

**Spirit-led Evangelism:  
Evaluative Criteria for Outreach Praxis in a Pentecostal Context**

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Pentecostals have always been outreach-focused, for mission and evangelism are embraced as the supernatural outflow of the Spirit's empowerment for service as spelled out by the Spirit-giver himself in Acts 1:8 - a favorite Scripture. Whether or not these efforts have yielded much long-term fruit for the kingdom of God is a question better left to the historians to answer. One such historian, Cecil M Robeck, notes how the Azusa Street Mission, believed by many to be the seminal institution for Pentecostalism in the U.S., "grew with unparalleled speed" and was "aggressively evangelistic" from its outset.<sup>1</sup> Another Pentecostal historian, Everett Wilson, notes that the growth of the Assemblies of God (AG) overseas was "exponential," increasing on the average by 12% per year, sustained over three decades without decline. Such growth "is itself a phenomenal development and much greater than that of any other contemporary mission anywhere for sustained periods of time or covering so many fields."<sup>2</sup> Whatever history's assessment may be in the long-run, the positive impact of Pentecostalism as a force for Christianity's growth across the globe is fairly much undisputed.<sup>3</sup>

Yet after the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century a consensus is growing, at least in the U.S., that Pentecostal churches are no longer seeing the exponential growth they experienced during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Assemblies of God statistics for the reporting years 2004 and 2005, 36% of their churches opened prior to 2001 experienced growth of 10% or more in Sunday AM worship attendance, 41% experienced a decline of at least 10%, and 22% remained steady. "That means that about two-thirds of Assemblies of God churches have plateaued or declined

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<sup>1</sup> Cecil M. Robeck, *The Azusa Street Mission and Revival: The Birth of the Global Pentecostal Movement*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2006), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Everett A. Wilson, *Strategies of the Spirit: J. Philip Hogan and The Growth of the Assemblies of God Worldwide* (London: Regnum, 1997), 7.

<sup>3</sup> As Allan Anderson noted, "Pentecostalism has probably been the fastest growing religious movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it is now found in every country in the world. One of the reasons for this must surely be because it has always had a strong emphasis on mission and evangelism," Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 206.

during the same time period.”<sup>4</sup> When it comes to conversion AG churches reported a 47.5% increase in the number of conversion in the years 1993-2003, but a 4.6% decline between the years 2002-2003 alone, with the average number of conversions in AG churches remaining flat at 47 conversions each between 2007 and 2008.<sup>5</sup>

What is at the root of this dilemma among at least one prominent Pentecostal fellowship in the U.S.? The premise of this document is that part of the challenge rests with present-day practices in respect to evangelism within these local Pentecostal contexts – be they local church or para-church in nature. No other issue in the life of the church, except perhaps the subject of prayer, receives so much attention with so little action as evangelism. This estrangement between intention and practice is worsened by the decided lack of faithful theological reflection on evangelism practices within Pentecostal church contexts.

Rather, wholesale pragmatism rules the day. The advent of each new and seemingly successful methodology is followed by its eager importation and application in other church contexts. Unfortunately, implementation generally is not due to any inherent theological integrity, but rather because of the results produced elsewhere, “end justifies the means” logic. Further, that end itself, the salvation of souls, often embraces a mistaken focus on crisis as the over arching paradigm for conversion. Because of the inherent link between one’s concept of conversion and the practice of evangelism, if the former is misconceived, the latter will naturally lose its effectiveness.

A refocus on conversion as an ongoing spiritual journey rather than an overly reductionist understanding of conversion as a singular crisis event is needed. This is founded on the premise

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<sup>4</sup> Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 25.

<sup>5</sup> General Council of the Assemblies of God Statistician, “Statistics on the Assemblies of God, U.S.A.,” General Council of the Assemblies of God, <http://ag.org/top/About/Statistics/index.cfm> (accessed January 14, 2010).

that a believer's spiritual journey will involve 3 phases; quest, encounter and transformation. This is an essential paradigm for the conversion process. Trends toward acceptance of a broader understanding of the complexity of the conversion process within Pentecostal contexts are promising. In addition, part of the solution is to encourage Pentecostals to develop a much keener sense of the Spirit's leading in this regard, what I call discernment of Theopraxis.<sup>6</sup> Discovering God in the midst of situations is foundational to Pentecostals implementing their own practical theology of evangelism that is more in line with what God intends: "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."<sup>7</sup>

As part of that resolve it is asserted that evangelism methodologies and practices which are genuinely Spirit-led will meet certain evaluative criteria. Five imperatives are offered to help the ordinary believer implement his or her own Spirit-led practical theology of evangelism. They are specifically: 1) evangelism practices should be biblical in basis, 2) dialogical in method, 3) communal in context, 4) spiritual in dimension, and 5) holistic in scope. These criteria can be used by Christians to determine the validity and efficacy of any particular outreach methodology in their efforts to assist the Spirit's work in the conversion process.

## **Preliminary Definitional Concerns**

### ***The Method of Practical Theology***

Like other disciplines in theology; i.e. historical, biblical and systematic approaches, the field of practical theology embraces its own methodology inherent to that discipline. The structure of practical theology may be the key to positive change in the way Pentecostals engage

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<sup>6</sup> See the section following for a more detailed description of this phrase.

<sup>7</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, 2 Peter 3:9. All Scripture quotations herein are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

the task of evangelism.<sup>8</sup> Through the implementation of four phases of dynamic interaction employed in practical theology, church and para-church ministries can develop an effective pedagogy in the formation, implementation, and subsequent evaluation of evangelism practices. These four phases involve devising a specific “thick” description of the dilemma, encouraging a genuine dialogue within the Pentecostal tradition, formulating reasonable intentions, and finally, implementing sensible applications toward the resolution of the dilemma.<sup>9</sup>

The first phase incorporates a "thick" description of the concrete situation in which the dilemma exists.<sup>10</sup> This necessitates addressing some definitional issues at the outset. The intent is that earnest theological reflection on the concrete situation in question must begin with some common understanding of what is meant by the key phrases: Pentecostal context, conversion as spiritual journey, Spirit-led evangelism and what discernment of Theopraxis entails.

The second component entails a genuine dialogue with various “voices,” not the least of which is the Spirit of God who superintends the whole process of conversion. Because a dialogue with God is essential to Christian existence, prayer is the starting point for all effective outreach. In addition to the primacy given the biblical texts, traditions of the church, and significant theological writings, a theology of evangelism must also promote honest dialogue

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<sup>8</sup> For a thorough discussion of this premise see Brian M. Kelly, *Toward a Practical Theology of Evangelism: Spiritual Journey as an Essential Paradigm for the Conversion Process and Its Implications for Evangelism Methodologies* (Pasadena: Ph.D. Dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> The author's methodology is significantly shaped by Browning's basic structure of practical theology, see Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 58. Also by David Tracy's "revised correlational method," see David Tracy, "Practical Theology in the Situation of Global Pluralism," in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology* ed. Lewis S. Madge, and James N. Poling, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 139. Critical correlation is "a corporate act of a well-led community of faith that moves from insights and clarifications to decisions and actions which help define along the way what this faith community is to be in the midst of the world," *Ibid.*, xxix.

<sup>10</sup> They are "thick" in that "they have behind them a range of implicit or explicit assumptions or judgments at many different levels or dimensions," Browning, 105.

with individuals both in and outside the church. This concept of dialogue is most important, as practical theology is the result of dynamic interactions that are rooted in dialogue.

The third phase is a matter of arriving at reasonable intentions where hypothetical solutions to the predicament in question are designed for implementation. Formulations for resolving the issues raised by the descriptive and dialogical steps are propounded. Certain parameters for the employment of solutions, criteria for their effectiveness, and other relevant and reasonable guidelines are then established.

The fourth stage is a dialectical process of implementing sensible applications to resolve the dilemma. The model employs applications that are dynamic "works in progress," requiring considerable flexibility to rehabilitate the dilemma. This step incorporates a Hegelian dialectic of thesis, anti-thesis, and eventual synthesis.<sup>11</sup>

The process allows for ebb and flow of interactions between all phases as is necessary for transformation and the "near" resolution of the dilemma.<sup>12</sup> This framework should be incorporated into the teaching, reflection, and implementation of a practical theology of evangelism for each local Pentecostal context.

