God dying for. To put a finer point on it, our greatest challenge is to speak and act in the name of the One who was born in backwater Bethlehem and died “outside the camp” (Heb 13). We must strive, in our evangelism, for a greater conformity of our message to the originating Messenger, our evangelism to the Evangel. Rather than attract the world to Jesus with some sort of desiccated gospel that entices everyone and offends nobody, we’ve got to absorb the world into his embrace, to invite everyone to live into Jesus’ strange new world and thereby be converted. Which is a major reason why, if you are looking for successful evangelism, you will find that evangelism will be more effective among the marginalized than among Adams’ “thinking persons,” just because that’s the way it

has always been.

Of course, there are “thinking persons” who are marginalized in various ways. For those who have personally experienced the debilitating corruption of North American culture under the Bush administration, we may have a distinct advantage in our attempts to evangelize them. I recall some years ago, when a group of us campus ministers did a survey among college chaplains that attempted to uncover what sorts of college students were particularly open to the claims of Jesus Christ, a primary group were students who evidence “disgust and contempt with American culture”—just the sort of students most of us avoided. Still, whether the recipients of our evangelistic testimony hear or refuse to hear, our toughest evangelistic task is always christological—to walk and to talk like Jesus. We’ve got to love Jesus more than we love what apparently “works.” As Stone puts it,

Evangelism is a practice that is performed at boundaries and along the edges of difference. Because of that, nothing could be more important to a theology of evangelism than clarifying the nature of that difference and how the Christian community’s posture toward the world along those boundaries is always one of both invitation and subversion.¹⁵

And one reason why Christians are attracted away from the center and out to the boundaries is that we are engaged in a passionate quest to worship this particular God. “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed...” (Luke 14:13-14). We have been told a story about a God who, for some reason known only to the Trinity, loves to work the margins, the realm of the otherness of the poor, the orphaned, and the widowed, the alien and sojourner, the dead and the good as dead. “Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me” (Matt 25). Here is a God who is not only on the margins but calls those of us who hanker for a more peaceful, stable center to come and join in the raucous life at the margins. I went to that dilapidated warehouse that night for the “Jesus Rave” only by invitation.

Encounter with those on the margins reminds us church people that we were also marginal in our relationship to God, strangers and aliens (Eph 2:19). “You know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Exod 23:9). In receiving the other, we are confident that we keep being received by the Other. John Wesley took Jesus’ promise that, “You always have the poor with you” (Matt 26:11) as reassurance that because the poor are always with us, so will Jesus Christ always be with us because Jesus is always with the poor. We evangelize not simply to give but also to discover and to receive.¹⁶ Though we have been called to the margins by the story that is told to us by the church, we can’t hear that story completely without the constant help of the stranger, the other, and the marginalized. I learned more about Jesus from the angry, body pierced, hermaphroditic youth at the “Jesus Rave” than I taught.

That’s why evangelism is more than simply doing good things for the poor. The land is full of once thriving inner city churches that once had a mission, were once a home for a vibrant worshipping community, that in their present dwindled state, now content themselves with providing social services for the poor—using their endowments, or the few older members who are left, for running a clothes closet or food pantry for the poor. The gospel empowers the poor to tell the rich a story that the rich

have trouble hearing. The gospel enjoins the rich not simply to do nice things for the poor but rather to join the poor in praising the God who for all our sakes became poor. I agree therefore with Gustavo Gutiérrez who says, “the proclamation of the gospel, will be genuinely liberating when the poor themselves become its messengers.... It will not sound nice and it will not smell good.”¹⁷ We must never proclaim the gospel in such a way as to imply that the world has the intellectual resources to know just who and who is not on the margins. Jesus decenters all of us. That night in the warehouse, the youth taught me that *I* might be at the margin of Christ’s salvation and that where they were standing was truly “not far from the kingdom of God.”¹⁸

Thus Tony Campolo sends pairs of college students out to evangelize in the poorest parts of town, instructing them simply to knock on people’s doors and say two things: Tell us what God is doing in your life, and What would you like us to pray for? That’s evangelism that takes seriously the sort of God who hangs out at the margins, that begins with the assumption that anytime we move toward the margins, God got there before us. God is always inviting to a party people whom we wouldn’t be caught dead with on a Saturday night on the outskirts of Birmingham. Read Luke 14.

