

PROTESTANT EVANGELISM OR CATHOLIC EVANGELIZATION? A study in Methodist approaches

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This paper was read at the
Methodist Sacramental Fellowship Public Meeting
during the Methodist Conference of 1992
in Newcastle-upon-Tyne

The Decade - of Evangelism or Evangelization?

If we are Protestants, we are living through a decade of evangelism. If we are Catholics, we are living through a decade of evangelization. Does the difference in the two words matter? For some people the answer is that it matters not a scrap: the two terms are interchangeable.¹ The argument of this lecture, however, is that there is a sharp and significant difference, and that it behoves Methodists, who are both Catholic and Protestant in their theology and spirituality, to pay some attention to this.² The Catholic term 'evangelization' is, I suggest, much more akin to Methodist understandings than is the Protestant term 'evangelism.' In the course of this paper we shall see that the methods of John Wesley, and his brother Charles, were 'Catholic' rather than 'Protestant.' Because of this, we will suggest, Methodists have a great deal to share with fellow Protestants about styles of evangelism. Methodists are open to contemporary Roman Catholic missionary thinking about communicating the Gospel and about discipling the Kingdom.

The Rise of Evangelism

The terms 'evangelism' and 'evangelization' are comparative late-comers in Christian vocabulary. Rare indeed are the sightings of either term before the mid-nineteenth century. An evangelist was one of the writers of the four Gospels or a title of an office in the early church, and that virtually was it! Neither the term 'evangelism' ('the preaching or promulgation of the Gospel; the work performed by an evangelist') nor 'evangelization' ('the action or work of preaching the Gospel') is used by either John or Charles Wesley in any sense equivalent to the Oxford English Dictionary's two definitions.³ The simplest way of accounting for this is that neither of these nouns nor the verb from which they derive appear in the King James Version of the Bible. The Greek verb *euangelizein* is always there rendered as 'to preach the gospel.'⁴ But in this lies the pointer to the deeper reason why 'evangelism' was not a term in general use. The 'Good News' had already been preached everywhere in western Europe, and those who had heard had been baptized. 'Christendom' had been established and in England, as in other countries, everyone was in principle a member of the national church. Evangelism was not necessary within a community where everyone was baptized and a member of a parish. In 'Christendom' shepherds (in Latin, *pastors*) are set over congregations (Latin, *grex*, a flock) in order 'to teach and admonish.' The church officer called an evangelist was no longer needed. Even today the ordinals of

most denominations affirm that priests and ministers are pastors, entrusted with Christ's flock in the pattern of the Good Shepherd. In their training they are 'taught pastoral theology, and only rarely theology of mission.'⁵ To be sure, some of the sheep may be lost and some may be confused, but there will be no suggestion that they need to have the Good News preached to them for the first time. It was, and apparently still is, taken for granted that the minister works among people who were, or are, already 'Christians.'

But as new factors emerged in the eighteenth century a new discovery was made. Industrial revolution, migration to the cities or to the colonies, and enlightenment indifferentism and deism joined to lead to an increasing number of nominal believers. Such 'Christians' needed 'awakening' and 'revival.' New psychological methods were developed to bring about awakenings and revivals. The need for awakening and accompanying techniques for achieving awakening are the two components of an ideology of evangelism. This developed first in North America, and only then, often by imitation, in Britain and other European countries. We see this happening in the case of John Wesley. On 11 October 1739 he read for the first time the most seminal book for revivalistic evangelism. This was Jonathan Edwards's *A Faithful Narrative of a Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls*, first published in 1738. Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) wrote, 'there is a difference between having an opinion that God is holy and gracious, and having a sense of that holiness and grace – just as there is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet and having a sense of its sweetness ... The former rests only in the head ... but the heart is concerned with the latter.' Edwards, a pioneer in psychology as well as one of the greatest of Calvinist theologians, showed how liminal experiences of terror, dread, panic in the face of death, judgement and eternal damnation could lead to 'conversion,' a cleansed conscience, and to a sense of God as gracious.⁶ In this condition the soul is awakened. Here we see the root of the popularist misconception that evangelists work by 'dangling people over hell-fire.' A reading of Edwards' famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* suggests however that there might be some grounds for this misconception.⁷

The first Great Awakenings, as they are called, were thus already running their course in Colonial America when Wesley began his travelling ministry. Some of the ambiguity in Methodist evangelistic activity is to be attributed to John Wesley's own ambivalence about what was happening in the 'Awakenings' of New England as described by Jonathan Edwards.⁸ But it was the second series of Great Awakenings, taking place at the turn of the century, that moulded and shaped nineteenth century American understandings of evangelism.⁹ The distinguished American Methodist church historian, Albert Outler, sums up what happened in the Second Great Awakening. He wrote that

'this immense and complex upwelling of the Spirit rescued the Christian cause and defined American Protestantism for the better part of a century. It reconquered the Eastern seaboard from the deists; it helped conquer the opening frontiers of the boisterous West. It invented the camp meeting as a new way of getting the gospel to the people. It turned revivalism from an episodic affair to a permanent institution. It relegated the sacraments to a marginal role and its own theological ethos came to be identified as the distinctive meaning of the word 'evangelical' in America.'¹⁰

