

Seven Propositions for Evangelism The Theological Vision of *Worship, Wonder, and Way**

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In my book, *Worship, Wonder, and Way: Reimagining Evangelism as Missional Practice*, I attempt to communicate a theological vision for evangelism as a missional practice of the Christian church and describe practices of evangelistic witness that I hope will be both hopeful and helpful in the context of the local church. Since the book was written to be accessible to readers in local churches around the world, the academic research that informs the book is not explicit in the book. However, a deep well of theological resources inform the book. In this paper, I will make explicit the implicit theological vision of the book.¹

In their introduction to *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, Paul Chilcote and Lacey Warner suggest six propositions concerning evangelism as a summary of the theological vision that informs that book.² Through the experience of researching and implementing my doctoral project in evangelism, I gained an appreciation for these propositions. In this paper, I expand on the original six propositions of Chilcote and Warner and add one more proposition to fill out a perspective that I feel needed greater attention in my context.

Proposition One: The Mission of God

Evangelism is a vital part of something larger than itself, the mission of God.

* This paper is an extended response to Dr. Dick Eugenio’s installation address, “Theology as Evangelism: Transformation by the Renewing of Minds,” pages 1–11, above.

¹ I refer briefly to the theological vision in the introduction. Grant Zweigle, *Worship, Wonder, and Way: Reimagining Evangelism as Missional Practice* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2015), 16.

² Paul W. Chilcote and Lacey C. Warner, eds., *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), xxvi–xxvii. Propositions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7 are directly attributable to Chilcote and Warner, however I present them in a different order than Chilcote and Warner. Proposition 6 is my addition.

David Bosch calls evangelism the core, heart, or center of the mission of God.³ In *Transforming Mission*, Bosch summarizes mission as “the church sent into the world, to love, to serve, to preach, to teach, to heal, to liberate,” and argues that “authentic evangelism is imbedded in the total mission of the church.”⁴ Witness is a term that encapsulates this larger mission of the church.

In *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, Darrell Guder writes,

The concept of witness provides a common missiological thread through all the New Testament language that expounds the church’s mission. It serves as an overarching term drawing together proclamation (*kerygma*), community (*koinonia*), and service (*diakonia*). These are all essential dimensions of the Spirit-enabled witness for which the Christian church is called and sent.⁵

Conceptualizing evangelism as a vital part, but not the whole of the mission of the church is helpful because it opens up space for a larger conversation about the church’s mission and reduces the tendency to set up evangelism in competition with other aspects of a congregation’s mission. Not everything the church does is or needs to be evangelism, but everything the church does is an aspect of its mission of witness.

At the same time, the metaphor of core, heart or center, reminds us of the importance of evangelism in relation to the larger mission of the church. If a local church or denomination ceases to initiate persons into the life and mission of the Triune God through its witness in the world, that local church or denomination will cease to exist. Remove the heart and the body dies.

Proposition Two: Disciple

In *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor*, Scott Jones defines evangelism as “that set of loving, intentional activities governed by the goal of initiating persons into Christian discipleship in response to the reign of God.”⁶ This means that evangelism is not primarily about growing churches or saving people; it is about initiating people into discipleship to Jesus. Since disciple-

³ David J. Bosch, “Evangelism: Theological Currents and Cross-Currents Today,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 3 (July 1, 1987): 98–103.

⁴ David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 412.

⁵ Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 53; See also Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Updated (Guildford: Eagle, 1995).

⁶ Scott J. Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor: A Theology of Witness and Discipleship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 18.

ship requires ecclesial participation, evangelism will likely result in numerical church growth. And discipleship to Jesus, the One who is King of the Kingdom of God, is part and parcel of salvation.

The point to understand here is that evangelism functions in the mission of the church as the bridge between a congregation's wider mission of witness and their more focused mission of discipleship. This understanding of the *telos* of evangelism eliminates the need to separate persons into "the Decided" and "the Discipled."⁷

Proposition Three: The Reign of God

Chilcote and Warner sum up this proposition well when they write that "evangelism is oriented toward the reign of God."

The ultimate goal toward which evangelism moves is the realization of God's reign in human life. While not unconcerned with the salvation of the individual in and through Christ, initiating persons into an alternative community of God's people who give themselves for the life of the world is its proper end.⁸

This proposition is in line with Mortimer Arias' characterization of evangelism as recruitment, "an invitation to participate in the blessings of the kingdom, to celebrate the hopes of the kingdom, and to engage in the tasks of the kingdom."⁹

Calling churches to engage in Kingdom activities has become popular in much of the missional literature today.¹⁰ However, what is often missing is a vision of evangelism that is intentioned toward recruiting persons into the life and mission of the Kingdom of God through specific congregational practices of recruitment and initiation.¹¹ Traditional practices of evangelism that lack

⁷ See Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 32, for a helpful discussion on the problem of moving "the Decided" to "the Discipled."

⁸ Chilcote and Warner, *The Study of Evangelism*, xxvi.

⁹ Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001), 105.

¹⁰ See for example Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008); Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009); and N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

¹¹ See William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 92-

connection with the larger vision of the Kingdom of God will ring hollow in churches that are appropriating Kingdom language into their mission and vision.

