

## PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AND EVANGELISM

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At the dawn of a new millennium it is imperative the Christian church take a fresh look at the task of evangelism. 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 accurate theological reflection on evangelism, which is not surprising considering the scarcity of practicing evangelists who are theologians and vice versa.

Moreover, the question of how to actualize effective evangelism is too often addressed by the incorporation of a wholesale pragmatism in the evangelistic endeavor. 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, proving that pragmatism reigns supreme as the end justifies the means. Further, that end itself, pursued so diligently by lay persons and clergy alike, is in fact flawed. As is often the case, a significant aspect of the problem may also contain the key to the solution; in this case the mistaken focus on crisis as the overarching paradigm for conversion. Because of the link between one's concept of conversion and the practice of evangelism, if the former is misconceived, the latter will naturally lose its effectiveness.

Neither an effortless nor too simplistic solution to the gargantuan task of restoring a lifestyle of evangelism to the third millennium Church, such as experienced in the first century church, will be proposed here.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, both church and academy have a responsibility to attempt some new propositions to further the Lord's great purposes in the world. As a student of both church and academy, I am excited by the potential which an application of the discipline of practical theology to evangelism efforts within local churches offers for a restoration of a lifestyle of evangelism.

Toward that end, I propose that conversion should be conceived as an ongoing process, a spiritual journey, rather than narrowly viewed as a sudden crisis encounter. Proceeding from this premise, I envision effective evangelism as emerging from a practical theology that is dialogical in method, biblical in basis, spiritual in dimension, communal in context and wholistic in scope.

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This kind of theological reflection will move churches, and the individuals of which they are comprised, toward the realization of a lifestyle of evangelism.

### The Character of Practical Theology

The structure of practical theology holds the key to positive change in the way churches approach the task of evangelism.<sup>2</sup> Through the implementation of four phases of interaction employed in practical theology, churches can develop an effective pedagogy in the formation, implementation, and subsequent evaluation of evangelism practices. These phases involve devising a specific description of the dilemma, encouraging a genuine dialogue within accepted oral and written traditions, formulating reasonable intentions, and finally, setting in motion sensible applications toward the resolution of the dilemma.<sup>3</sup> This framework should be incorporated into the teaching, reflection, and implementation of a practical theology of evangelism for each specific church context.

Properly executed, this process assures that evangelism methods reflect a genuine discernment of Theopraxis,<sup>4</sup> are properly contextualized to each local field, have developed the necessary criteria to provide for evaluation and correction, and most important, emerge from the life of the church and ordinary believers rather than academia. Such an approach militates against theological estrangement, widespread pragmatism, overly simplistic views of conversion, and the implementation of ineffective methods of evangelism.

### The Extent of the Dilemma

#### Empirical Data

Empirical studies indicate the scope of the problem facing the church when it comes to evangelism.<sup>5</sup> A recent study of 845 adult Christians from 34 different churches, characterized the link between conversion experience (Sudden, Gradual, or Unconscious) and evangelism. Respondents answered questions about their evangelism involvement, their personal conversion story, their theology of evangelism, and their likely involvement in various evangelism methods. Perhaps the most interesting statistic is that nearly 70% of those Christians polled had either a Gradual conversion experience (42.6%) or had always been a Christian (26.3%), compared to less than a third who attest to a Sudden conversion (31.1%). This data concurs with numerous other studies throughout the last century.<sup>6</sup>

The data affirm that there is a significant relationship between one's Conversion Story and several beliefs about conversion. As might be expected, those with an Unconscious or Gradual

conversion place a higher emphasis on conversion as a lifelong process. Those with a Sudden conversion place a higher emphasis on the belief that Christians are cognizant of their conversion and need a dynamic spiritual experience. For some reason not clear from this data, those with an Unconscious and Gradual conversion find church involvement to be less important than those from the Sudden category. Conversely, there is a significant tendency for those with a Sudden conversion to downplay the importance of baptism, especially when compared to those with an Unconscious conversion. In these four aspects, at least, it seems there is a link between what people have experienced themselves and their theology of conversion.

Another intriguing finding is the significant disparity in the ranking of the four basic spiritual disciplines in importance.<sup>7</sup> Almost twice as many with a Sudden conversion saw Prayer and Bible reading as absolutely essential than those with an Unconscious conversion. The disparity is even greater in the discipline of Sharing one's Faith. Why would those who are converted suddenly appear so much more zealous in sharing their faith than those who have been Christians all their lives? Perhaps, the answer has more to do with the evangelism methods offered than the degree of zealotness in the believer.

Furthermore, regardless of the conversion experience, respondents consistently and significantly ranked evangelism as less important than the other spiritual disciplines. This lower emphasis on evangelism would seem to stand the NT on its head. A thorough reading of the NT texts indicates no less a focus on evangelism than on the need for prayer, fellowship, or respect for scriptural knowledge. As such, the contemporary church is in danger of perpetuating a vicious cycle in which the inferiority of evangelism, and the scarcity of evidence for a lifestyle of evangelism, affirms for new converts the relative unimportance of evangelism as a spiritual discipline.<sup>8</sup>

The data also show that how people come to Christ influences their likelihood of involvement in certain evangelism methods. For every method, those with a Sudden conversion endorsed more willingness to get involved than those with a Gradual conversion, and they in turn were more likely to do so than with an Unconscious conversion. For example, those methods that reflect fairly public or intentional evangelism endeavors, such as "sharing a testimony in public," are the ones which both the Gradual and Unconscious convert are less likely to participate in, according to the results. Assuming that more assertive methods of evangelism view conversion as a punctiliar event evoked by a crisis experience, it stands to reason that individuals with a sudden Conversion Story would be more likely to employ these methods, as the data seem to indicate.