British Methodists may well respond to two words at least in this passage: 'camp

meeting'! The mythology of Primitive Methodism suggests that Methodism was not so much born in song, as at Mow Cop. But again notice the derivative nature of nineteenth century Methodist revivalism. The Camp Meeting was an American invention (in which we note, in passing, Francis Asbury had a share).¹¹ So, too, was much of the vocabulary, methodology and theory. These were systematized in the work of Charles G Finney (1792-1875). Another North American church historian, Robert T Handy, describes Finney's work like this:

A man of great self-confidence, Finney set out deliberately to stir up revivals wherever he went. He developed the system of 'new measures' to accomplish this. Services were called at 'unseasonable hours' and were often 'protracted' over a period of days so that a resistant congregation could be 'broken down.' Prayer-circles, inquiry sessions, cottage-meetings and personal instruction went along with the main services, helping to create an atmosphere conducive to the desired decision for Christ. Prayers were usually highly emotional, direct and uttered with particular sinners in mind. Women were invited to pray aloud in mixed assemblies – a radical step at the time. The evangelist did not hesitate to use harsh and colloquial language, believing that such means were justified in the effort to save resisting souls. Of particular effectiveness among the 'new measures' was the 'anxious bench' or 'mourner's seat,' where those in deep spiritual distress about their destiny were gathered directly under the Awakener's eye.¹²

Charles Finney set out the theory of all this in two profoundly influential works, *Lectures in Revivals of Religion* (1835) and *Lectures on Systematic Theology* (1846-7). Thus, theologically and ethically, nineteenth century revivalism grew into 'evangelism,' so much so that, for many, 'evangelism' is synonymous with 'revivalism.' Its two basic themes were simplistic to the point of empty-headedness. The Gospel was summarized as deliverance from hell-fire and damnation and the Christian life set forth as a rigid and repressive personal morality. There were further consequences, and Albert Outler describes these well.

This Protestant tradition was largely 'Montanist' in its ecclesiology (low-church, free-church): anti-sacerdotal, anti-sacramental, anti-intellectualist. It made a pejorative distinction between speculative theology and existential faith. It was suspicious of a learned clergy. It regarded conversion as more typically the climax of Christian experience than its initiation. It insisted on personal religion as the only real essence of Christianity.¹³

The point of all this will not be missed. Students still come into our colleges nurtured by transatlantic evangelical (revivalist) literature. Their role-models are often American evangelists (revivalists). We may hear a new kind of pulpit voice which speaks with a mid-Atlantic accent. We may recognize, too, in British Methodism the suspicion of a 'learned ministry.' We also suffer from its widespread anti-sacramentalism. This is part, I suggest, of this prevalent ideology arising out of nineteenth century revivalism. It has served, in many circles, to give 'evangelism' as a concept a bad name. As the Irish Methodist scholar, William Abrahams, a man deeply committed to the proclamation of the Gospel, admits: 'At the very best, most modern evangelism hands over two things: deeply reduced fragments of the Christian message and the personalistic debris of the Christian moral tradition.'¹⁴

Revivalism is one strand within the 'Church Growth' understanding of mission and evangelism associated with the name of Donald McGavran.¹⁵ We could say, 'No Charles Finney – no Donald McGavran.' In American practice, if not in theory, church growth has much to do with desire to have very large churches, which operate in competition with other churches of other denominations. Church membership figures are based in many surveys on the numbers of those calling themselves 'born again.' Thus in the annual Barna report, *What Americans Believe* for 1991, 'born again' people are defined as those who say that they have made a personal commitment to Christ and 'believe that when they die they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior.'¹⁶ This definition is pure 'revivalism.' Although Donald McGavran does insist upon 'feeding and folding,' ('Faithfulness in proclamation and finding is not enough. There must be faithful after-care'), a personal relationship to Jesus is still the only real essence of Christianity.¹⁷ Thus, in Barna's words, 'Currently just 35 per cent of the adult population can be deemed to be born again ... This leaves two out of three American adults yet to be changed through the message of salvation by grace, through faith in Christ.'¹⁸ In the American situation George Barna declares, 'according to this year's study, next Sunday more than half of the people who attend a church worship service (52%) will not be born again Christians!'¹⁹ Of course, it is just possible they may be deeply committed in other ways, in social action or sacramental devotion, but Barna makes the point for us: being 'born again' is what matters.

Wesleyan Patterns of Evangelism

The ambiguities in life and practice in contemporary British Methodism are such that some of those who hear or read this will have had no difficulty at all with revivalistic theology as the basis of evangelistic activity. Others will have experienced profound disquiet. Since it is not given to any one to be dispassionate in these matters, you will already be aware that I too share a profound unease about the theology and practice of revivalistic forms of evangelism. I make three suggestions why many Methodists (from all over the world as well as from these islands) have grave hesitations about 'born again' Christianity.

The first lies in a long tradition deriving from John Wesley himself about the nature of salvation. He could not have made this plainer than when he wrote in 1745:

By salvation I mean, not barely (according to the vulgar notion) deliverance from hell, or going to heaven, but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy and truth. This implies all holy and heavenly tempers, and by consequence all holiness of conversation.²⁰

Being born again is but the means of entrance into a whole process of salvation, which Wesley equates with 'holiness' or 'sanctification.'

