

CONSIDERING
THE GREAT
COMMISSION

EVANGELISM
AND
MISSION
IN THE
WESLEYAN
SPIRIT

EDITED BY
W. STEPHEN GUNTER
ELAINE A. ROBINSON

Abingdon Press
Nashville

IRA J. TAYLOR LIBRARY
THE LIFE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

CONSIDERING THE GREAT COMMISSION
EVANGELISM AND MISSION IN THE WESLEYAN SPIRIT

Copyright © 2005 by Abingdon Press

All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, except as may be expressly permitted by the 1976 Copyright Act or in writing from the publisher. Requests for permission can be addressed to Abingdon Press, P.O. Box 801, 201 Eighth Avenue South, Nashville, TN 37202-0801, or e-mailed to permissions@abingdonpress.com.

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Considering the Great Commission : evangelism and mission in the Wesleyan spirit / edited by W. Stephen Gunter and Elaine Robinson.

p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-687-49363-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Missions—Theory. 2. Evangelistic work. 3. Wesley, John, 1703-1791.
4. Methodism. I. Gunter, W. Stephen, 1947- . II. Robinson, Elaine A., 1959- .

BV2063.C628 2005
266'.7—dc22

2005014098

All scripture quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, copyright 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Chapter 8 first appeared as "Saving Women: Re-visioning Contemporary Concepts of Evangelism," *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education* (October 2003), 16-31.

Quotations from *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* © 1968 by the United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.

Quotations from *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* © 1996 by the United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.

Quotations from *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* © 2004 by the United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Part I: Conceptualizing the Great Commission	
1. The Great Commission 1910-2010	7
Andrew F. Walls	
2. The Great Commission in an Age of Globalization	23
Dana L. Robert	
3. The Global Mission of The United Methodist Church	41
Elaine A. Robinson	
4. Jesus Christ: The Heart of the Great Commission	57
W. Stephen Gunter	
Part II: Contextualizing the Great Commission	
5. Megatrends That Challenge an Evangelizing Church	71
Achim Härtner	
6. Building the Church in Africa: Church Planting as an Inclusive Praxis	95
John Wesley Zwomunonditira Kurewa	
7. Evangelization and Church Growth: A Lesson from the Barrio ...	107
Harold J. Recinos	
8. Saving Women: Re-visioning Contemporary Concepts of Evangelism	119
Lacey Warner	

05 06 07 08 09 10 11 12 13 14—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The Means of Grace and the Promise of New Life in the Evangelism of John Wesley

Henry H. Knight III

A preacher warns of God's judgment and calls for a decision on the part of the hearers to accept God's forgiveness. A stranger approaches and, through a presentation of spiritual laws or a series of questions about our eternal destiny, invites us to accept Christ as our Savior. In both cases there is the urgent call for a decision now, at this moment, because whether one spends an eternity in heaven or hell could depend upon it. These are among the images that come to mind when North Americans hear the word "evangelism." But such images are stereotypes. Some who practice evangelism do come close to the stereotype; others are more careful, caring, and theologically nuanced than the images suggest. But whether done poorly or well, these forms of evangelism all understand salvation as a matter of eternal destiny—of going to heaven rather than hell. They believe that destiny is settled by an immediate decision to accept Christ and the forgiveness of one's sins. There is an urgency to share this message lest someone miss that opportunity and be lost eternally.

John Wesley and the movement he led were certainly concerned with the eternal destiny of persons. There was an urgency to proclaim the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. Yet Wesley never equated being saved with a decision we make; salvation was foremost a work of

God. Salvation involved much more than whether one went to heaven or hell; fundamentally, it was the reception of and growth in a new life of love. These two emphases—the content of salvation and the nature of divine activity—may be where Wesley is most different from many recent understandings of evangelism, and they are certainly his greatest contributions to our own evangelistic theory and practice.