I once served a failing inner city congregation that decided, through an evangelistic effort, to get back in touch with our neighborhood. Door-to-door visits followed, along with all the other techniques that were recommended by Baptists. To our shock, it worked! We actually succeeded in attracting new people to our church. Yet we soon discovered, in day-to-day congregational interaction with these newly evangelized, that we had evangelized the wrong people! That is, we had not evangelized people who looked like us. We evangelized people whose needs were much more desperate, and more interesting, than ours. The result was a glorious renewal of the congregation. Those new Christians restored a primal sense of adventure to our life together, reminded us of what it was like to be received into a strange and quite wonderful story of God with us. From that experience I commend evangelism as a major means of reawakening any boring, predictable mainline congregation.

Yoder says that for anything to be “evangelical” it must first be news:

It says something particular that would not be known and could not be believed were it not said. Second, it must mean functionally that this “news” is attested as *good*; it comes across to those whom it addresses as helping, as saving, as *shalom*. It must be public, not esoteric,... [it] tells the world something it did not know and could not believe before. It tells the world what is the world’s own calling and destiny, not by announcing either a utopian or a realistic goal to be imposed on the whole society, but by pioneering a paradigmatic demonstration of both the power and the practices that define the shape of restored humanity. The confessing people of God is the new world on its way.¹⁹

The gospel’s news is news not so much as novelty but as difference, strangeness when compared with the world’s expectations for how it is going to be saved. And according to the Acts of the Apostles, it is the church that must be dragged kicking and screaming into evangelism by a God who keeps getting to the margins before us.

As Wesleyan theologian Albert Outler once wrote:

Give us a church whose members believe and understand the gospel of God's healing love of Christ to hurting men and women. Give us a church that speaks and acts in consonance with its faith—not only to reconcile the world but to turn it upside down! Give us a church of spirit-filled people in whose fellowship life speaks to live, love to love, and faith and trust respond to God's grace. And we shall have a church whose witness in the world will not fail and whose service to the world will transform it.²⁰

This surely implies that in most evangelism, those most in need of conversion, those who are continually surprised by the strangeness of the gospel, are those who are in the church. I think of that nasty little story Jesus told against us, the parable of the woman and the yeast (Luke 13:21 ff.). This is the only parable in a series that features a woman. It is a parable that uses the negative biblical image of yeast in a positive way. The kingdom of God grows through the actions of someone on the margins (a woman) doing something a bit odd (hiding smelly, putrid yeast in a lump of dough). If you've never been evangelized by someone on the margins, whom you thought that you were evangelizing, you probably won't know what Jesus meant in this parable.

Perhaps that's why when it comes to the realization of resurrection, it's the marginalized (i.e. women) who are the first to get it. Mary Magdalene is the chief resurrection witness, the only person to figure prominently in all four gospel accounts. All we know about her is that before she became part of the Jesus Movement she was possessed by "seven devils." It's as if the gospel writers say, "If you are going to believe in the truth of the resurrection of Jesus, you'll have to give credence to the testimony of this person on the margins."