Second, Methodists nourished in the tradition of the Wesleys have great difficulty about denominational triumphalism. We are not happy if this should imply that we want our churches to grow and expand, in rivalry with, or at the expense of other churches. Recall the verse of Charles Wesley, written in 1755:

When first sent forth to minister the Word
Say, did we preach ourselves or Christ the Lord,
Was it our aim Disciples to collect
To raise a Party, or to found a Sect?

No; but to spread the Power of Jesus' name,
Repair the Wall of our Jerusalem
Revive the Piety of Ancient Days,
And fill the Earth with our Redeemer's praise.²¹

There is a deep resistance in many of us to raising a party, or to founding or to being a sect. We do not feel at ease with evangelistic activity as a propaganda exercise, 'collecting' disciples, playing a numbers game.

Third, those Methodists who stand within the authentic tradition of the Wesleys are not impressed by 'uncontrolled, stampeding growth.' George Hunter, who uses these words in his excellent survey of what is to be learned from the 'church growth' school, *To Spread the Power; Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit*, cites these statistics for eighteenth century Methodism:²²

| | | |
|------|--------------|-----------------|
| 1768 | 40 circuits | 27,341 members |
| 1778 | 60 circuits | 40,089 members |
| 1788 | 99 circuits | 66,375 members |
| 1798 | 149 circuits | 101,712 members |

These are not the statistics of a great ingathering or a mass movement. The reason for this slow but sure growth lies in John Wesley's own direct teaching. His helpers were to preach in as many places as they could and to start as many classes as they could, but they were never to preach without starting classes. As he noted in his *Journal* for Sunday 13 March 1743: 'The devil himself desires nothing more than this, that the people of any place should be half awakened and then left to themselves to fall asleep again.' Wesley's teaching was formalized in the *Larger Minutes* of 1763:

Q. Is it advisable for us that we preach in as many places as we can without forming any societies?

A. By no means. We have made the trial in many places; and that for a considerable time. But the seed has fallen as by the way-side. There is scarce any fruit of it remaining.

Q. But what particular inconveniences do you observe when Societies are not formed?

A. These among many others. 1. The Preachers cannot give proper instruction and exhortation to them that are convinced of sin; 2. They cannot watch over each other in love; Nor, 3. Can the believers bear each other's burden, and build each other up in faith and holiness.

Wesleyan Evangelism as Initiation into Discipleship

We see from these questions and answers that Wesley was far more concerned with initiation into discipleship than with the proclamation of the Gospel to as many people as he could possibly reach. He had also worked out the process of discipling and this bears close attention. People who responded to Wesley or his preachers were instructed to join a class. Before they were allowed to do this they had to give clear

evidence that they desired to be saved from their sins. After three months in a class, where they were taught about justification and the new birth, they were in a position to be admitted to membership of the Society. To do this they needed to assent to the General Rules: 'it is expected of all those who continue in these Societies that they shall continue to evidence their desire of salvation – first by doing no harm ...; second by doing all the good they can, such as ...; and third by attending upon the ordinances of God.' These ordinances were then defined as the public worship of God, ministry of the Word, either read or expounded, the Supper of the Lord, private prayer, searching of the Scriptures, and fasting or abstinence. The classes were intended to 'spread the power of Jesus's name,' and men and women were continually challenged to press to 'sanctification in this life,' or to be made whole in love. That was salvation as Wesley understood it.

In this we discern the Wesleyan *ordo salutis*, or order of salvation. First there is awakening to the fact of lostness and the sense of desperate need. Preventing or prevenient grace is at work here. Then there comes justifying grace, which establishes the fundamental sense of new birth and assurance of pardon and forgiveness. This was the main task of the class meeting. But then as Methodists became members of the United Societies there came the other obligations summed up in the *General Rules*. The 'awakened,' having discovered new birth and justification, were to do good, to avoid all known sin, and to pursue the means of grace. As members of the United Societies they were eventually to be enrolled in the Bands and the Select Societies. As seekers after perfect love, the Methodists were to meet for encouragement, or rebuke, or advice, from peer groups. Sanctifying grace was expected to be at work in the bands and the select societies.

The organisation of all this is set out in the *Larger Minutes* (1763):

Q1. How are the people divided who desire to be under your care?

A. Into the United Societies, the Bands, the Select Societies, and the Penitents.

Q2. How do these differ from each other?

A. The United Societies (which are the largest of all) consist of awakened persons: part of these, who are supposed to have remission of sins, are more closely united in the Bands. Those of the Bands who seem to walk in the light of God compose the Select Societies. Those of them who are for the present fallen from grace meet apart as Penitents.

Q3. What are the Rules of the United Societies?

A. Those that follow. (Then they were read.)

Q4. What are the Rules of the Bands?

A. They are these. (Which were read and considered.)

Q5. What are the Rules of the Select Societies?

A. The same and these three,

1. Let nothing spoken in this Society be spoken again; no, not even to the members of it.

2. Every member agrees absolutely to submit to his Minister in all indifferent things.

3. Every member, till we can have all things in common, will bring once a week, *bona fide*, all he can spare toward a common stock.

Q6. Are there any peculiar Rules for the Penitents?

