

Paul Adams

Evangelism class

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Context for Evangelism paper

While many realities in our changing world affect the work of evangelism, one of the more prominent factors is the self-identity of the United States.

The identity of the United States today is closely tied to its political history. Specifically, the United States has grown from an outlying British colony a few hundred years ago into one of the world's great superpowers today. This status is directly associated with the financial resources necessary to create a standard of life that is higher than any previous culture in history. When combined with historical military strength and a capacity for innovation, it is easy to see how citizens of the United States would have a high view of their country's ability to succeed. This is especially true when considered in relation to the rest of the world.

This sense of identity has had significant effects on the way the Christian institutions of our nations view evangelism. During the times in which American power and Christian influence have been at their highest, it has been widely assumed that we have been blessed with abundant resources because of our faith. Thus, evangelism is largely unnecessary within the Western world, which shares the abundant lifestyle of the United States, but is absolutely critical for the poor nations of the world. Throughout the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, the rich nations of the world sent missionaries to the poor nations of the world because of the obvious need there. The perceived need for resources was directly related to the perceived need for the Christian faith, and this colonial approach to Christianity epitomized the idea of evangelism as an exported product.

However, since the 1960s, the United States has seen a decline in Christendom, even as the power of the nation has continued to grow. Church leaders are increasingly realizing the necessity of evangelism in our own nation, and now recognize that we are part of the "mission field" once identified with the poor nations of the world. However, because the United States has even more money and power than it did before the 1960s,

the connection between the nation's identity and the work of evangelism is weakening. In a country that has historically viewed wealth as its just reward from God, the fact that we have more of it is interpreted as a sign that God approves of what we are doing. This interpretation persists even though the people providing the interpretation are far more likely to be worshipping the idol of state power than the God of Jesus Christ.

With these factors in mind, it is easy to see the resistance of citizens to the work of evangelism. Those within the church observe the prosperity of the state, and often agree with the traditional view that there must be a common Christian faith that is causing it. Of course, the declining influence of Christianity in the United States is well-documented. Those outside of the church observe the prosperity of the state, and substitute money, power, and consumer goods for God. After all, our culture says, if you only buy the right product, you will be happy. And, we assume, isn't individual happiness the point of life? As Jesus taught, it is difficult to persuade someone who apparently has everything that God has other plans for the world than self-satisfaction.

My Methodist tradition has a long tradition of evangelism. Although the Methodist movement began as an effort at renewal within the structures of the Anglican Church in the eighteenth century, renewal changed into evangelism when Methodism arrived in the United States. Methodists were the most prominent evangelicals of the nineteenth century. While other Christian groups established themselves in the original thirteen colonies on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean, the Methodists moved west with the colonists as the nation expanded. Their ministry included work with not only the white settlers, but with the Native American and black slave populations as well. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Methodist church---and the churches associated with it---had grown in numbers from a membership of 65,000 to a membership of 4.65 million.

However, like the Christian groups on the Atlantic coast before them, the Methodists also settled down. As the expansion of the United States slowed, Methodists became less evangelical and more institutional in their identity. Mission work became the work of specialized pastors and missionaries, while the people of the church fully embraced their new role as church-goers. The membership numbers of the Methodist Church peaked at over ten million in the 1960s, and have been on the decline ever since.

From a historical perspective, the Methodist church obviously has a long---and

successful---tradition of evangelism. Unfortunately, that tradition has not been practiced on a general scale for nearly a hundred years, and the current United Methodist Church looks little like the flexible, energized organization of its past. Today, the United Methodist Church may have the most institutionalized structure in the Protestant world, and the great theological diversity on which it prides itself makes it incredibly difficult to focus on participating in God's mission through evangelism on anything higher than the congregational level. However, since pastors are trained to support the Methodist structure above all else, few of them are willing to risk challenging the institution. Their support is necessary if they want to be employed in the church's itinerant system, in which job openings are filled by the decision of the bishop, not by congregations.

Members of the United Methodist Church, who have generally accepted their role as "church-goers", are now supported by the institution in that role. Congregations are now guaranteed pastoral leadership and financial support from other congregations as a right. (Current stresses within the church have strained this guarantee, but it is still treated as sacred.) On a system-wide scale, members go to church to receive the benefits their system provides, which is exactly the opposite of the work of evangelism.

It would be easy to suggest that all the United Methodist Church would need to do to engage in evangelism would be to look at its history and emulate it. However, any closer inspection of the reality of the last major evangelical work of the church shows that the nineteenth-century context has little in common with the 21st-century context we live in today.

The official Methodist symbol is a flame and a cross, which represents the Holy Spirit coming upon the Christian church at Pentecost. However, the Methodist symbol currently functions in a way that tells us who we *were* rather than who we are becoming. Institutions are natural and critical forms of organizations, but today, the United Methodist Church has used its hierarchal, bureaucratic system to isolate itself from disruptive influences. Sadly, the church has forgotten that one of the primary roles of the Holy Spirit is to be a disruptive influence. Today, the United Methodist Church has one of two basic choices: it can either change its official logo from the 'flame and cross' to a picture of a boring committee meeting, or it can develop new structures that will allow it to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit and respond accordingly in a changing world.