

## The Integral Nature of Worship and Evangelism

Insights from the Wesleyan Tradition

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WHEN MY FAMILY AND I first arrived in Mutare in August 1992, the entire southern region of Africa was experiencing one of the worst droughts of the century. In spite of the fact that our formal work was at Africa University and the Old Mutare Centre, Janet and I both felt called to do something to help the many hungry people that surrounded us. It did not take us long to discover that widows and children were starving within ten miles of the university. Through our contacts with the church, we met Rev. Elisha Kabungaidze, pastor of the Mundenda Circuit, with responsibility for some seven churches in one of the hard hit areas. With the help of Elisha and a devoted circle of lay leaders within his congregations, we began to identify the “poorest of the poor” within the bounds of his wide-ranging parish. Some were members of his churches; most were not. We traveled throughout the area with Elisha, delivering food and other items basic to life. It was a humbling experience, but through it all I rejoiced in the holistic vision of evangelism and its integral connection with worship embodied in this hardworking servant of God.

Each morning of worship/evangelism/mission began with our group standing together in a circle. We greeted one another with the name of Christ. We prayed. One of our members read the Word for the day. We sang. We prayed some more, and then we set out. We had the privilege of walking from hut to hut with Elisha and his parishioners, repeating the same, basic sign-act of love with him. Every day was truly sacramental. As we approached a homestead, Elisha would call out the names of the family in his deep, resonant voice and exchange the traditional greetings.

“Marara ere?” (Did you sleep well through the night?)

“Tarara marara o.” (Yes. I slept well if you slept well.)

Elisha would explain to the families why we had come, for they were usually unaware of our plans to visit. He would tell them we knew that they had no food and that the love of Jesus had moved us to do whatever we could to help them in their need. Often the women would fall to the ground and weep, and then spring to their feet, dancing and singing the praises of God. The Shona of Zimbabwe have a saying: “If you can talk, you can sing. If you can walk, you can dance.” And we had many opportunities to witness and to practice both. We always prayed together, and we almost always sang a song as we departed. It was a joyful song, a song of hope within the midst of suffering. More often than not it was *Makanaka Mambo Jesu, makanaka Mambo Jesu*; “Oh how good is our great chief, Jesus.”

Elisha lived out a model of evangelism—a way of being in mission in the world—that struck me very deeply. His participation in God’s mission reflects with integrity, I believe, what Albert Outler once described as the trio of dominical imperatives regarding evangelism, namely, heralding, martyrdom, and servanthood.<sup>1</sup> Before Elisha did anything, he acknowledged God’s presence and adored the Triune One. Wherever he went, he announced the gospel, the good news. He boldly proclaimed the love of God for all people and pointed to the Creator, Savior, and Sustainer he had come to know through Jesus Christ. He provided witness in the sense of living out his life in solidarity with God’s people. He lived the life of a servant, a life characterized by the ungrudging outpouring of himself. When I asked him on one occasion where he had learned this winsome way of life, he responded by saying, “I think it is simply in my Methodist blood.”

Far from a partisan cry (hardly something I intend here), I think Elisha was directing us to an essential principle, for surely, as the Wesleys argued repeatedly, their effort was simply to rediscover “primitive Christianity.” While never using the language of “evangelism,” their primary project was to emulate a pattern of life in community that reflected the presence of a

1. Outler, *Evangelism*, 99–104.

living Lord and a liberating/healing Spirit.<sup>2</sup> Implicit in my narration of life in the shadow of Elisha is the integral nature of worship and evangelism in the community of faith. I don't know if Elisha could have distinguished worship from evangelism in any sophisticated or nuanced manner. In fact, I would submit to you that the fullest possible integration of doxology and disciple-making was the key to his contagious faith. He lived what many are beginning to rediscover in post-Christian Western cultures at this very time. In the past decade or so, a growing number of church leaders and scholars have begun to address the connection between evangelism and worship, that perennial question in all ages of renewal in the life of the church.<sup>3</sup> In such times as these, spiritual fruit has always been abundant.

In relation to these monumental questions, therefore, my proposal here is rather modest. As we meet together here in this seminary named for the founder of Methodism, I simply desire to explore the fundamental relationship between worship and evangelism, using the hymns and writings of Charles Wesley (the neglected brother) as a vehicle for discovery.

## I.

The terms *worship* and *evangelism* suffer from a common malady. They both defy simple definition. Both can be defined so narrowly that the profound nature of their significance is lost; they can be defined so broadly that they come to mean nothing. In common discourse within the life of the church today, worship can mean anything from the entirety of the Christian life to a set of praise music in the context of the Christian assembly. Likewise, evangelism can range in meaning from the specific act of preaching the gospel to a group of unchurched homeless men in an inner city soup kitchen to the entirety of the Christian faith. Despite the importance of precision, I am actually quite happy, at this point, to leave us in a state of “happy ambiguity” with regard to definition, because a part of this exercise is to discern the interface of these practices in the life of the church. Defining these terms in too narrow a fashion may blind us to their

2. I first narrated this account at a conference on “Evangelization, the Heart of Mission: A Wesleyan Imperative,” sponsored by the General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church and its Mission Evangelism Committee, in January 1995.