Karl Barth was big on preaching, yet he pleaded, toward the end of his life, for an ecclesial evangelism that was more than words, a witness that was made at the margins:

The community does not speak with words alone. It speaks by the very fact of its existence in the world; by its characteristic attitude to world problems; and, moreover and especially, by its silent service to all the handicapped, weak, and needy in the world. It speaks, finally, by the simple fact that it prays for the world. It does all this because this is the purpose of its summons by the Word of God.²¹

In other words, the church, true to its vocation, is assigned by God sometimes not to preach, but simply to be there, to stand there. It's where God makes us stand that is the oddity. The challenge is therefore not to be effective, not to produce more disciples, or to win. The greatest challenge in evangelism in the twenty-first century may be just to be where God is, standing or serving, preaching or reaching where God is. I suppose that's why the last thing the Risen Christ told us, before ascending to the throne was, "Go!" (Matt 28). The story that we preach in the Sundays of Lent, in the rituals of Holy Week, tells us where God has gone—outside of town, on a cross overlooking the garbage dump of the Holy City, on the margins. Now, at Pentecost, God gathers people "from every nation under heaven," many of whom make us uncomfortable. Let us go forth and join the party.

Notes

1. Bryan P. Stone puts it this way: "It is precisely from a position of marginality that the church is best able to announce peace and to bear witness to God's peaceable reign in such a way as to invite others to take seriously the subversive implications of that reign" (11). Stone's new book on evangelism is just about the best thing we've had on the subject of post-Christendom evangelism. He works the idea of marginality and evangelism wonderfully well. This article is inspired by Stone's book, which crystallized many of my thoughts on this subject. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2006).
2. James R. Adams, *So You Can't Stand Evangelism? A Thinking Person's Guide to Church Growth* (Boston: Cowley, 1994), 22.
3. Ibid., 12.
4. Ibid., 36.
5. Ibid., 14.
6. Ibid., 15.
7. Ibid., 69.
8. Bryan P. Stone notes that Adams is a prime example of what George Lindbeck has called the liberal "experiential-expressive" approach to theological doctrine (Stone, 154-157). Stone shows well that, when it comes to evangelism, most of us, whether we think of ourselves as "liberals" or "conservatives," "mainliners" or "evangelicals," are all "experiential-expressivists." We reduce the gospel to an expression of personal experience that we name as "gospel." See Lindbeck's discussion of the "experiential-expressive" in his *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 179.
9. John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1997), 73.
10. It is not only accomodationist but also arrogant to claim that you have found the center or the middle of anything as complex as the church. See Robert Edgar's attempt to make the boring middle of the road an ecclesiastical virtue: *Middle Church: Reclaiming the Moral Values of the Faithful Majority from the Religious Right* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).
11. The Western press has invented the term "Moslem fundamentalists" or "Islamicist fanatics" to describe Moslems who are very serious about Islam. Christians must not allow the press to do this to us. When Christians love enemies, share bread with the *poor* at the table of the Lord, refuse violence and forgive sins, we're not being "fundamentalists" or "sectarian." We're simply being faithful to the sort of God who has met us in Jesus Christ. We are refusing to let Caesar define "the center."
12. Lesslie Newbigin has pointed to the Bible's odd "repeated narrowing" of the story of salvation until that story gets posited on one people on the margins of the Empire who are elected to be God's mission. *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1995), 34. This God elects to do a universal work through a particular, peculiar people who are marginalized by the official history of the Empire.
13. Sören Kierkegaard, *Attack upon "Christendom"* trans. Walter Lowrie (Boston: Beacon, 1956).
14. Stone, 168.
15. Ibid., 172.
16. Ibid., 217.
17. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1983), 22, as quoted in Stone, 229.
18. Stone notes a government report that some twenty-five percent of the homeless in the U.S. have serious mental illnesses. Up to fifty percent of the homeless have substance abuse problems. When I read that I realized why those churches that minister to the homeless seem so much more alive, spiritually. The homeless, for a number of reasons including their mental instability, keep inviting an overly stabilized and centrist church to the margins. John Wesley thought that there wasn't much wrong with any Methodist that couldn't be cured by regular visits with prisoners in jails. See Willimon, *Basic United Methodist Beliefs* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2007), chap. 8.
19. John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood, Essays Ecumenical and Ecclesiological* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1998), 373.
20. Albert C. Outler, *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit*, Nashville: Tidings, 1971.
21. *Evangelical Theology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), 38.