In like manner here, this document follows the above structure. The first part of this paper deals with certain definitional or nomenclature issues to provide specific descriptions that can become "grist for the mill" so to speak for the second phase in which a developing dialogue concerning these issues ensues.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The second movement of Hegel's dialectic is not an inevitable negation of the first, it could also be a "discerning one that perceives a problematic or alternative perspective and with dialogue can be a moment of peace rather than conflict," Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: The Way of Shared Praxis* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 475n.38.

<sup>12</sup> I use the term "near" in recognition that a full resolution will never occur for every resolution will only result in a new, albeit more finely nuanced, dilemma to inject into the process all over again.

<sup>13</sup> The submission of the paper to SPS, its delivery at their annual conference, and subsequent response from and interaction with interested parties constitutes the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of "developing dialogue."

The middle part of the paper explicates what reasonable intentions should be implemented in regard to potential outreach efforts. This will involve a comprehensive explanation of the 5 evaluative imperatives as criteria for Spirit-led outreach.

The final portion of the paper is devoted to the “sensible application” phase – although from a theoretical rather than empirical stance. Five evangelism methodologies common to Pentecostal contexts are analyzed on the basis of our criteria to provide the reader a model of a practical theology of evangelism for the Pentecostal believer.

### ***Pentecostal Context***

All theological inquiry is influenced by the historical, educational and spiritual experience of the inquisitor. This writer’s background includes a conversion at a comparatively late age (31 yrs) with a Spirit-baptism experience subsequent by just a few weeks. In addition to teaching evangelism in both graduate and undergraduate contexts since 1989, I have ministered as an “equipping evangelist” in well over 400 Pentecostal churches – 90% of these Assemblies of God churches since 1985. Based on Anderson’s definitions, and as an ordained minister in the Assemblies of God, this author would identify most readily with the classical Pentecostal tradition. However, for our purposes here the word Pentecostal is meant to include all those who are part of a movement “concerned primarily with the *experience* of the working of the Holy Spirit and *practice* of spiritual gifts” (italics his).<sup>14</sup>

### ***Conversion as Spiritual Journey***

Spiritual Journey is the most appropriate paradigm with which to conceive the conversion process. The concept of lifelong spiritual pilgrimage has considerable epistemological significance. Spiritual journey is an over arching paradigm for understanding the entirety of

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<sup>14</sup> Anderson, *An Introduction*, 14.

human existence. However, what is in mind here is Christian conversion seen as a multifarious process that entails three phases; quest, encounter, and transformation.<sup>15</sup> While every human is capable of experiencing all three phases of the spiritual journey, only those who commit their lives to Christ will ever actually go beyond the quest stage; the rest will remain “lost.”

The first phase, spiritual *quest*, involves the aspects of human pilgrimage in which persons seek after a deeper knowledge of the reason for their existence. All humans are being drawn by God back to him. While Christians cannot force movement along this path (this is the work of the Holy Spirit), they can help explain some of the paradoxes of human experience that hold people back from taking the next step toward reconciliation. Thus, the essence of evangelism at this phase consists of determining where people are on their spiritual quest and helping them along their path back to God.

The second phase is *encounter*. For some, their view of conversion consists primarily of this step in which a commitment is made to Jesus Christ. What is more important, this stage involves the discernment of Theopraxis, a recognition of the atoning work done by Christ at the Cross, followed by an obedient human response to the presence of God, which results in transformation stemming from genuine repentance and faith.

The final phase, *transformation* is the natural fruit of an ongoing discernment of Theopraxis in the life of the Christian believer. This comprises not only a quantity of life (eternal) but a quality of life as well, whereby the believer’s ongoing personal relationship with Jesus shapes and transforms every other relationship along the spiritual pilgrimage.

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<sup>15</sup> For a detailed description of this concept see Richard V. Peace, *Conversion Paradigms in the New Testament: The Conversion of Paul and the Twelve*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), also see Johnson and Maloney's, "Dynamic Sequence of Events in Conversion" which involves three stages: growing awareness, consideration, and incorporation. In their model, a "point of realization" and a "point of encounter" separate the three stages respectively, Cedric B. Johnson and H. Newton Maloney, *Christian Conversion: Biblical and Psychological Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 23f.

All three aspects must be incorporated into the evangelistic endeavor, lest people turn away from God because encounter was prematurely pressed upon them before the Spirit brought them completely through their quest to the place of faith. Similarly, an undue focus on encounter alone can lead to the neglect of the serious responsibility of nurturing people along the path of transformation as an intrinsic part of the evangelistic process.

### ***Discernment of Theo-Praxis***

*Theopraxis* is, simply stated, *the intentional activity of God in the midst of situations*.

Groome called this a “shared Christian praxis,” whereby God's self-disclosure can be discerned through a “participative and dialogical pedagogy,” in which people learn to reflect on their own “historical agency in time and place” and on their own “socio-cultural reality.”<sup>16</sup> The *Theopraxis* envisioned here is reciprocating, that of the human coming to know, and recognize the work of God, even as he or she is known by the divine, and recognized by him.<sup>17</sup>

In the context of this study, the subject of praxis is God himself. It is his activity, his course of action, his deeds, and the situations that arise from his presence, that are of primary interest. Its discernment entails the recognition of how and where such activity occurs. *Theopraxis* is God's purposeful activity which involves a two-dimensional interaction between human and divine in which the Holy Spirit is the catalyst. This interaction occurs in both personal and communal contexts. *Theopraxis*, as the activity of God, contains in itself the *telos* of divine self-disclosure, an interaction with a distinct purpose, the conversion of individuals and the advancement of the Kingdom of God.<sup>18</sup> The goal is realized when people are able to

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<sup>16</sup> Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 135.

<sup>17</sup> For a thorough discussion of this concept see Chapter Four, Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (San Francisco: Harper Row Publishers, 1983).

<sup>18</sup> Theological understanding discerns the Kingdom of God, seen as “the situation as God undergirds it, pervades it, disposes it, and lures it to its best possibilities,” Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 168.

personally appropriate their role in God's activity in the world with the "creative intent" of a renewed praxis "in Christian faith toward God's reign for all creation."<sup>19</sup> *Theopraxis* then, can be seen as a purposeful interaction between God and his people with the intent of transforming individuals, culture, and creation.

The ability to discern *Theopraxis* is inherent to human personality.<sup>20</sup> In the very act of creating humanity, God has made possible the eventual reconciliation of humanity unto himself which begins with the recognition of his activity.

Such discernment is formed in individuals who, through practice, are trained to distinguish good from evil (Heb. 5:14). Discernment is more than just acquiring empirical data, for that would never be sufficient alone to acknowledge the activity of God. It goes beyond that to dialectic of obedience, which involves not only knowing but doing.<sup>21</sup> This is realized when "the whole ontic being of 'agent-subjects-in-relationship' is actively engaged to consciously know, desire, and do what is most humanizing and life-giving (i.e. "true") for all."<sup>22</sup> The most life-giving of all activities for the Christian community is the dissemination of the Gospel message in a way that allows unbelievers to discern *Theopraxis*<sup>23</sup> and participate in such dialectic

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<sup>19</sup> cf., Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 135.

<sup>20</sup> It is part of the *sensus divinitatus* (sense of divinity) intrinsic to human nature. This "natural tendency" in all humans to speak their own "word about God" (*theos logia*) is already embedded in the heart of human existence. Groome sees this as "an *a priori* mediation of God's grace that gives the human a natural capacity for the divine." By nature we are "lured to the transcendent, to reach out in freedom toward self-consciousness and an expressed relationship with the divine," Thomas H. Groome, "Theology on Our Feet: A Revisionist Pedagogy for Healing the Gap between Academia and Ecclesia," in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*. Lewis S. Mudge, and James N. Poling, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 60.

<sup>21</sup> Parker Palmer defines obedience as "the means to listen with a discerning ear and respond faithfully to the personal implications of what one has heard," Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (San Francisco: Harper Row Publishers, 1983), 89.

