

# Evangelism after Pluralism

THE ETHICS  
OF CHRISTIAN WITNESS

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# Acknowledgments

The idea of pursuing something like an “ethics of evangelism” arose from a conversation I had with Rev. Grayson Lucky, formerly the pastor of Nichols Hills United Methodist Church in Oklahoma City. After reading my *Evangelism after Christendom*, Grayson made the observation that he saw it as resembling something like an “ethics of evangelism.” That sounded exactly right to me. He and his congregation invited me to give their annual Pope Lecture Series in 2008, and I committed myself to furthering the project of developing an ethics of evangelism with more intentionality in that lecture series. While it has been almost a decade now, I am grateful to Grayson and the Nichols Hills church for their hospitality and for the opportunity afforded me to think further about the practice of evangelism in various contexts, especially in relation to pluralism.

I am indebted to my students and colleagues who have heard forms of these chapters in lectures or read sections in various venues and given valuable feedback. I especially wish to thank Emily Kleidon and Michelle Ashley for their valuable assistance in preparing the manuscript, and I am grateful to them both for their efficiency and attention to detail.

# 1

## Competing for Space in the World

In his profound book *Christ on Trial*, Rowan Williams explores the various accounts of Christ's trial in each of the four Gospels. What surfaces in those accounts, especially in the Gospel of Mark, which highlights Jesus's silence before both the Sanhedrin and Pilate, is how Jesus stands outside the structures and languages of power by which he is being judged and how little leverage he has in that world. Says Williams,

The world Mark depicts is not a reasonable one; it is full of demons and suffering and abused power. How, in such a world, *could* there be a language in which it could truly be said who Jesus is? Whatever is said will take on the colouring of the world's insanity; it will be another bid for the world's power, another identification with the unaccountable tyrannies that decide how things shall be. Jesus, described in the words of this world, would be a competitor for space in it, part of its untruth. (2000, 6)

To say with Williams that Jesus is not “a competitor for space” in the world is not to say that Jesus is distant or removed from the world, but rather that in his life the maps by which we order

our social relations are being redrawn. As Williams puts it, Jesus threatens “because he does not compete . . . and because it is that whole world of rivalry and defence which is in question” (69).

One of the great challenges of faithfully bearing Christian witness in our world is the way prevailing political, social, intellectual, and economic frameworks are granted the power to impose conditions on the Christian social imagination and thereby to constrict it so that we imagine our witness only within those frameworks and their accompanying stories, habits, practices, and social patterns. Evangelism becomes a practice competing for space in the world and, to use Williams’s words, “part of its untruth” (6). The pacifist logic of evangelism as an offer of good news that empties itself of power and privilege is transformed into a logic of competition, exchange, and production that claws at the levers of power and lays claim to truth as a possession. As Williams says, quoting from Anita Mason’s novel *The Illusionist*, “There is a kind of truth which, when it is said, becomes untrue” (Mason 1984, 6).<sup>1</sup>

If Williams is right, this is a sobering truth for would-be evangelists. Bearing faithful witness to Christ may mean that, more often than not, we are left with the challenge of how to communicate Christ’s silence. This situation makes the task of contextualization in evangelism so demanding and risky, however unavoidable that task remains. In attempting to secure a space for the good news, we are tempted to compete for that space by accepting the terms of a false competition. We want the good news to be received positively in any given context, and we want it to make a difference in people’s lives and in the world. We want what we have to say to be meaningful but also irresistible (cf. Yoder 1992). So we attempt to mitigate the gospel’s strangeness, smoothing off its rough edges, securing its validity on the world’s terms, and

1. George Lindbeck makes a similar point when he observes that “the crusader’s battle cry ‘Christus est Dominus,’ [Christ is Lord] is false when used to authorize cleaving the skull of the infidel (even though the same words in other contexts may be a true utterance)” (1984, 64).

laying claim to structures of truth, power, and legitimacy that will shore up its credibility or attractiveness. We defend it using the rationalities and moralities that present themselves to us in our culture; ally it to structures of sovereignty, patriarchy, and privilege; or demonstrate its usefulness in achieving the social and economic goals of those to whom we would commend it. The good news is a gift. But when the good news is imposed imperially, defended with intellectually airtight arguments, or subjected to the logic of marketplace exchanges, the gift is no longer a gift. The ethics of evangelism, an ethics that is fundamentally self-emptying, gratuitous, and pacifist, becomes instead an ethics of conquering, defending, securing, and grasping.