Salvation as New Life

Wesley's understanding of human salvation was at the heart of a larger eschatological vision for all of creation. Ultimately, God will put an end "to sin and misery, and infirmity, and death" and reestablish "holiness and happiness" throughout the world.¹ Within this larger vision, Wesley believed it was God's intention to restore human beings to the divine image in which they were created and to do so in this life. Indeed, Wesley believed this eschatological transformation had already begun: through restoring the *imago Dei* in humans, God was already "renewing the face of the earth."²

Wesley understood the *imago Dei* to have three components. The first of these, the *natural image*, consisted of understanding, will (with various affections), and liberty (agency). The *political image* involved the responsibility to govern the creation. Most important was the *moral image*, in which humanity reflected the righteousness and holiness of God. Just as God is love, love for God and love for neighbor are the governing affections of humanity created in God's image. The effect of the fall into sin was the corruption of the moral image and the consequent distortion of the natural and political images. With the loss of love for God, the relationship with God was broken. With the loss of love for one's neighbor, immense suffering was unleashed by humanity upon the world. Because the affections had become unholy, the tendency to sin became rooted in the heart, so determining motivations and clouding vision that humanity could not escape the condition into which it had fallen. Only God could deliver humanity from this corruption by sin. That is precisely what God has done through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and is doing through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. The goal is the restoration of humanity "not only to the favour, but likewise to the image of God; implying not barely deliverance from sin but the being filled with the fullness of God."³ This, then, is salvation; "nothing short of this is Christian religion."⁴

Now if this is the goal, then evangelism cannot be construed in any way that would imply a salvation short of this goal. The end of evangelism is not justification but sanctification; growth in love is not subsequent to salvation—it is salvation. Evangelism in the Wesleyan tradition therefore must initiate persons into and sustain them in the process of sanctification that culminates in the heart perfected in love.

Grace as Transforming and Enabling

In his examination of how God works, Wesley simultaneously avoids two extremes. While insisting we have moral agency, or liberty, he denies we have absolute free will. Rather, in our fallen condition, our motivations for action, criteria for choices, and perspective on the world are governed by sin. The corruption of the will by sin is total; it is a disease that affects the entirety of human existence. This understanding Wesley holds in opposition to the views of some in his day that humanity is free by nature. If humanity did have natural free will, then the work of God would be, at most, persuasive. Through proclamation or other evangelistic means, the Holy Spirit would seek to elicit a decision, and because humanity could make that decision, the resulting conversion would not be so much an inward transformation of the heart as the resolution to turn to God and live a moral life. For Wesley, however, the corruption of sin was such that, apart from a gracious act of God, we could not make such a decision, much less live a moral life. Salvation is, indeed, by grace alone.

It is this consideration that has led many in the Augustinian and Calvinist traditions to insist grace must be irresistible. The logic is, if we cannot exercise our will to accept (much less procure) salvation due to its bondage to sin, then salvation can come only through a prior act of God transforming our will. This transformation must necessarily come at God's initiative. Once the will is transformed, it has a new set of motivations, orienting the person toward God. Moreover, the fact that not everyone responds implies that God selects (predestines) those who will receive salvation. In this case, evangelism would consist of proclamation with the assumption that those who respond and persevere in the faith are the ones chosen by God.

Wesley rejects this position—that all is of God's choosing—almost as strongly as the first position of absolute free will. Irresistible grace would not restore the *imago Dei*, but change it, denying the liberty that is

essential for humanity to have moral agency. Without the capacity for moral agency, humanity could not be restored to the image of God, for the moral image, centered as it is in love, necessarily requires agency or the ability to respond. Love is not truly love unless it is freely given. Put differently, if God loves in freedom, then humanity cannot partake of that image unless it, too, can love in freedom. We must be free or, better, freed to love God and our neighbor.

While insisting salvation is by grace alone, Wesley understood grace differently from the Calvinists. For Wesley, grace enables human response and invites it,⁵ restoring a measure of freedom to the human will. Reminding his readers of their own experience of grace, Wesley notes that God “did not take away your understanding; but enlightened and strengthened it,” and likewise, God did not “destroy any of your affections; rather they were more vigorous than before.”⁶ Above all, God did not “take away your liberty, your power of choosing good or evil”; God “did not *force* you; but being *assisted* by his grace you, like Mary, chose the better part.”⁷

Because grace is enabling but not coercive, Wesley can envision grace as universal without implying universal salvation. Because God does not want “any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9), God’s grace reaches out to every person, enabling each to respond. Through this prevenient grace, says Wesley, “everyone has some measure of that light”; it not only gives us a conscience but is the source of the unease we feel when we act “contrary to the light of . . . conscience.”⁸ Evangelism does not “bring” Christ to persons, but announces the good news of salvation in Christ to those whom God is already at work among. Thus, in contrast to those who advocate natural free will, Wesley insists persons are bound by sin and need to be set free by the transforming power of God’s grace. In contrast to those who see transforming grace as selective and irresistible, Wesley argues it is enabling and universal. When this view of grace is linked to salvation understood as a new life governed by love (and the restoration of the *imago Dei*), it has profound implications for how we do evangelism.