<sup>22</sup> This kind of wisdom, or knowing, that goes beyond acquiring objective truths to the actual application of these truths, not only names "the learning outcome intended by Christian religious education," but describes the essential relationship between God and humans in the process of what I call a genuine discernment of *Theopraxis*, Cf. Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Ray Anderson has argued cogently for the term "Christopraxis," in which "revelation, as reconciliation, true knowledge of God, as well as true life with God, inheres in the same event." See Ray S. Anderson, "Christopraxis:

of obedience.

Attempts to discern Theopraxis are really attempts to know the truth or reality of our human existence. Palmer argues convincingly that the truth is to be found beyond the mere "facts" of empirical data. In fact, "truth is personal and all truth is known in personal relationships."<sup>24</sup> The result is that not only is the "knower's person" part of the equation, but the "personhood of the known" enters into the process as well.<sup>25</sup> In this way, God, as Truth to be pursued, also becomes the pursuer.<sup>26</sup> This concept of truth, in the context of personality-in-relationship, undergirds the communal nature of human existence and serves as the primary impetus for the discernment of Theopraxis in the spiritual journey toward redemption.

Understanding truth as a commitment to obedience within community is essential to a true perception of Theopraxis.<sup>27</sup> This Theopraxis, or experience of God in the midst of the human situation, can be seen as true knowledge.<sup>28</sup> It has as its goal "the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds,"<sup>29</sup> which is at the core of the evangelistic task. For

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Competence as a Criterion for Theological Education," *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin*, Jan-Feb. 1984, 11. He uses Christopraxis as a "technical term" for the act of God in Christ which occurred "once and for all through the person Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Word," whereas, my intent, (cf. Groome) is to focus on a broader Theopraxis, constituting the many acts of God throughout all of salvation history. Cf., *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> He uses the example of Jesus who "did not offer propositions to be tested by logic or data to be tested in a laboratory. He offered himself and his life." As he points out, Jesus' call to truth is a call to community - "with him, with each other, with creation and its Creator," Palmer, 47-49.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>26</sup> Palmer points to the desert fathers who sought solitude and silence, so that the "truth could find them out, track them down." In this way the truth that sought them was not "an inert object" or proposition. Instead it is a personality that wished to draw them into a community of "mutual knowledge, accountability, and care," *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>27</sup> One of the key concepts to Palmer's view of truth is rooted in the sense of an "ancient vow" or "troth" where persons enter into a covenant to engage in a "mutually accountable and transforming relationship, a relationship forged of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks," *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Ray Anderson argues that the actions of God become the "basis for theological reflection" because those drawn into the actions have a "theological existence- that is, exist within the structure of action in such a way that the very being of God is disclosed as true knowledge," Anderson, "Christopraxis," 11.

<sup>29</sup> Palmer argues that there are two primary sources for our knowledge, "curiosity and control," but the greatest knowledge available is found in compassion and love. "The mind motivated by compassion reaches out to know as the heart reaches out to love. Here the act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own," Palmer, 7-8.

"truthful knowing weds the knower and the known."<sup>30</sup> In sum then, discerning Theopraxis is the Spirit-led process whereby humans recognize their own and God's identity within the community of creation, and participate in the purposeful redemptive work of God in their midst.

### ***Spirit-led Evangelism***

What exactly is meant by Spirit-led evangelism? Spirit-led evangelism is the process whereby the Christian community, through a spiritual encounter with the Risen Christ, and under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, assists the reconciliation of God's creation back to him. Therefore it stems from a discernment of Theopraxis which seeks to bring those outside of the community of faith into contact with the Spirit of God in such a way as to effect conversion.

Evangelism then is rooted in Theopraxis. This is "understood as being derived from the very nature of God" and the classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit [is] expanded to include yet another 'movement.' Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world."<sup>31</sup> Therefore, evangelism can be seen as an "enfleshment," if you will, of the heart of God. For *missio Dei* "describes the impulse that saw the Father send his son into the world to en flesh him. It is also the impulse that sees the Father, Son and Spirit send us into the world as his ambassadors, his representatives, enfleshing him here on earth."<sup>32</sup>

Ultimately a person's view of conversion directly impacts a person's view of their role in evangelism practices. Defining conversion is no easy matter, indeed whole books have been

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>31</sup> David J. Bosch. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (American Society of Missiology 16: Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 390.

<sup>32</sup> Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost, *Re-Jesus: Wild Messiah for a Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 28.

written on the subject. Though it is typically viewed as a singular crisis event I have argued that conversion be viewed primarily as a process with three distinctive phases along the spiritual journey of quest, encounter and transformation.

A failure to see conversion as a process blinds believers concerning their own role in evangelism. The church must help people recognize the various ways the Spirit empowers them, ways that resonate with their gifting and skills, to be a part of the spiritual journey of those outside the community of faith. For instance the gift of hospitality facilitates interaction between believers and unbelievers, the same way a zeal for apologetics or philosophy is suited for the spiritual quest phase. Likewise, guiding people through the encounter phase by praying and counseling with them requires unique gifting and sensitivity to the Spirit. Finally, encouraging new converts in their ongoing walk of faith involves those gifted in discipleship. If the church fails to help people determine and exercise their particular gifting, in ways that relate to the conversion process, it ultimately discourages them from healthy involvement in God's Theopraxis.

Also, Spirit-led evangelism must have an intentional quality about it, or too passive a stance is taken by the believing community and too little interaction with unbelievers occurs. In fact, this is essential for genuine evangelism to happen. Unbelievers must be involved. If no unbeliever is challenged by the presence and power of the Spirit of God to change, there is no genuine evangelism. Yet, evangelism is much more than proclamation, and should be conceived as "that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time."<sup>33</sup>

Contemporary theologians have rightly grappled with the nature of evangelism in order to

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<sup>33</sup> William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 13, 95.

help the church deal with dilemmas concerning its implementation.<sup>34</sup> While William Abraham's critique that evangelism is more than just a narrow focus on proclamation or church growth is valid, his idea of "initiation" into God's rule may be too broad.<sup>35</sup> In some churches everything the church does from Sunday School to midweek Bible studies is seen as evangelism. If too extended a definition is embraced, soon nothing is evangelism. It isn't long before the difficulty of proclaiming Christ in the midst of widespread unbelief is abandoned for the easier tasks of discipleship, worship, and fellowship.

Historian Michael Green's eclectic approach in understanding evangelism as rooted in the various uses NT uses of the words *to euaggelion*, *kerussein*, and *martureo* is one of the more beneficial responses to the question of what evangelism really involves. In this sense, all three aspects of announcing the good news, proclaiming the Lord's reign, and witnessing to his saving acts, are part of the missionary task of the Spirit-led community.<sup>36</sup>

In the Old Testament, outreach to others is seen in the context of a response to God's call, whether to individuals directly or mediated through the re-telling of the *magnalia Dei*,<sup>37</sup> and is expressed in a journeying with him either literally (Exodus) or metaphorically (Wisdom) in the wake of his victory march on the path of redemption history. Brueggemann strives to show that conversion and evangelism in the OT is a three part drama; involving first, actual conflict and victory, second, pronouncement, third, a lived appropriation.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, a "lifestyle of evangelism" was prevalent in the NT church and can be observed

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<sup>34</sup> The most thorough and recent treatments can be found in the compendium: *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, Paul W. Chilcote and Lacey C. Warner, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Abraham feels initiation is more than mere conversion or "soul-winning", more than sharing one's faith or a testimony, more than discipleship but may include all these elements and more, see Abraham, *Logic of Evangelism* 93-95.

<sup>36</sup> Cf., Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 76-115.

<sup>37</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three Storied Universe* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1993), 37-42.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

in a few contemporary fellowships. This is where believers are so empowered by the Spirit and so sensitive to the discernment of Theopraxis in their midst that they can hardly stop themselves from “gossiping” the Gospel wherever they go. The presence of God can be so tangible to believers that they cannot help but talk about the difference Christ has made in their lives, whether in the laundromat, the grocery store, the dentist’s office, or wherever given a Spirit-led opportunity. Witnessing, then, is much more a matter of who Christians are rather than an activity that Christians do.

This “natural” practice of evangelism is the intentional *telos* of the *missio Dei* described earlier. When a new convert comes into the church, he or she will see Spirit-initiated evangelism modeled by others as a natural part of their walk with Christ. Consequently, there is an implicit understanding of its importance in the life of the believing community. Sharing one’s faith should have the same significance in the rhythm of the church as praying, reading of the Bible, and fellowshiping with the saints.