Because Christians hope to secure a space in the world for the good news, there may be no Christian practice more susceptible to distortion than evangelism. Church growth, power, and influence or the number of conversions one is able to produce easily become the ends sought in evangelism. But then there is no longer any good reason to practice evangelism well, to practice it *virtuously*. Christians learn quickly that these ends can be realized without virtue and without their own faithfulness; so the ethics of evangelism degenerate into a crass exercise in doing whatever it takes to achieve those goods and to convert others to Christianity. Christianity is a movement that for the better part of two millennia has been enamored by its own “success.” That success, however, and the orientation toward production and results that both fuels and is fueled by it, may well be the biggest obstacle to Christian evangelism practiced well and to a recovery of evangelism as virtuous witness. Perhaps it is time to reconsider the ethics of evangelism.

### The Ethics of Evangelism

As right as it strikes me to describe the approach of this book as an “ethics of evangelism,” I acknowledge that this way of talking

is not a common one and that its two central terms—*ethics* and *evangelism*—do not often intersect. In the first place, questions about the relation of ethics and evangelism typically surface only when considering the questionable tactics of high-pressure evangelistic groups and cults or the moral failures of high-profile evangelists such as Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, or Jim Jones (apparently we should be wary of evangelists named Jim). Indeed, one of the reasons that Billy Graham earned such wide respect and admiration during his lifetime, even among progressive Christians who reject the content of his evangelism, is the way he managed over almost seventy years of very public ministry to avoid being implicated in sexual or economic misconduct. In our time, and given a documented rise in clergy mistrust, it is striking that an evangelist, of all persons, would have been repeatedly identified in public polling as among the top ten “most admired” persons of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Also, his name was not Jim, so he had that going for him.

One reason, then, why ethics and evangelism do not often intersect in our thinking may be a general perception that they intersect so little in practice. And here we need not confine ourselves only to the shy television preacher or traveling evangelist—the kind of reprobate portrayed in the Sinclair Lewis novel *Elmer Gantry* or the 1992 film *Leap of Faith*, starring Steve Martin. The history of evangelism is intertwined with stories of imperial conquest, colonialism, forced conversions, and tactics that have come to be known as “scam-vangelism.” It is not difficult to understand why the practice of evangelism is ethically suspect, especially in the context of religious pluralism where it is widely perceived as an arrogant attempt to foist one group’s religious commitments on others and a manipulative effort to get others to believe and act like the religious group.

2. For example, see the CNN/USA Today Gallup poll conducted in 1999 in which Graham was ranked seventh, with 26 percent of Americans naming him as “one of the people of the century I admire most”: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/3367/mother-teresa-voted-american-people-most-admired-person-century.aspx>.

But a second reason why evangelism and ethics do not often intersect is that the two are widely construed as being focused on very different matters—evangelism on spiritual or other-worldly affairs and ethics on the here and now, on this-worldly concerns of the body, society, economics, and politics. When I attended seminary many years ago, it was almost as if you needed to make a choice between evangelism or social ethics in determining what group you were part of, who your friends were, or with which professors you most closely identified. Those primarily interested in evangelism were typically not part of the ethics or social justice crowd, and those passionate about social ethics disdained the practice of evangelism. Things may have changed, but I doubt if they have changed much. The field of Christian ethics is generally understood to be a field of study preoccupied with such matters as economic and racial justice, sexuality, war, and climate change. Christian ethicists do not always give close attention to core church practices like worship, preaching, evangelism, or religious education. The flip side is that those who study or teach these ecclesial practices don't often think of what they do as an exercise in Christian ethics. Christians might talk about a "theology of evangelism." But an "ethics of evangelism" is not a phrase heard very often, if ever.