A. Not yet.

Even from so brief an account as I have given of early Methodist theology and practice three key points seem to emerge to summarise Wesleyan understandings of preaching, conversion, initiation, and discipling.

1. For the Wesleys, primary evangelism (a term they never used) was the midwifery of the Spirit, enabling the new birth. The goal was not merely conversion, a term Wesley rarely used.²³ No more was it justification, nor a sense of pardon, nor a claim to be 'born again.' The goal was nothing less than the 'restoration of the soul to its primitive health,' 'a recovery of the divine nature,' a life lived 'in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy and truth.'

2. For the Wesleys, initiation was into community. There was no point in scattering the seed for the birds of the air to pluck it up. Preaching at random simply meant that the preachers could not instruct the hearers in justification, but more serious even than that, the believers were not able to bear one another's burdens, and so to build each other up in faith and holiness. John Wesley, Albert Outler remarked, 'had grasped the secret of the Word made social.'²⁴

Woe to him, whose spirits droop,
To him who falls alone!
He has none to lift him up,
To help his weakness on;
Happier we each other keep,
We each other's burdens bear;
Never need our footsteps slip
Upheld by mutual prayer.²⁵

3. For the Wesleys, discipling was sacramental. Attendance upon the Means of Grace was obligatory, and among these was 'the Supper of the Lord.' It is rather endearing that in 1788 John Wesley should have reprinted 'a Discourse written some fifty five years ago, for the use of my pupils at Oxford,' entitled 'The Duty of Constant Communion,' i.e. Sermon CI. But this fifty-five year old sermon was needed lest Methodists should forget in 1788 that which Wesley had intended in the *General Rules*. John and Charles Wesley, we may add, had grasped the secret of the Word made sacramental.²⁶

Come, to the Supper come,
Sinners, there still is room,
Every soul may be His guest,
Jesus gives the general word;
Share the monumental feast,
Eat the supper of your Lord.

In this authentic sign
Behold the stamp Divine:
Christ revives His sufferings here,
Still exposes them to view;
See the Crucified appear,
Now believe He died for you.²⁷

In the light of all the Wesleyan evidence concerning initiation and discipling (including the social and sacramental life), it would appear that for Methodists 'evangelization,' with its overtones of continuation and process, is a better term than 'evangelism' and its associations with individualism and revivalism.²⁸

In the third part of this lecture I want to compare Wesleyan evangelization with the way in which new thinking in the Roman Catholic Church over the last thirty years has been working itself out.²⁹ I refer of course to the profound insights of Vatican II (1963-5), represented in the two Conciliar Documents, *Lumen Gentium* and *Ad Gentes*, together with *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), in which Paul VI has defined evangelization: ‘what matters is to evangelize human culture and cultures (not in a purely decorative way as it were by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and to the very roots) ... this transposition has to be done with discernment, seriousness, respect and competence.’³⁰ Rather than discuss the theory of this, I propose a brief case study.

Modern Roman Catholic Evangelization : A Brief Case Study

One constant joy in teaching missiology both to ministerial students and to wider circles has been the recommending of Vincent Donovan’s *Christianity Rediscovered*, first published in 1978, with a second revised edition in 1982. Those who already know this book will share the pleasure in revisiting it. Others will want to read it as soon as possible. It is a model of the process of ‘evangelization.’ It is also of enormous importance to those who must cross the cultural frontiers as ‘evangelists,’ or bearers of the good news of Jesus Christ in modern European or North American societies. As Vincent Donovan himself reflected, ‘Evangelization in America presents many different and interesting challenges. In this book I describe work among a famous African tribe. I realised when I came back to America, that here on the home front I had left behind me one of the most exotic tribes of all – the young people of America.’³¹ We are surrounded in Western Europe by our own youth sub cultures and to them the Gospel must also be brought. Donovan wrote:

A young person in an American University, reflecting on the line of thought presented in this book, offered some advice: ‘in working with the young people of America, do not try to call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as the place may seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before.’ Good missionary advice, and a beautiful description of the unpredictable process of evangelization, a process leading to that new place where none of us has ever been before.³²

Donovan’s personal story is briefly told. Having worked as a priest-missionary of the Holy Ghost Fathers in East Africa for many years, he sought, in May 1966, permission from his bishop to go to the Masai people ‘unencumbered with the burden of selling them our school system, or begging for their children for our schools, or carrying their sick, or giving them medicine.’³³ Donovan wished to go to the Masai to talk to them about God and the gospel of Jesus Christ, and just that! He had no common vocabulary – there are, for example, no words in the Masai language for person, grace, freedom, spirit, creation, immortality. He had no scriptures to which to refer and no church buildings into which to invite his hearers. This was primary evangelization, and he was on his own.

From his richly evocative and intriguing book I take just four stories which seem to sum up the evangelization process. At the very earliest stage there was the encounter between Donovan and those who would gather around him. ‘The process followed was simple. I would mention a religious theme or thought and ask to hear their

opinion of it.³⁴ In his very first week, he asked some Masai to tell him what they thought about God.