### **The Imperative for Spirit-led Discernment in Evangelism**

The lack of practical theological reflection on the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of actual evangelism methodologies results in capitulation to a pervasive pragmatism in most Pentecostal contexts when it comes to evangelism methodology.<sup>39</sup> Because of this, evangelism methodologies tend to lack biblical integrity and often fail to resonate with the conversion experience of the average believer. The distressing consequence is a dearth of effective and Spirit-led evangelism effort taking place.

Too often decisions concerning evangelism in local churches are not based on a genuine

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<sup>39</sup> Such pragmatism is nearly always based on the number of conversions that took place as a result of the methodology. Yet, there is no normative definition of what conversion really entails, i.e., number of baptisms, new members, altar consultations, and church attendance. Nor has the negative impact of certain evangelistic methods on people’s faith journeys been assessed.

Theopraxis, or attempts to discern the leading of the Spirit. Unless church leaders are willing to do the hard work of seeking God and developing a reflective theology of evangelism for their context, they will succumb to the temptation of expediency. A focus only on tangible results threatens to reduce evangelism to an overly simplistic task, neglecting the complex Spirit-initiated and Spirit-formed nature of conversion, and making commonplace the dynamic interactions that occur between the human and the divine in that process. The answer lies in training ordinary Christians to discern more readily Theopraxis and develop their Pentecostal insights that are part of the “missional-incarnational” impulse inherent to the Spirit-filled life.<sup>40</sup>

However, due to an unhealthy bifurcation which exists between the church and the academy in respect to the study of theology, theological reflection is too often seen in contemporary western Pentecostal culture as a purely academic discipline having little or nothing to do with the actual day-to-day life of the average churchgoer. Historically, when the intellectual disciplines became independent of the church this evoked a new response, the promotion of a clerical paradigm, or the appointment of professionally and theologically trained clergy as the final arbiters for defining theology.<sup>41</sup> Allan Anderson has noted that the inherent belief in the priesthood of all believers has helped bridge the clergy/laity divide in some Pentecostal circles and is one of the reasons for its success around the world. “A theologically articulate clergy was not the priority, because cerebral and clerical Christianity had in the minds of many people already failed them. What was needed was a demonstration of power by people

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<sup>40</sup> See Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2007), 127-131, for a comprehensive treatment of the Spirit’s work in promoting an “apostolic” genius in the individual believer and the missional communities of faith of which they are a part.

<sup>41</sup> Two books deal with this issue in depth; Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); and Edward Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

to whom ordinary people could easily relate.”<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, when the practice of the church focuses almost solely on the delivery of sermons and instruction from clergy as the primary pedagogy for theological education, the division between religious faith and the routines of life is enlarged. Because this reduces the believer's relationship with the Christian tradition primarily to an exposition of biblical text as a means of arriving at truth, it "subverts the very basis of the reflective wisdom of the believer."<sup>43</sup>

Rather a more holistic and existential learning has always been a part of Pentecostalism from its origin.<sup>44</sup> This is all part and parcel of the Spirit's work in which he "enables human freedom by gifting human experience with the genuine opportunity to collaborate with the divine offer of grace" for "the Spirit personalizes human beings more and more fully (through the conversion process) orienting human experience toward the full assimilation of the image of God and life of Christ in their own lives.”<sup>45</sup>

Unhappily, emphasizing the authority of trained clergy over and against a more innate Spirit-led, intuitive authority has helped to sustain unhealthy compartmentalization in the life of the believer and perpetuate the myth that evangelism is the responsibility of the formally trained. An overemphasis on the power of the pulpit or classroom encourages ordinary Christians to be passive listeners instead of active participants in the activity of the Spirit. This concentration on professional clergy as the locus of all theologies represents a major structural challenge to re-visioning the sharing of faith as a habit to be practiced by every believer.

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<sup>42</sup> Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism*, 217.

<sup>43</sup> Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge*, 97.

<sup>44</sup> The Pentecostal experience "demands interpretation of the experiential dimension of spirituality over and against an emphasis on textuality in religious life," see Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirits: A Pentecostal/Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield, UK: Academic Press, 2000), 134.

<sup>45</sup> Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out On All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 294.

Consequently, apart from participation in church activities, many laypeople are not encouraged to discern actively the work of the Spirit in their lives, or the lives of those outside the faith. This disparages the discovery of the genuine move of God in everyday tasks. Worse yet, unbelievers get the point as well - the Christian God is not to be found outside the context of church services and is only present where compelling spiritual phenomena are manifested! To effect a truly Spirit-led missional lifestyle, today's Pentecostals must embrace and practice a theology of evangelism that is internalized and self-initiated under the guidance of God's Spirit.

This absence of theological reflection is the genesis of other problems as well. A symptomatic focus on the shortage of evangelism tends to cloud the real issue of why people fail to get involved in evangelism efforts. Not only is there a decided lack of long-term fruit to excite enthusiasm, but the methods of evangelism that are offered fail to resonate with the conversion experiences of their constituency or lack enough theological integrity to spur committed involvement. When evangelism methodologies only reflect a crisis conversion theology, especially within congregations whose constituents primarily attest to a gradual process rather than event oriented conversions, lay participants stay away in droves. In addition, the primary focus of conversion has been almost solely on the individual, rather than the communal aspects of salvation and its impact on families, neighborhoods, social structures, cultures, indeed the entire cosmos. Within both the academy and the church, the traditional Pentecostal understanding of salvation as a punctiliar event which affects primarily individuals must continually be challenged.

In the previous two sections I have tried to provide some foundational considerations concerning the Spirit's work in helping us discover the activity of God in the midst of our missional Pentecostal contexts as God orchestrates them. In addition, I have made some

observations concerning some of the challenges Pentecostal's face due to a lack of theological reflection, spiritual sensitivity, and lay empowerment as they assist God in his efforts to help people along their spiritual journey with Christ. The next section of this paper will attempt to show how discerning the Spirit's activity in conversion can best be discovered and assisted based on five evaluative criteria to be applied to any evangelism methodology under consideration for implementation in Pentecostal contexts.

### **Five Evaluative Criteria**

There are at least five unique characteristics endemic to genuinely Spirit-led outreach methods that need to be considered. If a particular method does not employ these characteristics then through the dialogical processes of a practical theology (already alluded to) the method can be attuned to meet each essential criterion, as follows.

#### ***Dialogical in Method***

First of all, the whole process of evangelism must be dialogical in method. Dialogue "along the way" is the essential catalyst for discerning Theopraxis; the foundation for the Spirit's leading in spreading the Gospel. We must seek, on a continual and communal basis, significant dialogue not only with the Creator who wishes to transform every facet of the process, but also with those outside the community of faith. Only in this way can they too, share in God's invitation to partake of the truth of the gospel.<sup>46</sup> Developing a dynamic dialogue with the various "voices" both within and outside the church, i.e., biblical documents, historical traditions, narrative accounts, political practices, generational characteristics and contemporary scholarly literature, is a purposeful activity and one of the key aspects of what it means for evangelism to

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<sup>46</sup> This is true because all theology, as knowledge of the Truth, is essentially a dialogue between the Knower and the known, and takes place within community. As Palmer contends, "to know the truth is to enter with our whole persons into relations of mutuality with the entire creation - relations in which we not only know, but allow ourselves to be known," Palmer, 54.

be dialogical or conversational in method. This is described as a "play between question and text,"<sup>47</sup> and the dynamics of this conversation, including descriptions of the various participants, the role of the Spirit, the faith community, and the question of authority in the discussion, all impinge on the interactions that comprise evangelism.

Evangelism, orchestrated by the Spirit, is a conversation that is rooted in, and emerges from the biblical and historical traditions of the church. From the biblical texts it is clear that salvation history is only part of the greater story of God's intervention with the people he calls to himself. The narrative traditions which form that history play a key role in evangelism as the basis for an invitation to participate in the mighty acts of God, which is experienced in the powerful, spiritual encounter of conversion. Therefore, the story of God's activity should be incorporated into any effective evangelism methodology.