Of course, those studying for ministry may find themselves contemplating the relationship between ethics and church life in the form of something called "pastoral ethics," in which they are asked to consider matters of professional conduct, authority, and boundaries in pastoral caregiving. But for the most part, we are not accustomed to thinking *ethically* about most of our core church practices. It would be hard to imagine, for example, members of a congregation complaining to their pastor that they wanted more ethical worship or more ethical preaching. They might well ask that the subject matter of preaching focus on ethical issues. But they are not likely to be concerned that preaching be carried out more ethically. And when it comes to activities like prayer, hospitality, forgiveness, healing, worship, the Lord's Supper, or baptism, little

attention has been given to imagining what an ethical framework for reflecting on such important practices would even amount to.<sup>3</sup>

### *An Ecclesial Ethics*

Part of the problem here is a binary between personal ethics and social ethics that is at least partially related to the distinctively modern separation of the personal from the social and the public from the private. While personal ethics might focus on individual decisions related to behaviors such as lying, sexual immorality, substance abuse, gambling, or stealing, social ethics is usually aimed at more systemic issues of injustice, racism, poverty, international relations, war, climate change, and so on. Missing from this binary is an *ecclesial* ethics. In this ethics the church is the logically prior reality from within which Christians understand both the personal and the social and according to which the ordinary practices of the church *are* our ethics. The language of “personal” or “social” need not disappear when thinking about ethics, but they both derive from and find their orientation within our life together as Christ’s body. As Stanley Hauerwas says, “The notion that one can distinguish between personal and social ethics distorts the nature of Christian convictions, for Christians refuse to admit that ‘personal’ morality is less a community concern than questions of justice, and so on” (2001, 372). Thankfully, the past few decades have witnessed the recovery of an ecclesial ethics, and I understand my own work as an attempt to contribute to its further development and recovery.<sup>4</sup>

One chief consequence of framing evangelism within an ecclesial ethics is that the church as the body of Christ rather than some

3. A helpful exception to this is the 1997 World Council of Churches (WCC) Faith and Order Commission document, “Becoming a Christian: The Ecumenical Implications of Our Common Baptism” (Faverges, France, January 17–24). The document includes sections on “Baptism and Ethics” and “Christian Ethics as Baptismal Ethics.”

4. For a helpful introduction to ecclesial ethics, see Wells and Quash 2010, 180–206. The authors rightly suggest that the writings of John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, Alisdair MacIntyre, and John Milbank, as different as they are from one another, are good examples of ecclesial ethics.

other social body provides the primary formation and habitus for the practice of evangelism. This does not mean that contextualization within other social bodies or forms of culture is irrelevant or an afterthought, or that the church as a social body is either a watertight alternative to other social bodies or an insulated bubble in their midst. But it does mean that the patterns of our faithfulness in any context derive from an ecclesial social imagination that is nurtured and passed along by distinctive stories, practices, and exemplars by which we learn what it means to be a people. Contextualization that grows out of an ecclesial imagination is no exact science, but in the following chapters I explore various social contexts in which evangelism is carried out, and I discuss the ethics of evangelism in each context and the difference that an ecclesial imagination makes. In each case, Christians *as a people* attempt to faithfully embody the good news of Jesus Christ in such a way that it can be touched, tasted, and tried on so that it might be taken seriously and then adopted authentically by others or rejected responsibly.

The good news is not something that precedes its own embodiment so that it is a matter of getting the news right to begin with and then dropping it into this or that situation appropriately “contextualized.” Rather, the good news becomes good news precisely as a people embody that gift materially in concrete ways. The challenge for Christians is to bear witness to the good news in ways that make it a present and habitable possibility for others, without contradicting that good news in the very act of offering it—that is, without becoming competitors for space in the world and, as Williams says, “part of its untruth” (6). As Williams puts it,

The challenge remains, to re-imagine what it is for God to speak to us *as* God—not as a version of whatever makes us feel secure and appears more attractive than other familiar kinds of security. For if our talk about God is a religious version of talk about human safety, the paradox is that it will fail to say anything at all about

salvation. It will not have anything to do with what is decisively and absolutely *not* the way of this world. (15)