Evangelism as Proclamation

We have not, as yet, defined evangelism. While it is generally acknowledged that Wesley did evangelism, it was not a term he used—in fact, the term “evangelism” comes into common usage only in the nineteenth cen-

tury.⁹ Two definitions of evangelism are helpful in understanding Wesley’s practice. At this point we can introduce the first, which understands evangelism to be either the proclamation of the gospel or personal witness to persons who are not Christians. Most contemporary definitions of evangelism, while differing in details, would be comparable with this understanding. Of course, a definition like this depends in practice on what is meant by “being a Christian.” For Wesley, a Christian is minimally a person who has been regenerated or born again. Such a person has been so transformed by grace that love for God and neighbor, as well as other holy affections, has taken root in the heart and begun to grow. That is, a Christian is someone in whom the restoration of the *imago Dei* has actually begun.

If this is the case, then there are persons who have been baptized or who are on church rolls but are not Christians and, therefore, should be considered appropriate recipients of an evangelistic message. This claim—that a person can be baptized, yet not be a Christian—is disturbing to many because it seems to diminish the importance of baptism. Yet it points to the very heart of God’s promise of salvation according to Wesley, which is not merely a change in status before God but an actual transformation of the heart and life by God that leads to a continual response by the person. For Wesley, baptism is denied by failing to actually live as one who has been baptized.¹⁰

We can now see how God utilizes evangelism to effect salvation. In some, who may not even believe there is a God, prevenient grace is at work, manifested as an uneasy conscience or a sense that life is somehow not what it is meant to be. With others, the nominal Christians, there is an extremely diminished understanding of salvation that does not include the new birth, or perhaps what was once a living reality in their lives has now become a distant memory. To all of these, evangelism proclaims the salvation that God has promised through Jesus Christ. It gives an account of the fallen human condition, what God has done in Christ to remedy the situation, and a description of the new life God offers. It emphasizes that this offer is by grace alone and is received by faith. Evangelism, then, is preeminently invitational, urging persons (enabled by grace) to turn to God and to receive forgiveness and new life.

Evangelism as Initiation

In later centuries, with the advent of the altar call, persons responding to an evangelistic invitation were expected to leave the meeting as

Christians.¹¹ In nineteenth-century revivalism, those responding would perhaps undergo a struggle, as they went through the throes of repentance, culminating in an experience of the joy of salvation. With later revivalism, the focus was less on experiencing salvation and more on making a decision. These later revivalistic practices are all in sharp contrast to Wesley's practice. Those awakened to their condition and, therefore, seeking salvation were invited to enroll in a small group that met weekly and to practice a set of spiritual disciplines.¹² The goal was not to elicit a decision, but to enable participation in the means of grace.

Wesley defines "means of grace" as "outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God, and appointed . . . to be the ordinary channels" through which God conveys "preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace."¹³ Among the means of grace are works of piety, such as prayer (both public and personal), receiving the Lord's Supper, searching the Scriptures (through hearing, reading, meditating), fasting, and Christian conference. These are means through which we may be in relationship with God. Other means of grace are works of mercy, wherein we care for the souls and the bodies of our neighbors through meeting the needs of those who are poor, sick, hungry, or otherwise in need, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, and nurturing faith. As we engage in these means of grace, the Holy Spirit works in our lives, enabling us to grow in grace. Thus, the awakened sinner, seeking to know that his or her sins have been forgiven and to receive a new birth, does so by using the means of grace. The newborn Christian, seeking now to grow in sanctification and be perfected in love, does so by continuing to use the means of grace.