I was more than startled when a young Masai elder stood up and . said, 'If ever I run into God, I will put a spear through him.' Here he was immersed on one side in an unshakable belief in the existence of God, and faced on the other with the numbing reality of a life that includes pain and sickness, death of children and loss of cattle. This young elder was trying to come to terms with a God who seemed to be responsible for it all.³⁵

Donovan comments that these thoughts are not so far from those of many Europeans. This is the first lesson in communicating the Good News. Here in Europe, or there in Africa, evangelization begins where people are, not where some Christians would wish them to be. But there is also another 'first' lesson. People in every place know about 'God' and have something to say on this to Christians.

As Donovan went on in his own self-appointed work, he began to meet the Masai in their belief and unbelief, sharing their anguish as one human being with another. He records this moment when a Masai elder made this great speech to him. The word used to convey the idea of 'faith,' said the elder, is not a very satisfactory one in the Masai language.

It meant literally '*to agree to.*' I, myself, knew that the word had that shortcoming. He said 'to believe' like that was similar to a white hunter shooting an animal with his gun from a great distance. Only his eyes and his fingers took part in the act. We should find another word. He said that for a man really to believe is like a lion going after its prey. His nose and eyes and ears pick up the prey. His legs give him the speed to catch it. All the power of his body is involved in the terrible death leap and single blow to the neck with the front paw, the blow that actually kills. And as the animal goes down the lion envelops it in his arms (Africans refer to the front legs of an animal as its arms), pulls it to himself, and makes it part of himself. This is the way a lion kills. This is the way a man believes. This is what faith is.³⁶

Donovan describes the silence and amazement with which he heard these words. But the elder had not finished:

'We did not search you out, Padri,' he said to me. 'We did not even want you to come to us. You searched us out. You followed us away from your house into the bush, into the plains, into the steppes where our cattle are, into the hills where we take our cattle for water, into our villages, into our homes. You told us of the High God, how we must search for him, even leave our land and people to find him. But we have not done this. We have not left our land. We have not searched for him. He has searched for us. He has searched *us* out and found us. All the time we think we are the lion. In the end, the lion is God.'³⁷

Donovan comments: 'The lion is God. Of course. Goodness and kindness and grace and divine presence and creating power were here before I got here.' Otherwise how could anyone hear the Gospel? Catholic and Methodist theology both know prevenient or 'preventing' grace.

In this way the Gospel of the Lord Jesus was heard and taught among the Masai. How cultural differences (the first century Jesus, the twentieth century American missionary, and the timeless Masai tradition) were resolved and how they were come to terms with is fully and fascinatingly described. But here I want to deal with that

part of the evangelization process which has to do with initiating and discipling. Well over half of *Christianity Rediscovered* deals with the response of the Masai and the way in which they began to work out their discipleship in terms of their own culture.

First, for them, came Baptism. Donovan tells the story:

I told them I had finished the imparting of the Christian message inasmuch as I could ... Now it was up to them. They could reject it or accept it. I could do no more. If they did accept, of course, it required public baptism. So I would go away for a week or so and give them the opportunity to make their judgement on the gospel of Jesus Christ.³⁸

Wesley had discovered in his own preaching that it was good to make those who were moved by his preaching come back at five o'clock on the next morning, and so to give those who responded a chance to think out what their first reactions implied. Donovan likewise was not hassling the Masai into the kingdom. Like Wesley, he had the strictest standards about the admission to the community:

So I stood in front of the assembled community and began: 'This old man sitting here has missed too many of our instruction meetings. He was always out herding cattle. He will not be baptized with the rest. These two on this side will be baptized, because they always attended and understood very well what we talked about. So did this young mother. She will be baptized. But that man there has obviously not understood the instructions. That lady there has scarcely believed the gospel message. They cannot be baptized. And this warrior has not shown enough effort ...'³⁹

So Donovan says he proceeded, only to be interrupted firmly by an old man of the community, Ndangoya. Ndangoya said politely but firmly,

Padri, why are you trying to break us up and separate us? During the whole year that you have been teaching us, we have talked about these things when you have not been here, at night, around the fire. Yes, there have been lazy ones in this community. But they have been helped by those with much energy. There are stupid ones in the community, but they have been helped by those who are intelligent. Yes, there are ones with little faith in the village, but they have been helped by those with much faith. Would you turn out and drive off the lazy ones and the ones with little faith and the stupid ones? From the first day I have spoken for these people and I speak for them now. Now on this day one year later, I can declare for them and for all this community that we have reached the step in our lives where we can say, 'We believe.'⁴⁰

Ndangoya had grasped that the Word had become social, as perhaps Donovan had not. Ndangoya is nearer Wesley's understanding of the discipling process as one in which we each share what we have, be it lesser or greater:

Help us to build each other up,
Our little stock improve;
Increase our faith, confirm our hope,
And perfect us in love.⁴¹

Evangelization is not so much about the personal response of the individual, but about the 'us-ness' of the community, the members of which 'together travel on,' and 'bear each other's pain.' Within such a community the 'evangelist' is also a learner and sharer, as we see so clearly with Donovan here. 'We' rather than 'I' is the Wesleyan

pronoun. It is 'we' who

... join, with mutual care,
To fight our passage through
And kindly help each other on,
Till all receive the starry crown.⁴²

It is 'we' who 'rise renewed in perfect love.'