### *Evangelism and Context*

A 1967 report of the World Council of Churches titled “The Church for Others” famously said that “the world provides the agenda” for a church that is truly missionary (20). The report called on the church in an increasingly secularized world to look outside of itself to find signs of God’s work and Christ’s transforming presence in the world, rather than perpetuating a debilitating ecclesio-centrism that turns the church inward and leads it to forget its calling and purpose. But if it can truly be said that the world sets the agenda for the church, this can never mean that the good news turns out to be little more than what persons in a particular context desire or what they might take to be good news on the terms and conditions of the context itself. The good news instead presents its own possibilities, which may very well appear remarkable if not impossible within a particular context. Where the only possibilities might appear to be vengeance, scarcity, fear, suspicion, division, and competition, the good news points to abundance, sharing, reconciliation, and forgiveness. Evangelism is a subversive practice precisely insofar as it is enacted and embodied in the everyday and material practices of a people who see these remarkable new possibilities and refuse to play by the rules of their culture or to buy in to the political, cultural, and economic assumptions of their time. Evangelism is subversive because, in inviting the world to come and see the newness of which it is but a foretaste, the church calls attention to a contrasting identity that is possible in Christ and to what the world (and indeed the church) might become.

### *Faithful, Embodied Evangelism*

At the end of the day, ethics and evangelism are inseparable because the corporate pattern of life we have been given by Christ

and into which we are formed as his body is both the medium and the exemplification of the salvation God is offering the world. In other words, our corporate life together as a church does not merely make us more credible witnesses of *the way* we are offering the world; rather, our corporate life together as a church *is* that very way, and this makes our corporate ethics constitutive of evangelistic practice. For an ecclesial ethics, then, the practice of evangelism as the faithful and embodied offer of good news is first and foremost grounded in the habits, disciplines, stories, practices, gestures, and social patterns by which our lives are lived and ordered together as the body of Christ before a watching world. And make no mistake: the world *is* watching. The question is whether we will give the world anything to see. Ethics *is* evangelism.

The good news heralded by the church is that in Christ salvation is now possible in the form of a new way of life. This salvation is not an experience to be passively received or a set of propositions to be assented to. It really is a *way* to be embarked upon, a *way* we forgive each other's sins, a *way* we love and include those who are different from us, a *way* we welcome the poor, a *way* we love our enemies, a *way* we bind up those who are brokenhearted or have suffered loss, a *way* we cancel debts, and a *way* the world's hierarchies are turned upside down in Christlike patterns of fellowship.

## Evangelism and Pluralism

One recurring theme throughout the chapters of this book is pluralism. That should not be a surprise, since pluralism pervades the world within which Christians are called to bear witness. And for no Christian practice is pluralism more of a challenge than the practice of evangelism. Evangelism is criticized by both Christians and non-Christians for being associated with attitudes of belligerence and superiority and for being a barrier to mutual understanding and dialogue, especially across interfaith boundaries. After all, it's pretty difficult to listen to another person's

religious views honestly and openly when you're attempting to convert them to your own.

It would be better to say that a recurring theme is *pluralisms*, for there are many types of pluralism. Pluralism is not the same thing as plurality. While there may be a plurality of religions, races, or ethnicities, pluralism is *the story we tell about plurality*—the way we construct its meaning, evaluate it, and habituate our practices, institutions, and social patterns within plurality. The fact that we use the single word “religion,” for example, to refer to a variety of different phenomena as diverse as Christianity, Buddhism, or civil religion is already an implicit form of pluralism embedded in our vocabulary. We think we have identified common features that unite all these phenomena so that a single word can be applied to each of them equally. In fact, this very example illustrates that pluralisms are really about unities—about how we are to comprehensively comprehend and make sense of the many.

The way unities are imposed on plurality is a complex work of social imagination across time with great consequence for evangelism. As works of imagination (whether implicit or highly theorized), pluralisms set the conditions for how we think about the good news in particular contexts. Indeed, pluralisms can constrict Christian witness so that it can only be imagined on the terms of those pluralisms. Consider, for example, a group of Christians who would like to convert Buddhists to Christianity. The evangelizing Christians in this example are likely operating under the assumption that Buddhism and Christianity are two species of the same genus (religion) and, moreover, that the two are in competition with one another so that the adherents of the one need to be converted to the other. In other words, the evangelists are working out of a particular pluralistic social imagination that both sustains and is sustained by a story about how to understand the plurality they have encountered.