3. This conversation actually goes much further back within the *oecumene* of the church to the Second Vatican Council. But for the discussions within Protestant circles, and reflective of much more recent dialogue, consult Morgethaler, *Worship Evangelism*; Webber, *Worship Is a Verb*; Kiefert, *Welcoming the Stranger*; Benedict and Miller, *Contemporary Worship*; Keck, *Church Confident*; Langford and Langford, *Worship and Evangelism*.

broad-ranging application; applying only broad strokes may obliterate the fascinating detail that actually constitutes real life. While it will be important for me to establish some basic parameters shortly—which I hope to do more descriptively than prescriptively—I think we do well to start where Charles Wesley would have begun, namely, in Scripture.

There are many biblical texts that leap immediately to mind as we contemplate the meaning of worship or the meaning of evangelism, but one text jumps out at me as I reflect upon the integral dynamic that links the two: Acts 2:46–47.

Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

However brief this description might be, it is a fairly definitive portrait of life in Christ—a life that directly linked worship and evangelism. True spiritual worship, as St. Paul made so abundantly clear in Romans 12, has to do, in fact, with every aspect of life. There can be no separation of worship or liturgy from the totality of life as we really know it. Worship, in this broad sense then, is the grateful surrender of all we are and all we have, a “living sacrifice” of praise and thanksgiving to the God of love who has created all things and bears witness with our spirits that we are the children of God. It is living in and for God and God’s way in human history in all things. The ministry of evangelism in this earliest Christian community, the consequence of which was “the Lord adding to their number day by day,” consisted of spending time in the communal worship and praise of God, sharing together the sacred gift of food, and offering kindness and hospitality to others. Just a few verses earlier in this chapter, of course, Luke provides a little more detail. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). There was a certain specificity with regard to the foundation of this evangelistic community in Word and sacrament. There was a peculiar nature to the worship of God that they practiced. But all of this life together—including the sharing of personal possessions so that no one lacked the basic necessities of life—was aimed at living in and manifesting the reign of God.

It is a cliché to describe worship, and more precisely liturgy, as “the work of the people” and to think of evangelism in similar fashion, not as the work of a single individual, but of “the whole people of God.” The purpose of this corporate service—this shared labor of love—is to form us in praise and engage us in God’s mission. Charles Wesley seems to have learned early

in life that worship/evangelism is *paideia*—life-shaping instruction or formation through action. For the earliest Christians—like those we see in the Acts of the Apostles—this classical Greek understanding of discipline must have entailed all those things that are done in the community of faith that shape the whole person in their journey toward maturity in Christ. In this process, however, nothing was more critical than the words and actions of the liturgical assembly that spilled over naturally into lifestyles of good news in the world. True worship springs from the heart, but worship (defined here in the more narrow sense as the liturgy) also has the potential to shape Christ-like people who become evangel-bearers for others.

The writer to the Hebrews uses the language of *paideia* to describe a vision of the Christian life: “We had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them . . . But [God] disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness” (Heb 12:9–10). The concept of a discipline that frees the human spirit and leads the emancipated child of God into a life characterized by holiness of heart and life clearly inspired the Wesleys. Charles bears witness to the potency of the vision.

Loose me from the chains of sense,  
 Set me from the body free;  
 Draw with stronger influence  
 My unfettered soul to thee!  
 In me, Lord, thyself reveal,  
 Fill me with a sweet surprise;  
 Let me thee when waking feel,  
 Let me in thine image rise.

Let me of thy life partake,  
 Thy own holiness impart;  
 O that I might sweetly wake  
 With my Saviour in my heart!  
 O that I might know thee mine!  
 O that I might thee receive!  
 Only live the life divine!  
 Only to thy glory live!<sup>4</sup>

4. J. Wesley, *Works*, 7:428 (no. 278.4, 5).

Authentic evangelism both reflects and creates an “O that I might . . .” *modus operandi* in life and a desire to praise God in all things. So orthodoxy—the right praise of God—involves a joyful obedience and a daring surrender. It is not too much to say that the evangelistic ministry of the community of faith and the worship of the assembly—and specifically the liturgy—shape us in such a way that we believe in God (faith), desire nothing but God (love), and glorify God by offering our lives fully to Christ (holiness).

St. Paul places this concept at the center of his admonition to Christian parents in Ephesians 6:4, where he commands them to bring up their children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Charles picks up this theme in one of his “family hymns” and refers to this process—in a profoundly evangelistic turn of phrase—as a means to “draw their souls to God.”<sup>5</sup> In a hymn written for the opening of the Methodist School in Kingwood, he expands the image.

Come, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,  
 To whom we for our children cry!  
 The good desired and wanted most  
 Out of thy richest grace supply—  
 The sacred discipline be given  
 To train and bring them up for heaven.