Furthermore, prayer is essential to true discernment of the Spirit's activity and Spirit-led evangelistic efforts to assist that activity. Palmer views prayer as the "practice of relatedness."<sup>48</sup> This is a "relatedness" that is not flight from the world to God, but rather insight of God at work in the world.<sup>49</sup> Instead of a routine monologue offered by the human to his or her deity, the acts of Theopraxis involve a prayerful conversation that includes active listening, coupled with obedient responses, which results in a genuine interaction between the participants.<sup>50</sup> From this prayerful association, humans will realize a greater insight into the will and ways of God, for

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<sup>47</sup> For Browning it is "a to-and-fro process of questioning the text, listening to the text, and being questioned by the text," see, Browning, 213.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>49</sup> As Palmer has shown, "the Christian tradition's central claim is not that God takes us out of ourselves and our world into ethereal realms, but that God broke in to reveal us and our world as we are," Palmer, 14.

<sup>50</sup> For "knowledge of truth requires a personal dialogue between the knower and the known, a dialogue in which the knower listens to the world with obedience," *Ibid.*

"theological thought can breathe only in the atmosphere of dialogue with God."<sup>51</sup>

Finally, evangelism approaches that are Spirit-led will involve a conversation with those outside of the community of faith. As the dialogue continues, a larger truth is revealed, "a truth that is not only within us but *between* us."<sup>52</sup> For this reason, the church, and the individual believers that form its constituency need to be open to dialogue with those outside the community of faith.

Authority for determining the Spirit's leading when it comes to evangelism practice should never rest merely within the academy - perpetuating the false theory-to-practice paradigm in the church's thinking.<sup>53</sup> The preferred process includes all God's people, even those yet to come to faith, in a "dialectical unity between situations and theology" instead of the traditional "from theory-to-practice" mode.<sup>54</sup> A communal dialogue then, is essential to arriving at truth.<sup>55</sup> In theological reflection, deference should be given to the interactions between individuals-in-community and the texts in question, in contrast to subjective, introspective insights and formulations.<sup>56</sup>

Therefore the spiritual dialogue that is evangelism is never between believers and God

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<sup>51</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*. trans. by Charles L. Taylor, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmanns Publishing Company, 1962), 34.

<sup>52</sup> Palmer refers to a study in which the group score on a test is almost always higher than the average of individual scores, in fact, through the process of reaching consensus the group score is often better than the best individual score, "which suggests that through consensus the group can reach a level of knowledge higher than that of the group's most knowledgeable member," *Ibid.*, 93-94.

<sup>53</sup> Browning argues that practical theology really begins in practice, but there is no practice that is not "theory-laden." The process really goes from "theory-laden" practice to a "retrieval of normative theory-laden practice to the creation of more critically held theory-laden practices," cf., Browning, 7.

<sup>54</sup> Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 64.

<sup>55</sup> "Truth is between us, in relationship, to be found in the dialogue of knowers and known, who are understood as independent accountable selves... genuine dialogue is possible only as I acknowledge an integrity in the other that cannot be reduced to my perceptions and needs," Palmer, 56.

<sup>56</sup> Browning maintains that the "hermeneutical dialogue with classic texts ... should be a community effort involving several people and their respective horizons in a dialogue with the classic texts." This is so because the "idea of reality can never be known adequately by an individual... to gain relatively reliable knowledge we need to rely on the interpretive skills of the entire communities," Browning, 50-51.

alone, but also between believers and those with whom they share their faith outside the church. This encourages the unbeliever's discernment of Theopraxis, generating a genuine spiritual dialogue with God. If "truth exists in the interaction *between* persons rather than inside them,"<sup>57</sup> then the evangelistic task must be seen fundamentally as a shared dialogue that would encourage a communal, as well as an individual encounter with the presence of God.

In conclusion, evangelism that is dialogical in method offers some significant correctives to contemporary Pentecostal church. When Pentecostals solely employ personal experience, private truth, and existential appeals to what "God told me," as the criteria for validity, then a communal view of truth which arises out of dialogue becomes even more imperative.<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, when the modern church or academy is seen as the locus of authority the result is what Rebecca Chopp calls a "constitution of Christianity in bourgeois society as individualistic, existentialistic, and private."<sup>59</sup> If, true dialogue "requires a frank exchange of convictions," and brings to the interaction "a commitment to respect the religious beliefs and practices of others,"<sup>60</sup> then an authentic discussion with those outside the community of faith, indeed those marginalized in the broader culture must be encouraged.<sup>61</sup> In sum then, a dialogical

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<sup>57</sup> Newton Maloney sees this as the conclusion of organizational development consultants who "resist the temptation to say that truth is private and that change comes by the achievement of rational insight. Instead they suggest that truth is discovered in the dialogue persons have with one another and... change comes through group action rather than individual insight," cf., Maloney, H. Newton, "A Framework for Understanding and Helping the Church," in *Building Effective Ministry: Theory and Practice in the Local Church*. Carl S. Dudley, ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1983), 189.

<sup>58</sup> Palmer notes that while individual dialogue with God in relatedness is important, for him, the community serves as "a check against personal distortions, it helps interpret the meaning of texts and gives guidance in [the] experience of prayer," Palmer, 18.

<sup>59</sup> See Rebecca S. Chopp, "Practical Theology and Liberation", in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*. ed. Lewis S. Mudge, and James N. Poling, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 123, 125. For Chopp, the primary text is a "living history of social practices" immersed in a "web of relations in which the individual doing and being is contained. "Therefore religious tradition must be broadened to include other kinds of historical witnesses besides those authorized by the "ecclesial and theological elites." Ibid, 130, 134.

<sup>60</sup> Cf., Abraham, *Logic of Evangelism*, 227.

<sup>61</sup> For Chopp this is found in a liberation theology that has to do with the "emancipation and enlightenment of persons" in history; the option for the poor in Latin American liberation theology; the "dangerous memory" of those

method is really a “holy conversation and invitation” in which God speaks to and through the church to the world which he so intensely desires to reach.

### ***Biblical in Basis***

Secondly, God has also spoken through his Word. The revealed acts of history as chronicled in the documents of the Old and New Testament, and illuminated by the inspiring power of the Holy Spirit to the reader, are integral to the dialogue between God and humanity which forms the basis of the conversion process and thus our evangelism practices. No earnest theological reflection is complete without considerable interaction with the biblical text and the principles gleaned from it. Since the Bible serves as the pre-eminent authority for Christian belief, comprehensive dialogue with those texts relevant to salvation and evangelism must be addressed when evaluating our outreach practices.

Methods that are biblical in basis will be based on principles from God’s word that are based on sound interpretive judgments. The hermeneutical task of dialogue with the biblical texts, however, should never be left solely to individuals but conducted in community. The process of dialogue consists of "checking, criticizing, and clarifying our communal relationships."<sup>62</sup> As Brueggemann noted, the biblical text is “the articulation of imaginative models of reality in which ‘text users,’ i.e., readers in church and synagogue, are invited to participate.”<sup>63</sup> In his view, as the community of faith “uses” a text in its evangelism practice it “reenacts not only the substantive (moral, doctrinal) claims of the text, but also the dramatic, dynamic transformational potential of the text.”<sup>64</sup>

More specifically, the Pentecostal community as a tradition that highly prizes the move of

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who suffer in political theology; and women's experiences in feminist theology, Chopp, 125, 129.

<sup>62</sup> Palmer, 90.

<sup>63</sup> Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 8.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

the Spirit in its midst has in practice affirmed the importance of biblical antecedents for its doctrine but “the tradition has lacked both hermeneutical sophistication and consistency.”<sup>65</sup> As a corrective, in more recent history numerous Pentecostal scholars have endeavored to “find ways to articulate the validity of the Pentecostal experience, but do so in a way more consistently biblical.”<sup>66</sup> Jesus affirmed the Spirit’s role in biblical interpretation when he said the *parakletos* will “guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.”<sup>67</sup> For Pentecostals a direct experience of the Spirit, what I have alluded to as a discernment of Theopraxis or the activity of God in the midst of situations is crucial to biblical interpretation and application when it comes to evangelism.<sup>68</sup>

While much has been written about the appropriate approaches to interpreting those biblical texts pertaining to evangelism, such as the “Great Commission” in Matthew 28,<sup>69</sup> the point here is that every evangelism method should have clear biblical precedence based on valid exegetical warrants recognized within that community of faith’s interpretive tradition to support their implementation.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), x.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> John 16:13-14.