Imagine now a very different group of Christians who oppose evangelistic attempts to convert Buddhists to Christianity and who

ground their opposition in the belief that both religions are valid, perhaps even complementary, so that attempting to convert one to the other is wrongheaded and disrespectful. While this second group of Christians are typically called “pluralists,” both groups of Christians might well be operating within the same pluralistic framework—one in which Buddhism and Christianity are both “religions” and therefore examples of the same kind of thing. Each group accepts a unity that has been imposed onto the plurality encountered and expressed in their common use of the word “religion” to refer to both phenomena. The fact that they diverge in their assessment of whether the two religions are contradictory or complementary may disguise but ultimately cannot eliminate their mutual starting point: that both phenomena are specimens of the same kind of umbrella phenomenon, that is, “religion.” Both groups, we might say, operate from a shared pluralistic social imagination, even though their responses differ from one another.

Throughout this book, I do not accept the pluralisms that present themselves to us in our time as an inevitability, a necessity, a given. Things do not have to be as they are. Pluralisms emerge historically within particular contexts and institutions such as universities, the marketplace, or the military and for particular ideological or pragmatic purposes. They are constructed, have locations, and are produced. For that reason it is possible to speak of *post*pluralism contexts and to use the phrase “evangelism *after* pluralism”—not as if pluralisms were a thing of the past but rather as a way of considering what it means to live and think in the wake of their ideals, possibilities, and prescriptions (cf. Bender and Klassen 2010). Precisely because pluralisms are works of social imagination, they render possible some ways of thinking and acting while other ways remain impossible—or rather *unimaginable*.

### *An Evangelistic Imagination*

In this book, I consider the extent to which pluralisms constrict the Christian evangelistic imagination in at least three ways. First,

they represent hegemonic impositions of unity onto plurality that eclipse difference and diminish the importance of and respect for those who have been rendered “other.” Second, the kinds of unity they impose force us into competitive modes of comparison and judgment, leading Christians to think we must secure a space in the world for the good news, which largely ends up distorting the good news. Third, prevailing pluralisms distract us from grasping how the powerful unities of empire, nation, and market capture our allegiances, captivate our imaginations, and cultivate vices that undercut and erode the Christian life, not to mention our capacity for bearing faithful witness to the good news.

In the United States, for example, civil religion as an amalgam of patriotism, militarism, and capitalism may be far more relevant as a contrast to Christianity than is Buddhism or Islam. But standard accounts of pluralism obscure this. It would be rare to find a textbook or a class syllabus on world religions that includes “civil religion,” despite the fact that, at least in the United States, civil religion may well boast the most adherents. Those who are hell-bent (Matt. 23:15) on converting Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus to Christianity likely neglect their largest competitor—nationalism, or civil religion—precisely because *they* are *us*. But the prevailing pluralistic social imagination prevents us from seeing this.

### *The Cultural Contexts of Pluralism*

In the following chapters, my concern with pluralism is not, for the most part, focused on the typical and rather abstract questions about the uniqueness, unsurpassability, or finality of Christ, the nature of salvation, or the status of religious truth claims, though these questions all have their place (chapter 8 addresses them to some degree). Instead I attempt to explore how pluralisms are narrated and constructed in three particular cultural contexts: empire, the nation-state (and its military), and consumer culture. The second of these is primarily concerned with the particular case of the United States, though I trust that case has relevance for

other contexts, especially insofar as the US version of pluralism enshrines Enlightenment notions about freedom, rights, and the individual that characterize other nations and societies throughout the world. In each case, I explore how these pluralisms habituate the practice of evangelism and how, thus habituated, evangelism becomes an attempt to compete for space in the world, thereby distorting it as a Christian practice.

The problem does not lie with the presence of religious diversity, which Christians need neither fear nor fight. Rather, in all three contexts, a unity is imposed on plurality that possesses an extraordinary capacity for shaping the Christian social imagination and thereby habituating evangelistic practice in ways that are essentially competitive. In each case, I trace how the good news is distorted as a competitor for space in the world—“part of its untruth,” as Williams says. But my ultimate hope is to identify a counterimagination that habituates the practice of evangelism in rather different directions and refuses the temptation to secure a space in the world for the good news. Within that alternative imagination, evangelism is the noncompetitive practice of bearing faithful and embodied witness in a particular context rather than an attempt to produce converts by first safeguarding the credibility or helpfulness of the good news. Shaped ecclesially through distinctive social practices, evangelism is the offer of beauty rather than an exercise in positioning the good news within a crowded marketplace in an attempt to fight off the competition.