Answer on them the end of all  
 Our cares, and pains, and studies here;  
 On them, recovered from their fall,  
 Stamped with the humble character,  
 Raised by the nurture of the Lord,  
 To all their paradise restored.<sup>6</sup>

The more famous fifth stanza of the hymn articulates the holistic nature of this integrative, formational process.

Unite the pair so long disjoined,  
 Knowledge and vital piety:  
 Learning and holiness combined,  
 And truth and love, let all men see

5. J. Wesley, *Works*, 7:637 (no. 456.8).

6. J. Wesley, *Works*, 7:643 (no. 461.1, 2).

In those whom up to thee we give,  
Thine, wholly thine, to die and live.

My contention here is quite simple. I believe that the Wesleys viewed the liturgy of the church—doxological evangelism, if you will—as the primary matrix in which this nurture raised and restored the children of God, both those inside and potentially those outside the household of faith. Through Word and sacrament, God sets us on our journey of faith, offers us spiritual nourishment, and provides the necessary guidance for us to find our way home, especially when we require the perennial reminder that home is wherever God’s reign is realized in the life of the world.

## II.

Another biblical text, I believe, affords a provisional lens through which to explore the integral nature of evangelism and worship.<sup>7</sup> In an effort to flesh out the foundational concepts of worship/evangelism as doxology and discipline, I want to import a motif that is not without some dangers; but I find it helpful in exegeting the Wesleyan tradition nonetheless. I refer to the so-called “Isaiah Motif” drawn from the call of the prophet in Isaiah 6:1–8, a pattern one time fashionable for ordering the various acts of Christian worship and also explicating the evangelistic call to mission. A reminder of the text might prove helpful.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts:  
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this

7. The analysis of Isa 6:2–8 which follows relies heavily upon my Presidential Address to The Charles Wesley Society at Point Loma Nazarene University, October 2004; see Chilcote, “Preliminary Explorations.”

has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

The paradigm embedded in this narrative involves, at least, a fivefold progression:

1. Adoration, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts,” moves the worshiper to
2. Confession, “Woe is me!” to
3. Forgiveness, “your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out,” and through
4. Proclamation, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,” to final
5. Dedication, “Here am I; send me!”

While there is an abiding truth in this sequence of devotion, it is dangerous to transpose it mechanically either into worship or the practice of evangelism.<sup>8</sup> It is always important to remember that the inbreaking Word gives and sustains life. At times, God acts unpredictably. There is also a potential danger, I want to admit, in mechanically imposing this structure upon the Wesleys. But while it is artificial to choreograph God’s presence and movement or to plot these serially in a service of worship or in a strategy of evangelism, much less to squeeze Wesley into this mold, there is a certain “evangelical” logic in the Isaiah motif that resonates with a Wesleyan understanding of the divine-human encounter. I think this is well worth exploring. So permit me to examine briefly these specific dimensions of Isaiah’s theophany.

### Adoration

The Isaiah narrative opens with an overwhelming sense of awe, majesty, and wonder. Our first response to God is an acknowledgment of whom it is we worship.<sup>9</sup> The good news about God only becomes intelligible in this posture. Virtually every day of Charles Wesley’s life began with morning prayer, including the words of the ancient prayer of praise, the *Te Deum*:

We praise thee, O God: we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.  
All the earth doth worship thee, the Father everlasting. To thee

8. See, in particular, the critique of the threefold pattern of vision, contrition, and commission drawn from the Isaiah text in Hoon, *Integrity of Worship*, 51, 287.

9. See Cushman, “Worship as Acknowledgment.”



all Angels cry aloud: the Heavens, and all the powers therein.  
 To thee Cherubim and Seraphim continually do cry, Holy, holy,  
 holy, Lord God of Sabaoth; Heaven and Earth are full of the  
 Majesty of thy Glory.

In the 1780 *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, Wesley alludes to the Isaian *Sanctus* in at least four hymns.

Meet and right it is to sing,  
 In every time and place,  
 Glory to our heavenly King,  
 The God of truth and grace.  
 All in one thanksgiving join:  
 Holy, holy, holy, Lord,  
 Eternal praise be thine!<sup>10</sup>

Selections drawn from his earlier collection of *Hymns on the Trinity* emphasize the awe with which one should approach God and the glory of God's tremendous and mysterious majesty.

Holy, holy, holy Lord,  
 God the Father and the Word,  
 God the Comforter, receive  
 Blessing more than we can give!

Thee while dust and ashes sings,  
 Angels shrink within their wings;  
 Prostrate Seraphim above  
 Breathe unutterable love.

Fain with them our souls would vie,  
 Sink as low, and mount as high;  
 Fall, o'erwhelmed with love, or soar,  
 Shout, or silently adore!

10. J. Wesley, *Works*, 7:346 (no. 212.1). Note the explicit reference to the Communion Service of the Book of Common Prayer in the opening line.