<sup>68</sup> Stronstad argues that “charismatic experience, in particular, and spiritual experience, in general give the interpreter of relevant Biblical texts an experiential presupposition that transcends the rational or cognitive presuppositions of scientific exegesis, and, furthermore, results in an understanding, empathy, and sensitivity to the text, and priorities in relation to the text, which other interpreters do not and cannot have,” Roger Stronstad, *Spirit, Scripture & Theology: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Baguio City: Asia Pacific Theological Seminary Press, 1995), 59.

<sup>69</sup> See David J. Bosch, “The Structure of Mission: An Exposition of Matthew 28:16-20” in *Studies in Evangelism*, Chilcote & Warner, eds., 73-92, and George R. Hunsburger, “Is There Biblical Warrant for Evangelism” in the same volume, 59-72.

<sup>70</sup> As an example of this see Menzie’s argument that Luke’s charismatic view of Spirit baptism as empowerment for witness (Pentecostal perspective) differs from Paul’s soteriological emphasis (predominant Reformed perspective) and has important implications for evangelism: “For it is always possible to argue, as many do, that while all experience the soteriological dimension of the Pentecostal gift at conversion, only a select few receive gifts of missiological power. Yet Luke calls us to remember that the church (every member, not just the clergy!), by virtue of its reception of the Pentecostal gift, is a prophetic community empowered for a missionary task,” Robert P.

### ***Spiritual in Dimension***

Recognizing the spiritual dimension necessitates that ordinary Christians be trained to discern the work of God in their midst. In addition to adequate theological preparation, a heartfelt reliance on the Spirit of God will enable persons to accomplish the enigmatic and complicated task of winning the lost. By centering on God as the evangelist, they can more accurately understand the gifting of the Spirit to them as individuals who will be used by him to engage unbelievers along their spiritual journey and encourage others to take one step closer to Christ.<sup>71</sup> This involves the inward community where the Spirit speaks to the heart of the believer in prayer, study of God's Word, and confirming circumstances. Only through dialogue with the Spirit can humans discern God's work in evangelism and participate in his interventions.

Through the three stages of quest, encounter, and transformation the Holy Spirit interacts with humans to effect what is known as Christian conversion.<sup>72</sup> Because conversion is as complex and varied as the personalities of each individual and the intricacies of the Spirit's interactions within that human life, it must be tacitly assumed that there is no monolithic paradigm that can claim universal application to every conversion experience. Nevertheless, the three phases of spiritual journey (quest, encounter and transformation) can provide a helpful structure to explain the manner of the Holy Spirit's workings. The first phase involves a spiritual quest upon which every human embarks; as people ponder their reason for existence, a consciousness of separateness emerges in the human heart. The second aspect of spiritual

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Menzies, "Luke's Understanding of Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Pentecostal Dialogues with the Reformed Tradition," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 16 (2008) 86–101, 100 .

<sup>71</sup> Some are gifted in ways that speak to the "quest" phase of the process, showing aptitude for hospitality, apologetics, philosophical insight, etc.; while others are comfortable with "encounter" experiences, which involve praying publicly, inviting, worshiping, and calling for repentance; still others feel empowered to help with ongoing "transformation," by leading Bible studies, teaching classes, or meeting one-on-one with new believers.

<sup>72</sup> Christian conversion can best be defined as a life-long process of transformation in which the God of the Universe reconciles individuals and all of creation, back into redemptive relationship with Himself through the atonement of his Son's death on the cross and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit toward the final completion of all things.

encounter is an explicit experience of the incarnation, power, and ongoing presence of the risen Lord which accomplishes reconciliation between God and humanity. Finally, conversion entails a progressive spiritual transformation, embodied in the process of sanctification, inherent to a view of salvation as movement toward a specific destiny.<sup>73</sup>

Experience has shown however, that evangelism methods and strategies are more often driven by pragmatic than spiritual considerations. Pentecostals who are concerned about being truly Spirit-led in their evangelism practices would be wise to invest as much time attempting to discern God's preference for reaching a particular field as surveying various methods that have worked elsewhere. By evaluating those methods deemed most effective and then, through the Spirit's inspiration, contextualizing their use for a specific evangelism field, Christians allow God to have more of a voice in the strategy.

The nature of spiritual journey is such that every individual is at a different position along the way. Continual discernment of Theopraxis assists believers in determining where those outside the faith might be in their journey. When evangelism is reduced to a simplistic formula, the charisma of the Holy Spirit is not honored in the conversion process. Such efforts fail to resonate with either the spiritual journey of many Christians or the biblical accounts concerning conversion, leading to discouragement and lack of participation. Rather, by focusing on the spiritual dimension of evangelism, believers are encouraged to discern their particular gifting and discover how that gift is best exercised in the conversion process, whether in the phase of quest, encounter, or transformation.

This view of evangelism honors the Spirit's gifting in pre-evangelism efforts such as

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<sup>73</sup> For this model each phase is seen as epigenetic, the individual cannot move to an advanced phase without experiencing the preceding ones. Jn.16: 8-11 describes this process; see Kelly, *Toward A Practical Theology of Evangelism*, 206-259.

apologetics, philosophical debate, and open hospitality toward unbelievers. Likewise, the Spirit gifts other believers in the area of discipleship to work with those who have already encountered the Lord and encourage their ongoing walk with him. The failure to expand the scope of evangelism beyond the presentation of the gospel and subsequent prayer of repentance has ultimately disparaged both pre and post-evangelism efforts. This has discouraged ministry involvement in the very areas that God may have uniquely gifted believers for evangelism.

Believers can also trust that God will manifest himself by his Holy Spirit to those who are at the point of encounter in their spiritual sojourn. This encounter must be seen solely as the work of the Spirit; human efforts not led by the Spirit only detract from the power of the cross. Standardized methods such as altar calls and sinner's prayers may be helpful in facilitating a sense of God's presence for seekers at this turning point. But caution must be exercised in such approaches so that emotional manipulation or fraudulent claims concerning the gospel are not employed, rather than reliance on the Spirit to effect necessary transformation. Also, while some kind of spiritual encounter is essential for conversion this cannot be codified for every instance. Furthermore, ministers of the gospel should understand that evangelism does not end at this phase but is only complete when the new convert, by their own volition, has been thoroughly enveloped within the community of faith, and evangelism from the outset must work toward this goal.<sup>74</sup>

### ***Communal in Context***

Fourth, the communal context of conversion needs to be highlighted. The Messianic community, a community of loving wholeness, counters the effects of loneliness, isolation, and separation so prevalent within the contemporary culture. It does so by reconciling persons back

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<sup>74</sup> This would mean regular practice of spiritual disciplines such as study of the Word, prayer, fellowship with others in the church, and sharing their faith with unbelievers.

into genuine communal relationship with God and each other. Because the very essence of God's existence is communal, any relationship with him must be seen in the context of community. For this reason, all conversion, which is essentially the restoration of a severed relationship with the Triune Godhead, fundamentally occurs in a communal context. The community of faith is inextricably indebted to the dynamic of the Trinity for its life source and direction, for apart from God it can do nothing (Jn.15: 1-6).

Furthermore, the messianic community is by definition an exceptional community that is thoroughly Christological, which is, directed to Christ and by Christ. This distinction constitutes the basis for all individual conversion experience and subsequent immersion into his community. In this way all conversion takes place in the context of a journey along with the messianic community of faith. The work of Christ to form the community through his atoning sacrifice, and to direct the community toward its mission of incorporating new members, is foundational to its role as God's redemptive agency in the world. A practical theology of Spirit-led evangelism should embrace the conviction that the messianic community is the context of all genuine Christian conversion.

Because the triune God uses human agency in the redemptive task, neither conversion nor evangelism takes place solely in an individual context. For this reason, the "lone ranger" mentality in evangelism that strives to witness apart from local church involvement, or fails to facilitate incorporation of the convert into the community of the faithful denies the communal nature of God and his design for salvation. At the same time the church as the redemptive agency in the world cannot shrink back from its responsibility to equip and empower its members for the purpose of evangelism.