It might be wondered, if persons cannot be moral on their own, why would they faithfully do acts of piety and mercy? Even with a small measure of freedom restored through preventent grace, this performance would seem to be spotty at best. Wesley sees the problem of remaining faithful to these means of grace as even more difficult. In addition to the dominance of sin prior to the new birth and the persistence of sin afterward, he describes us as "encompassed on all sides with persons and things that tend to draw us from our centre,"¹⁴ which is God. This dissipation, as he terms it, involves much more than the many temptations to sin; it includes all the busyness of life, all the activities, deadlines, demands, and pursuits that can so occupy our time as to move God to the margins of life. A dissipated person is "habitually inattentive to the presence and will"¹⁵ of God; dissipation is "the art of forgetting God."¹⁶ The result of unchecked dissipation is that the awakened sinner is drawn from

the path to justification, the nominal Christian is reimmersed in his or her illusory Christianity, and the growing Christian falls away. Persons may profess Christian beliefs and attend church, but their hearts and lives are no longer oriented toward God and their neighbor.

It is the difficulty of consistently participating in means of grace coupled with the serious threat of dissipation that makes the small groups and spiritual discipline essential. In Wesley's day, a Methodist was someone who was committed to the discipline—the Rules of the United Societies—and to attend the weekly class meeting. The discipline was structured around three rules: (1) do no harm (that is, refrain from known sinful actions); (2) do good to the bodies and souls of persons (works of mercy); and (3) attend upon the ordinances of God (works of piety).¹⁷ At the weekly meeting, the Methodists were held accountable for how well they had kept the discipline, as well as received advice and encouragement to enable them to do so more faithfully.

The Methodist classes were fundamentally designed to counter dissipation and encourage Christian formation. They provided the structure, support, ethos, and accountability that enabled Methodists to participate in the means of grace. By such continued participation, awakened sinners came to know forgiveness and receive new life, and then began to grow in love as God restored them to the divine image. The goal of evangelism was for awakened persons to commit to this discipline and begin attending the weekly meetings, that is, to initiate persons into a life of Christian discipleship. It is no wonder, then, that Wesley records that "I was more convinced than ever, that preaching like an Apostle, without joining together those that are awakened, and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer."¹⁸

An increasing number of contemporary writings on evangelism express dissatisfaction with traditional definitions that center on proclamation and seek, in some way, to relate evangelism to some form of Christian initiation. William Abraham defines evangelism "as primary initiation into the Kingdom of God" and provides a set of six distinct activities necessary to that initiation.¹⁹ Scott Jones builds on Abraham, adding a seventh activity, and makes the focus of initiation communal discipleship.²⁰ George G. Hunter III, a leading church growth theorist, calls for the recovery of the Celtic style of evangelism that emphasizes conversion through communal participation.²¹ Robert Webber and Daniel Benedict seek to recover the ancient catechumenal process for a postmodern culture; Webber understands this as "liturgical

evangelism."²² Richard Peace notes the processive nature of the conversion of the twelve apostles in comparison to the instantaneous nature of Paul's conversion and proposes forms of evangelism through small groups and worship that facilitate the former.²³ These proposals are by no means identical, but they all share with Wesley a commitment to evangelism as entailing a process of initiation as well as proclamation and witness.

There has also been an increasing emphasis on cell groups as integral to evangelism and church growth, frequently with Wesley cited as the historic progenitor. Certainly, cell groups have been a major feature of church growth around the world, sometimes leading to congregations numbering in the tens of thousands. But while there may be much to celebrate about cell group ministry, Wesley's own practice was not as concerned with cell groups themselves as with helping persons adhere to spiritual discipline. The key question Wesley raises for all contemporary practice is whether evangelism leads to participation in the means of grace and to salvation as the restoration of the image of God.