Proposition Four: Conversion

Conversion matters. Though it may sound offensive in a multicultural and pluralistic world, evangelism is about converting people. However, the *telos* of conversion is not to the point of view of the witness or sectarian doctrines of a particular congregation, but, as has already been stated, to the Kingdom of God. The only way into the Kingdom of God is through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

Evangelism is oriented toward a good start in the process of conversion. Gordon Smith reminds us that “conversion itself is but a beginning.”

Because the problem is complex, conversion will need to be comprehensive, affecting the whole of our beings. I stress that conversion itself is but a beginning. It will not, as a single or even complex experience, lead to a complete resolution of the human predicament. We are not suddenly made whole and completely healed persons. However, we are “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17) in the sense that a beachhead has been established. The old identity is gone; we have entered into a new identity that is grounded on faith (Rom. 1:17) and that supports the transformation that will follow.¹²

Congregational practices of evangelism need to be intentioned toward facilitating a good start in the process of conversion in ways that are consistent with biblical and historic Christian practices and will support the transformation that follows. Conversion is a process that may or may not include crisis moments, depending on the way the Spirit chooses to work in the life of the particular constituent of the church’s witness.

Proposition Five: The Whole People of God

Evangelism is a missional practice of the whole people of God together. It is not a simple activity, but inclusive of a wide range of congregational practices. Brian Stone argues that,

The most evangelistic thing the church can do today is to be the church—to be formed imaginatively by the Holy Spirit through core practices such as worship, forgiveness, hospitality, and economic sharing into a distinctive

people in the world, a new social option, the body of Christ.¹³

This perspective does not diminish the value of those with the gift of evangelism, but rather calls the church to encourage those with the gift of evangelism to exercise their gift in a manner that builds up the whole body of Christ so that together they can be more fruitful and faithful participants in God's mission.

Proposition Six: Personal

The Christian gospel emphasizes God's love for persons and God's desire to include all persons in the eternal Triune fellowship of divine love that is inherently Personal. Evangelism is personal because God's being is a communion of Persons. While the wider mission of God is inclusive of God's cosmic plan to reconcile all things, things in heaven and earth to Himself, evangelism is narrowly focused on God's plan to reconcile persons to Himself.

In *The Jesus Way*, Eugene Peterson reminds us that,

The ways Jesus goes about loving and saving the world are personal: nothing disembodied, nothing abstract, nothing impersonal. Incarnate, flesh and blood, relational, particular, local. The ways employed in our North American culture are conspicuously impersonal: programs, organizations, techniques, general guidelines, information detached from place. In matters of ways and means, the vocabulary of numbers is preferred over names, ideologies crowd out ideas, the gray fog of abstraction absorbs the sharp particularities of the recognizable face and the familiar street.¹⁴

Evangelism is personal. Revisioning evangelism as a missional practice of the church includes reimagining the language of personal evangelism in a way that is rooted in the incarnational ways of Jesus.

Proposition Seven: Contextual

Because it is personal, evangelism is inescapably contextual. This calls congregations to understand both themselves and the context of the constituents of their witness. Many evangelism programs are dis-carnate, created in another place in another time and then marketed to a mass audience. Congregational leaders in evangelism need to be careful students of context and culture. It

¹³ Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 15.

¹⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways That Jesus Is the Way* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1.

may be that the first step in helping a congregation to revision evangelism is to ask them not to do anything but listen and learn. It involves sitting and listening to children, absorbing the rants and anger of disaffected former attenders and skeptical neighbors, eating and drinking with sinners, immersing yourself in places where you come to know stories and local histories.

Darrell Guder reminds us that Christ's way of proclaiming the good news began with kenotic self-emptying.¹⁵ Jesus then was able to embody the gospel in a way that was relatable, understandable and compelling to his first century Jewish constituency. This way takes time and is costly. It is the way of the cross. But it is also the way to life. Revisioning evangelism as a missional practice of the church may be costly, but it is also a pathway to life and renewal.

Conclusion

These seven propositions offer a theological vision of evangelism that I have discovered to be helpful as the pastor of congregations that are seeking to revision and renew their practices of evangelism in their own unique and wonderful contexts. My hope is that this theological vision can be helpful to other pastors and congregations in their own unique and wonderful contexts as well.

Announcing and embodying the good news of the Kingdom of God as realized in the life, death, resurrection, ascension and coming return of Jesus Christ and lovingly initiating persons into discipleship to the King of that Kingdom is worthy of the church's best efforts and creative energies. Jesus promises that these efforts and energies will be inspired, enlivened and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Evangelism is the heart of the mission of the church. A renewed theological vision for evangelism as a missional practice of the church will contribute to heart-healthy churches. Such churches will experience the joy that comes from faithfully and fruitfully participating in God's mission for the life of the world and find pathways for renewal in the places they have been called to bear witness.

¹⁵ Darrell L. Guder, "Incarnation and the Church's Evangelistic Mission," in *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, ed. Paul W. Chilcote and Lacey C. Warner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 173.