The community of faith, as it pursues its journey toward the final consummation of all

things, under the direction and guidance of its head Jesus, is a community with a mission, to win the lost and direct them toward their final goal, the city of God. The dialogue which the community of faith offers in evangelism, wherein unbelievers are exposed to the faith narratives of the redeemed, fulfills the church's role as God's redemptive agency in the world. This dialogue offers the kind of communal support needed by individuals along their spiritual journeys, while challenging the faithful to fulfill their mission to the world.

Dialogue between unbelievers and the community of faith should inform and direct the course of evangelism efforts. Unless the church engages with those outside the faith, in language they can understand, the church will not be able to incarnate or communicate the truth claims of its Gospel. All healthy evangelism methods go beyond mere proclamation; they offer the possibility for unbelievers to be heard. Additionally, they extend an offer for further dialogue even as they invite participation in the kingdom of God.

In this context of ongoing dialogue, individuals are given the opportunity to join the community of the faithful. The goal of all evangelism then, is the individual's incorporation into this community where sanctuary from the brokenness and isolation of sin is attainable and wholeness can be restored. When believers participate in evangelism, their personal invitation to unbelievers is literally to become their brother or sister in the family of God for eternity.

Thus, the criteria for effective evangelism is not the number of souls that were saved, leading to a kind of "notch on your belt" mentality. Rather, effective evangelism seeks to challenge persons through a dialogue with the community of faith, to discern Theopraxis in their own lives in such a way that they take one step closer to Christ on their spiritual journey.

### ***Holistic in Scope***

Fifth, and finally, the holistic scope of the conversion process needs to be recognized.

Individuals have inestimable worth as persons destined to be whole in an eventual restoration of the image of God. This restoration takes place in the essential relationship between the inner character of the human and the personhood of God, whose interactions are expressed in a person's spiritual journey toward a specific goal.<sup>75</sup> As such, the people of God have a destiny of wholeness; the destination of their journey is to "dwell in the presence of God as a whole person."<sup>76</sup> Therefore, conversion is understood to be the process whereby wholeness is restored.

Holistic evangelism then, addresses every facet of human existence. The dialogue that occurs between God and individuals within the context of the caring community is able to restore completely the fragmented image of God and every manner of brokenness in human personality. Communicating the Gospel incarnationally involves more than the spiritual care of converts, but strives to meet temporal needs as well. This requires sacrifice on the part of the community of faith, a judgment on rampant materialism, and evaluation of the nature of economic systems in light of the principles of scripture.<sup>77</sup> The call to redemption is an invitation for healing on every level, including physical, emotional, and social illness.

Moreover, it is holistic in that its scope extends redemption beyond the sphere of mere individuals to include the messianic and global communities of which they are a part. Conversion then, involves more than individual redemption; its repercussions extend to the entire cosmos. For the church truly to impact culture, radical social interventions are necessary, enacted with the intention of redeeming sinful infrastructures and institutions that reflect the

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<sup>75</sup> "For the Christian, the journey is much more inward, involving growth in his perceptions, his relationships, and his actions - in short, growth in his whole life," Richard V. Peace, *Pilgrimage: A Handbook on Christian Growth* (Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1996), 18.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>77</sup> Brueggemann noted how in our age that in contrast to the life-giving power of the Gospel, death operates in "the seductive power of consumer economics with its engines of greed. . . in the reduction of all life, human and non-human, to a bartering of commodities, until we and our neighbors are all perceived as means and not as ends." Brueggemann, 40.

corruption of the world.<sup>78</sup> Evangelism that addresses social justice issues requires methods that extend into the realm of the public square, calling for social policy which encourages the possibility of a genuine spiritual journey unhindered by the fetters of poverty, illiteracy, injustice, and oppression.

Finally, evangelism that is holistic goes beyond care only for humans. As co-caretakers of God's creation, the church must cry out against the exploitation of the natural environment for the sake of material gain or comfort, and challenge believers to consciously appraise their efforts or paucity of such, in preserving the ecosystems entrusted to them. By doing so, they, with all creation, are able to model the worship of God whose is imminent within and transcendent beyond creation. Thus the purpose of the spiritual journey and the fruit of Theopraxis is to recognize and assist the Spirit's work in the midst of all creation to restore wholeness to every aspect of its existence.

I have tried to offer an overview of how the Spirit is a catalyst in the process of conversion by promoting a thorough-going discovery of God's activity in the midst of the spiritual journey of believers and non-believers alike. We now turn to the final step in the process of developing a working model for Spirit-led evangelism – the sensible application of those reasonable intentions argued for herein. How can we apply these five evaluative criteria to various evangelism methodologies?

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<sup>78</sup> For a insightful treatment of this issue see Ronald J. Sider, "Evangelism, Salvation and Social Justice: Definitions and Interrelationships," *International Review of Mission* 64, no.3 (July 1993): 251-67, where he notes: "In the first place, proclamation of the biblical Gospel necessarily includes a call to repentance and turning away from all forms of sin. Sin is both personal and structural. Evangelical Protestants regularly preach that coming to Jesus means forsaking pot, pubs and pornography. Too often in this century however, they have failed to add that coming to Jesus necessarily involves repentance of and conversion from the sin of involvement in structural evils such as economic injustice and institutional racism. Biblical evangelism will call for repentance of one's involvement in both individual and structural sins," 265.

## **Analysis of Evangelism Methodologies**

A number of contemporary evangelism methodologies popular in Pentecostal contexts will be used as case study examples for evaluation. These would include but would not be limited to: mass evangelism crusades, home visitation, seeker sensitive sanctuary evangelism, cyber-evangelism efforts, and compassionate/social justice ministries. Space will not allow me to address other types such as: personal conversational evangelism, small group house meetings, street preaching, and various types of literature distribution.

### ***Mass Evangelism Crusades***

Crusades held in public auditoriums and coliseums are a favorite evangelism method among many Christians due to the exciting, dramatic, emotional, publicized and passive nature of the believer's involvement in them. When evaluated in light of our five evaluative imperatives it becomes evident that what is espoused in theology is not always practiced in methodology. The sermon delivered from the pulpit may be sound, but the implicit message portrayed in the outreach practice can have a weightier impact on the new convert.

The nature of the invitation in such crusades is by necessity dramatic and public. Furthermore, crusade invitations often imply that conversion is an event precipitated by human decision leading to an incipient contractualism. The words of the invitation should reflect to the hearer a reliance on the Holy Spirit to do the work of conviction, rather than on emotional manipulation or group pressure to respond. Additionally, the ongoing nature of the commitment, emphasizing the spiritual disciplines and a life of holiness should also be communicated in order to ensure the biblical validity of the method.

Another challenge for those who employ crusade evangelism is maintaining spiritual sensitivity. This is often diminished as the message and methodology becomes increasingly

stylized through frequency of use. The nature of these large meetings and considerable organization required causes services to become regimented in order to eliminate potential mishaps. One key to sustaining the spiritual dimension is the utilization of lay altar counselors. Altar workers can be trained to assure the opportunity for genuine dialogue and an accurate Gospel presentation that encourages an ongoing spiritual journey with God.

These counselors also link the effort with local church communities for further discipleship. The lack of continuity between altar call responses and ongoing discipleship in local church communities is perhaps the greatest shortfall of this type of evangelism. Billy Graham's organization, with its extensive Operation Andrew training for lay counselors and links with local churches, is perhaps the best example of assuring adequate altar counseling and effective invitations for future fellowship and nurture. Yet, small local churches cannot produce the sizeable budgets, famous names, professional music performances, and extensive organizations that are usually involved in large crusades. Moreover, new converts may get the false impression from this example that the Christian community should always be so scintillating, creating an expectation for the local church that will lead to disappointment.

A further difficulty with the atmosphere of large Christian meetings is that they tend to be politically conservative, embracing an uncritical preservation of the status quo. Crusade convocations are used rarely to rally Christians to challenge existing diabolical structures or become more involved in social justice concerns. Such meetings also are inclined to focus exclusively on spiritual rather than material or social issues, leaving little room for the holistic aspects of conversion to be addressed. A more holistic use of crusade evangelism would allow for display booths, announcements, actual food or clothing distributions, or other innovations to link local churches and social organizations to the immediate temporal needs of participants.