The Means of Grace and Salvation

To underscore the necessity of evangelism's initiating persons into faithful participation in the means of grace, we must examine the believer's growth in the Christian life. We can begin by recalling the role of affections in Wesley's theological anthropology.²⁴ Abiding affections or holy tempers are dispositions that together constitute the will. Affections make us the persons we are. The affections determine our spiritual and moral character. The Christian life is marked by such holy tempers as love for God and neighbor, faith, hope, humility, joy, peace, and other fruit of the Spirit. In fact, Wesley claims that "true religion, in the very essence of it, is nothing short of holy tempers."²⁵

Now it is clear that these affections are not abstract qualities. We do not simply "love," but we love God and neighbor; we do not simply "hope," but we hope in God (or hope for God's kingdom). In other words, affections are directed toward particular objects. Unholy affections, such as pride or the love of status or wealth, are directed toward objects other than God; holy tempers are directed toward God. The life that one lives is decisively shaped by the affections that one has. A life centered on love of wealth is quite different from one governed by love of God. The heart, consisting as it does of various affections, determines

the shape of the life. A holy life is a product of a holy heart. Yet, to an extent, the reverse is also true: works of mercy and works of piety, when done by those who are seeking God and open to receive grace, are means of grace through which affections are evoked and nurtured.

What is true for the growing Christian is also true for those awakened by evangelistic proclamation or witness. These persons recognize their lives are ruled by unholy affections, and they desire for God to give them holy affections instead. Yet their very seeking, prior to receiving the new birth, has evoked fear of God, together with what Wesley calls the "faith of a servant"²⁶ and a beginning hope in the gospel promise of forgiveness and new life. They bring this faith of a servant to the means of grace and begin to grow as they expectantly await justification and new birth.

This system of means of grace, spiritual discipline, and weekly meetings makes three important contributions to receiving and growing in the Christian life. The first we have already noted: the discipline linked to accountability in the class meeting enables one to counter dissipation and remain faithful to practicing the means of grace. The second has to do with the object of the affections. It is one thing to love God or hope in God, but it is another to say just who this God is. The means of grace provide an ethos in which we experience the identity of God. I use the word "experience" deliberately, as participation in the means of grace involves the whole person. God is not whoever we think God is, but God is who is actually revealed in the history of Israel and preeminently in Jesus Christ. To prayerfully search the Scriptures, to come to the Eucharist with expectant faith, to pray, or to sing, enables us to experience this distinct and particular God. Thus, participation in the means of grace enables us to grow in the knowledge and love of God, for as we come to know God more fully as the object of our affections, our affections (and our lives) are shaped accordingly.

The third contribution has to do with how we actually live. It is one thing to have hearts increasingly governed by love for God and our neighbor, but another to determine exactly what it means to serve God or love our neighbor in the concrete circumstances of life. Wesley believed that even attaining Christian perfection would not remove our ignorance or other limitations of finite existence. Culture has its shaping influence on our lives, giving us ways of looking at the world that are at variance with the reign of God. The means of grace are continual reminders of what God's reign requires and what God's love entails; through them, the Holy Spirit shapes us in the reality of the new life that

God gives instead of the fallen existence that is passing away. The class meetings provide regular opportunities to discuss what it means to live out this new life in relation to our neighbor. Over time we can increasingly come to see the world as God sees it.

The Witness of Christian Communities

What might be the impact of communities of Christians who actively seek to love God and their neighbor, either to receive new life or to grow in it? We have seen how Wesleyan evangelism necessarily leads to initiation into a formational discipline involving participation in means of grace. Now we can add that this way of life has implications for the practice of evangelism in two ways. First, Christians find they have good news to share. Their lives have been decisively and joyously transformed, and there is every reason to tell others not only what they have received, but that God's promise of new life is for all. Moreover, because they have begun to love their neighbor, they have every motivation to let others know what God offers them in Christ.

The second implication is what persons will find as they encounter such a community. Certainly, they will not find the kingdom of God in its fullness. Nor will they find a people free of suffering or removed from all the difficulties of life. What they will find are persons who believe in the promises of God and who seek to be open to receive the life God gives. They will find people who love and want to grow in love and who seriously desire to learn how to love their neighbor and one another in the world today. Above all, they will find persons growing in their devotion to God, as manifested in their worship and their service to others.

If, as Lesslie Newbigin has said, the "congregation is the hermeneutic of the gospel,"²⁷ then through meeting such a community, persons will come to know the reality of God's love. It will be a concrete interpretation of what the good news of Jesus Christ can mean in this world and for human lives. Such a community gives the gospel credibility, for it is a sign, as Wesley said, that God is indeed renewing the face of the earth.

PART III

Practicing the Great Commission