Baptism, Ndagoya understood, was a sacrament of, and for, the community. In *Christianity Rediscovered* the Eucharist is likewise seen as a sacrament of, and for, the community. Donovan tells of experiences some years later in the evangelization process. Small Masai groupings were now places where Mass was celebrated, and the celebration was carried on throughout the whole life of these communities. We get a sense of this as Donovan writes:

I used to look forward to evening Mass in Ole Sikii's village. It began when I drove my Landrover up to his village. The cows were just returning with their tired and parched herders. Children swarmed all over me with their heads bowed low in the typical gesture of a young Masai person greeting an adult. They waited to be touched on the top of the head, and if you did not do it, they kept butting you gently until you did. Elders left their work of standing at the various gates, supervising the return of the cows, assuring themselves that each cow, by name not by number, had returned safely, greeted me and went back to their work. Mothers, scattered throughout the village near all their houses had already begun the milking of the returning cows, but they heard you come in.⁴³

Life was about to turn into liturgy.

In every house in the village, the consciousness of the evening Mass had penetrated to some extent. In varying degrees, everyone in the village was thinking of the Mass, was turning towards the Mass, in a sense was already participating in the Mass, because it began when I drove in. Or long before. It was a strange kind of Mass. No church building, not even any special, fixed spot where it took place. As a matter of fact it moved around all over the village. It started in the spot where several elders had lighted a fire from two sticks of wood, even before I arrived.⁴⁴

And the liturgy had its own particular African indigenization.

An important act, on my part, before I entered the village, was to stoop down, scoop up a handful of grass, and present it to the first elders who greeted me. Grass was another sacred sign among the Masai, like spittle. Since their cattle, and they themselves, lived off grass, it was a vital and a holy sign to them, a sign of peace and happiness and well-being.⁴⁵

The scooping up of the handful of grass had its original sacramental value. Donovan describes this:

During stormy and angry arguments that might arise in their lives, a tuft of grass, offered by one Masai and accepted by the second, was an assurance that no violence would erupt because of the differences and arguments. No Masai would violate that sacred sign of peace offered, because it was not only a *sign* of peace; it *was* peace. Just as spittle was forgiveness. Such was the sacramental system of the Masai.⁴⁶

So, when Donovan arrived in a Masai village, he would pick up a tuft of grass and pass it on to the first elder who met him, with the words, 'The peace of Christ.' The grass would be accepted and passed on to his family, and they passed it on to neighbouring elders and their families. It had, says Donovan, to pass all through the village.

But sometimes the tuft of grass never returned. Some stormy and angry argument had fractured the well-being of the village. If there had been gross selfishness and hatefulness and lack of forgiveness, the African people knew they could make a sacrilege out of their life and worship by calling it the Body of Christ. If the grass had stopped there would be no Eucharist. One edition of *Christianity Rediscovered* has the subtitle 'An Epistle from the Masai.' There are many alleged Christian communities among us to whom that Epistle might be addressed. Certainly the Masai had perceived as deeply as anyone the meaning of 1 Corinthians 11. 24-6.

So the work of evangelization includes the sacramental life, the living within the Body of Christ. Donovan writes of his vision of the Eucharist. Sometimes, he says, this was turned into reality in the Masai villages, when there was the will to ask the Holy Spirit to overcome the weaknesses in the community. In the power of the Holy Spirit the African people may be able to say together: 'This – not just the bread and the wine, but the whole life of the village, its work, play, joy, sorrow, the homes, the grazing field, the flocks, the people – all this is my Body.' Then is salvation come to this house. Then, in the words of John Wesley, there is the 'restoration of the soul to its primitive health,' then there is the 'recovery of the divine nature,' then there is 'renewal in justice, mercy and truth.'

Conclusion

Were I to claim that what I have written is descriptive rather than prescriptive I should be laughed out of court. Yet there is a sense in which I make no prescriptions for other people about how they go about either evangelism or evangelization. I have tried to offer clarification about the difference between evangelism and revivalism, because as a teacher of mission I do not want evangelism to be a concept which people turn away from for the wrong reasons. As a teacher of Methodist theology I am anxious that Wesleyan insights into the nature of salvation inform our patterns of Church life, and perhaps offer some assurance to men and women engaged in our local churches that all the work of pastoral care, or befriending the stranger, bringing the newcomer into the fellowship, nurturing each other, and then all of us together searching for spiritual renewal through availing ourselves of every means of grace, is by no means a second rate evangelistic activity compared with 'real outreach' and 'mass conversions.'⁴⁷ On the contrary, it is true evangelization.