### *Home Visitation Evangelism*

Reaching out into the surrounding community through home visitation has long been a cost effective and simple way of sharing the Gospel. The intentionality of attempting to reach those in the neighborhood seems to fulfill a biblical mandate to penetrate the culture with the gospel message. But what is the message portrayed? Care must be taken that evangelism is not seen as simply mere proclamation. The use of booklets, tracts, fliers, and the like make it too easy for a gospel presentation to lack the two-sided nature of genuine dialogue. The use of questionnaires and surveys, so far as they involve a genuine openness to what respondents have to say, may help ameliorate this shortfall.

Another problem is the reduction of conversion to an easy contractualism wherein the respondent is asked to merely pray a brief prayer, coerced by the promise that if they do so, God will uphold his side of the bargain by imparting eternal life. While the prayer of faith is efficacious to save if the heart of the respondent is genuine, this consists of little more than a magical formula, “abracadabra, you’re going to heaven!” In order for this method to reflect a sound biblical basis, the ongoing aspect of spiritual journey as exemplified in the process of Christian formation, must be part and parcel of the gospel presentation.

In recognition of the spiritual dimension of the conversion process, there must be a willingness to abandon all preconceived methodologies under the Spirit’s guidance. Additionally, it is likely that only a small number of believers will participate in these more assertive and intentional methods of evangelism. Visitation evangelism is often held up as a more mature or self-sacrificing form of spiritual witness by its practitioners. Such a view is divisive and fallacious, since it is the message and not the method that is sacred, and it leads to the sin of pride based on a form of spiritual elitism.

Efforts to invite, pray for, or further serve the surrounding neighborhood represent only the initial offer for long-lasting fellowship with the community of faith. For this reason visitation evangelism should take place on behalf of a local church community and participants should clearly identify themselves as part of that community, including all pertinent information such as name, address, service times, and additional ministries offered.

Furthermore this initial contact is only a partial extension of the church's willingness to minister to the temporal and spiritual needs of the hearer, and must be clearly communicated. An open invitation to additional spiritual discipleship and material care should be evident in any offer extended. This means that the church must be prepared to go beyond the initial visit to follow up with additional support and resources which will adequately and genuinely minister to the needs encountered.

### ***Seeker-sensitive Sanctuary Evangelism***

Perhaps one of the most popular forms of presenting the Gospel message to unbelievers today is the "outreach service" sponsored by local churches in their own sanctuaries. A great benefit of this approach is it works hard at contextualizing the message, tying it into the narrative tradition of the church. From a biblical standpoint however, the content of the gospel portrayed must be examined. Since the medium itself influences the message so greatly, care must be taken in choosing the way the gospel is presented.

The danger is making the Gospel message too indulgent and reductionist. There is a tendency to "dumb down" the message to its lowest common denominator for the audience, often couched in a popular cliché or catchy phrase, and thus remove the mystery and awe that characterize God's grace. Similarly, by accommodating every aspect of the service to the comfort of an unregenerate audience, the sanctuary can be wrongly construed as a place of

entertainment rather than worship. The subtle implication is that essence of the gospel is blessing for the believer rather than service unto the Lord. Thus, seeker-sensitive churches must endeavor to develop a long term commitment to discipleship in the hearts of their constituency. The use of altar counselors, as with mass crusade evangelism, rectifies many problems with this method as well. The interactions they offer the audience provide access to the community of faith. Through Spirit-led conversations with believers, genuine dialogue can occur, a faithful gospel presentation made, and offers for holistic ministry extended.

The challenge remains for these churches to be prepared to feed, clothe, and counsel, as well as establish referral networks with other care-giving organizations in the community in order to minister to the entire person. Furthermore, in keeping with biblical tradition, affluent churches practicing holistic evangelism must work at extending an open invitation to the poor and oppressed in the community. This involves a willingness to take risks on behalf of those outside the status quo and a desire to see every aspect of the community in which they live be redeemed.

### ***Cyber-evangelism efforts***

The use of the internet and other kinds of electronic communication methods, i.e., cyber-church, blogging, Twitter, cyber-café, etc., as well as the use of digital media approaches such as video, text messaging, and music, is becoming more and more popular and rightly so for the *agora*, or marketplace of ideas today is certainly cyber-space. There are many advantages to this approach. One is that a clear, yet creative, biblical presentation of the gospel can be provided in innovative and contextualized ways that speak to this generation. Furthermore, respondents can interact and investigate the truth claims of a Christian witness anonymously without facing potential persecution or alienation within their own social circles for doing so. However there are

some major challenges to this form of outreach.

Probably the most obvious is the lack of real-time intimacy and accountability through such efforts. If Spirit-led evangelism is to be communal or relational in context then at some point there needs to be the kind of intimacy and accountability in our relationships within the body of Christ that can only come from genuine face-to-face encounters in community. Critics will argue that this can be accomplished through Skype or other kinds of video interfacing, but the reality is that anything that involves cyber-distance will remain only a cyber-relationship.

It is not clear to me how one can minister to the physical needs of new converts in cyber-space. A redemption that ministers to the whole spirit, soul and body is needed in many cases where a spiritual conversion is only the beginning of a life-long process of restoration to wholeness that God intends.

Furthermore there is the issue of holistic ministry which moves the individual convert beyond their own individualistic conversion and redemptively impacts those diabolical systems that hold people in oppression such as poverty, homelessness, racism, classicism and gender bias. Perhaps the use of cyber-technology could be harnessed to address some of these issues in innovative ways to improve this aspect of cyber-outreach.

### ***Compassionate/social justice Outreach***

Speaking of a more holistic redemption in regard to our outreach methods, we turn now to those outreach efforts which encourage community service and social and/or environmental activism. There is a disturbing trend in evangelical and even Pentecostal circles to embrace outreach that neglects or even purposefully eliminates communicating the central truth of the gospel message - the Lordship of Christ. It is as if the mere presence of Christians will result in a conversion of those who are outside the faith when works of compassion are evident.

The long-running controversy that pits the social gospel against a more traditional presentation of the gospel truths is still being debated. It is obviously not an either/or but a both/and proposition.<sup>79</sup> However, more and more the communication of the “reason for the hope you have”<sup>80</sup> is being left out of much of this type of ministry. This is a denial of the urgent necessity for conversion if, what the apostle Paul wrote is true –“now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.”<sup>81</sup> Evangelism efforts that leave out the heart of the gospel message for the sake of expediency, fear of persecution, or unwillingness to offend have “robbed the cross of its power”<sup>82</sup> and cannot be classified as genuine evangelism (communication of good news) at all.

For the sake of brevity I offer a critical interaction with only a few of the more prominent evangelism methodologies employed today and a cursory one at that. These observations are examples of the kinds of critique that an effective practical theology of Spirit-led evangelism might evoke. They are not meant to be exhaustive, for a genuine practical theology must, by definition, extend beyond theoretical abstractions. Instead, these illustrations must become actualized in an ongoing dialogue between the Spirit and the church communities that practice them.

## **Conclusion**

Every evangelism method is flawed in some way and could be improved. A practical theology which enables ordinary believers to critically assess various evangelism methods will likely increase their participation in outreach efforts as they see the fruit of their efforts in

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<sup>79</sup> “In practice then, evangelism and social action are intricately interrelated. They are inseparable both in the sense that evangelism often leads to increased social justice and vice versa and also that biblical Christians will, precisely to the extent that they are faithful followers of Jesus, always seek liberty for the oppressed (Luke 4: 18). But the fact that evangelism and social action are inseparable certainly does not mean that they are identical. They are distinct, equally important parts of the total mission of the Church” Sider, “Evangelism, Salvation & Social Justice,” 266-67.

<sup>80</sup> 1 Peter 3:15.

<sup>81</sup> 2 Cor. 6:2, Hebrews 3:7.

<sup>82</sup> 1 Cor. 1:17-18.

extending God's kingdom to unbelievers in the conversion process. All evangelism praxis must be critically informed by the guidance of the Holy Spirit to honor the complexity of the dynamic matrix of the Spirit's work inherent to the conversion process of both witness and hearer.