Furthermore, as an ordinary Christian I am daily aware of living in a world in which most people are not Christians and understand little or nothing of the Christian faith. For most people the good news has to be told for the first time. Perhaps they are people who live within one of the great world religions. Perhaps they are people who have grown up within one or other of the prevalent youth cultures. In these contexts I would much rather use the term evangelization than evangelism. For all such people the Christian message needs to be made known in a way in which they can understand it, question it, bring their own insights to bear upon it, and make their own response to it. This requires 'discernment, seriousness, respect and competence.' The way in

which this will happen is much more likely to be dialogue than proclamation.⁴⁸ And the process itself, by the grace of God, will lead us to a place where neither they nor we have ever been before.⁴⁹

NOTES

- 1 Cf William J Abraham: '*evangelism*, like its conceptual cousin *evangelization*, came into prominence only in the late nineteenth century. For arbitrary reasons the latter term got lost and has now surfaced in ecumenical circles as an alternative to *evangelism*. Somehow there is less stigma attached to the word *evangelization*, even though the usage from the nineteenth century to today makes it virtually impossible to separate these terms in meaning. Of course one can always stipulate a difference of meaning between them, but this does not alter the fact that historically the two mean much the same thing. People prefer the word *evangelization* because it gives them more freedom to change the meaning of the term and because it cuts them loose from the negative associations of the word *evangelism*. In my view nothing much hangs on the distinction.' *The Logic of Evangelism*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1989, pp 40-1. Abraham does not appear to have noticed that *evangelization* is the Roman Catholic term, even though he awards a high place to David Bohr's book, *Evangelization in America; Proclamation, Way of Life and the Catholic Church in the United States*, New York, Paulist Press, 1977.
- 2 Wesley, as has often been demonstrated, has his own fusion of protestant and catholic themes: faith *and* good works, scripture *and* tradition, the sovereignty of God *and* human freedom, the universality of grace *and* conditional election, original sin *and* Christian perfection. I concur with Outler's judgement that 'A Methodist has actually abandoned the Wesleyan tradition if and when he turns biblicist, or traditionalist, or existentialist, or rationalist. He has also repudiated Wesley's 'catholic spirit' when he starts berating, or excommunicating, others for views or practices which do not contradict the Christian basics.' Albert Outler, *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit*, Nashville, Tidings, 1972, p 42.
- 3 There is one reference to 'evangelists' in the index to *The Works of John Wesley, AM*. This has to do with the office of the evangelist in the early church, see *Works*, eleventh edition, John Mason, 1856, vol. vii, pp 261-3.
- 4 'Conversion' is similarly not part of the Wesleys' vocabulary. John wrote that it was 'a term I very rarely use because it is not in the New Testament.' Oxford Edition of the *Letters*, ed Frank Baker, vol. 3, p 266.
- 5 See Kenneth Cracknell and Christopher Lamb, *Theology on Full Alert*, British Council of Churches, 1986, pp 10ff. The situation described there is changing only very slowly.
- 6 For Jonathan Edwards, see Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, New York, William Sloane Associates, 1949. For an account of the Awakenings see Edwin S Gustad, *The Great Awakening in New England*, New York, Harpers, 1957.
- 7 In this sermon Edwards does actually picture the sinner dangling over the fiery pit by a single thread. Robert T Handy, however, calls this 'a rather untypical sermon.' *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada*, p 89.
- 8 The best account of the inter-relationships of the revivals in America and England is in Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, Epworth Press, 1989, pp 158-180. Wesley's own ambivalence to the American revivals is best exemplified in his relations with George Whitfield.
- 9 For these see such works as Bernard A Weisberger, *They Gathered at the River*;

- The Story of the Great Revivalists and their Impact upon Religion in America*, Boston, Little Brown and Co, 1958; Charles R Keller, *The Second Great Awakening in Connecticut*, New Haven, Yale, 1942, and Whitney R Cross, *The Burned Over District; The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850*, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1950.
- 10 Outler, *op cit*, p 60.
- 11 See Charles A Johnston, *The Frontier Camp Meeting; Religion's Harvest-Time*, Dallas, Southern Methodist University Press, 1955.
- 12 Handy, *op cit*, p 172.
- 13 Outler, *op cit*, p 61-2.
- 14 *The Logic of Evangelism*, p 141
- 15 The seminal work of Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, Grand Rapids Michigan, William B Eerdmans, 1970, is worth reading. Note his own remarks about methods of evangelism in Brazil, pp 26-7. From the proliferation of 'church growth' literature, I recommend a volume of essays from missiologists of various commitments, *Exploring Church Growth*, ed Wilbert R Shenk, Grand Rapids Michigan, William B Eerdmans, 1983. This book suggests renewed attention to ethnicity, eschatology and to ecclesiology, i.e. to the nature of the churches which should grow.
- 16 *What Americans Believe*, Ventura, California, Regal Books, 1991, p 304.
- 17 McGavran, p 15.
- 18 *op cit*, p 297
- 19 *ibid*, p 297
- 20 *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part One*, in the Oxford Edition of *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 11, edited by Gerald B Cragg, p 106.
- 21 For the background of these words see Frederick Gill, *Charles Wesley, the First Methodist*, Lutterworth Press, 1964, pp 170-1.
- 22 *op cit*, p 119. Hunter is citing Howard Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal*, Downers Grove, Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 1980.
- 23 See note 4, above. For an excellent treatment and modern Methodist examination of 'conversion' see George E Morris, *The Mystery and Meaning of Christian Conversion*, Nashville Discipleship Resources, 1981. Besides many other insights, George Morris is clear that 'Christian conversion means entering a new fellowship,' see pp 136ff.
- 24 *op cit*
- 25 John and Charles Wesley, *The Poetical Works*, edited by G Osborn, Wesleyan Methodist Conference Office, 1871, vol. 5, p 453. The first verse of this is also worth noting:
- Two are far better than one
For counsel, and for fight:
How can one be warm alone,
Or serve his God aright?
Join we then our hearts and hands,
Each to love provoke his friend,
Run the way of His commands
And keep them to the end.
- 26 Wesley held two views about the Lord's Supper. One is that it was or could be a 'converting' ordinance. On this see Henry Rack, *op cit*, pp 405ff. But by 1747 admission to the Lord's Supper was only by class ticket or special note, see Rack,

- ibid*, p 418.
- 27 John and Charles Wesley, *The Poetical Works*, edited by G Osborn, Wesleyan Methodist Conference Office, 1871, vol. 3, p 221, i.e. Hymn VII in *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, by John and Charles Wesley (1745).
- 28 Note the tough-minded views of Albert Outler about individualism: 'The essential fallacy in all unhealthy evangelism – in all its varieties – is in its hidden strategy of self-justification ... Do you want to be saved? Are you eager to flee from the wrath to come, while others perish in their sins?' *op cit*, p 36. Outler adds that the other kinds of pulpit questions: do you want 'peace of mind,' 'authentic self consciousness' and so on are but the obverse of these.
- 29 For an excellent up-to-date guide to issues of mission and evangelization from a mainly Roman Catholic perspective see Gerald Arbuckle, *Earthing the Gospel; An Inculturation Handbook for Pastoral Workers*. Geoffrey Chapman, 1990.
- 30 In Arbuckle, *op cit*, p 16.
- 31 Vincent J Donovan, *Rediscovering Christianity*. London, SCM Press 1978, p vii.
- 32 *ibid*
- 33 *ibid*, p 16.
- 34 *ibid*, p 41.
- 35 *ibid*, op 41-2.
- 36 *ibid*, p 63.
- 37 *ibid*
- 38 *ibid*, p 91
- 39 *ibid*, pp 91-2.
- 40 *ibid*, p 92
- 41 *Methodist Hymn Book*. No 717.
- 42 *Methodist Hymn Book*. No 716, *Hymns and Psalms*. No 375.
- 43 *op cit*, p 124.
- 44 *ibid*
- 45 *ibid*, pp 124-5.
- 46 *ibid*, p 125
- 47 William Abraham in *The Logic of Evangelism* is, despite his refusal to distinguish between the two terms, clearly on the side of the process rather than the single activity. He is critical of the concept of 'evangelism as proclamation.' In this, he says, 'whether or not people respond is not really the concern of the evangelist.' There are of course strengths in the concept of 'evangelism as proclamation.' 'The results are left entirely in the hands of God. Hence there is no need for manipulation, nor for anxious concern if no one responds.' p 47. Abraham comments on the Great Commission in Matthew 28, saying that 'even a superficial reading of the text shows that the emphasis falls not on proclamation but on making disciples, on baptizing, and on teaching ... There is simply no way in which sermons preached on television or radio can fulfill the minimum requirements laid out in Matthew 28 ...' pp 52-3. Using the example of Wesley, Abraham comes to similar conclusions to mine: 'we should begin to enrich our conception of evangelism by expanding it to embrace crucial elements of Christian initiation,' p 55, and later, 'in essence, what I am suggesting is that the church needs to reinstate the institution of the catechumenate.' p 174. Accordingly, he defines evangelism as 'that set of activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time.' p 95.
- 48 See Kenneth Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship; Christians and People of Other Faiths*, Epworth, 1986, for a discussion of the relationship of dialogue and

- evangelism, particularly in the New Testament, pp 23-35. Note my words there: 'But with the example of Paul before us we may ... conclude, in the strongest possible way, that evangelism is distorted if it is presented as happening only by monologue, by one-way proclamation.' p 29.
- 49 Since writing this paper, I have seen a lecture by Professor Franklin Littell, entitled 'United Methodists in a World of Religious Diversity,' in which he comments: 'Most serious, from a Wesleyan standpoint, has been our virtual abandonment of membership training and church discipline – a dereliction that weakens our impact on all fronts, and has often turned our joyful participation in inter-religious dialogue into an anxious and surly spiritual goal-tending.' (In *Fragments of Infinity; Essays in Religion and Philosophy*, ed Arvind Sharma, Prism Press, 1991, p 131.) Precisely! Because I am so concerned for inter-faith dialogue I need to affirm Wesleyan evangelization. We must have that confidence in the Gospel which sets us free from goal-keeping.

RECOMMENDED READING

- William Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1987.
- Gerald A Arbuckle, *Earthing the Gospel; An Inculturation Handbook for Pastoral Workers*. Geoffrey Chapman, 1990.
- Vincent J Donovan, *Rediscovering Christianity*, London, SCM Press, 1978.
- Robert T Handy, *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976.
- George G Hunter III, *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1987.
- W Douglas Weeks (ed), *What Should Methodists Teach? Wesleyan Tradition and Modern Diversity*, Nashville, Kingswood Books, 1990.
- George E Morris, *The Mystery and Meaning of Christian Conversion*, Nashville, Discipleship Resources, 1981.
- Albert Outler, *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit*, Nashville, Tidings, 1971.
- Wilbert R Shenk (ed), *Exploring Church Growth*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1983.
- David Lowes Watson, *Accountable Discipleship*, Nashville, Discipleship Resources, 1985.
- , *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, Nashville, Discipleship Resources, 1985.