Similarly, those with a Sudden conversion are much more likely to "pray a prayer of repentance with someone who asked them to" than those from the other categories. Because this type of evangelism is uncommon in the more gradual conversion experience, such activities may fail to resonate with those respondents' understanding of how conversion, and consequently evangelism, takes place.

As a caveat, the difficulty of measuring (empirically) the various aspects of Christian conversion should be appreciated. Conversion is a highly personal, spiritual experience not easily quantified or characterized apart from subjective self-disclosure of the phenomenon. In addition to the paucity of actual scientific data, the wide disparity in nomenclature regarding the conversion story causes confusion. Perhaps in the future, organizations like the AETE and other academic entities will attempt to formulate some specific definitions to be recognized and accepted, at least within academia.<sup>9</sup>

### The State of Evangelism

The empirical data supports some basic assertions to be made concerning the state of evangelism within the American church. The lack of practical theological reflection on the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of actual evangelism methodologies results in capitulation to a pervasive pragmatism in the church when it comes to evangelism methodology.<sup>10</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 wholesome evangelism effort taking place.

Too often decisions concerning evangelism in local churches are not based on a genuine Theopraxis, or attempts to discern the leading of the Spirit. Unless pastors and leaders are willing to do the hard work of seeking God and developing a comprehensive theology of evangelism for their context, they will succumb to the temptation of expediency. Instead, leaders should realize that a stress on tangible results threatens to reduce evangelism to an overly simplistic task, neglects the complex nature of conversion, and makes 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 theological skills in evangelism.

However, due to an unhealthy bifurcation which exists between the church and the academy in respect to the study of theology, theological reflection is seen in contemporary Christian culture as a purely academic discipline having little or nothing to do with the actual day-to-day life of the average churchgoer. When the

intellectual disciplines became independent of the church this evoked a new response, the promotion of a clerical paradigm for defining theology.<sup>11</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 practice reduces the believer's relationship to 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>12</sup> Unhappily, in this way professional clergy help 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 work of the church. This concentration on professional clergy as the locus of all theologies represents a major structural challenge to revisioning the sharing of faith as a habit to be practiced by every believer.

Consequently, apart from participation in church activities, many laypeople are not encouraged to discern actively the work of God in their lives, or the lives of those outside the faith. This disparages the discernment 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! If a lifestyle of evangelism is to be recovered, the ordinary Christian must embrace and practice a theology of evangelism that is internalized and self-initiated.

This lack of theological reflection is the genesis of other problems. 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 in evangelism efforts, but the methods of evangelism offered too often fail to resonate with the conversion experience of their constituency or lack enough theological integrity to spur involvement. By limiting the methodologies offered to only those which reflect a crisis conversion theology, especially within congregations whose constituents primarily attest to process rather than event oriented conversions, lay participation is discouraged and decisions are affirmed to abstain from involvement. In addition, the primary focus of conversion has been almost solely on the individual context, rather than the communal aspects of salvation and its impact on the entire cosmos. Within both the academy and the church, the traditional protestant understanding of salvation as a punctiliar event which affects primarily individuals must be challenged theologically.

These problems are part of the specific description of the current dilemma. What then, can be done to resolve these issues? By working through the process of developing a practical theology of evangelism, churches can mobilize Christians further along a spiritual journey that will invigorate the life of the church as well as those who do not yet know Christ.

### Spiritual Journey Revisited

I believe Spiritual Journey to be 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 overarching paradigm for understanding the entirety of human existence. From Toyota and U.S. Navy commercials to 900 line psychics, "journey" has become a national buzz word of sorts, a theme prevalent in the popular culture. However, what I have in mind here is Christian conversion seen as a multifarious process that entails three phases; quest, encounter, and transformation.<sup>13</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." Finally, Christian conversion is ongoing, involving a complex process of transformation.

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 consists of determining where people are on this journey 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.

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.

### Five Aspects of Theological Reflection on Evangelism

In order to promote a more thorough and accurate reflection for the formation of a Practical Theology of Evangelism using the journey model, at least five aspects should be addressed.<sup>14</sup>

First of all, the whole process of evangelism must be dialogical in method. Dialogue "along the way" is the essential catalyst for discerning Theopraxis, providing the means of forming a practical theology and understanding its implications for spreading the Gospel. Developing a dynamic dialogue with the various "texts" used by those both in 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 the correlational approach. This is described as a "play between question and text,"<sup>15</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. 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>16</sup>

Secondly, a thorough investigation of the scriptures will provide a biblical basis for the spiritual journey paradigm. The Old Testament, with its description of both the literal and metaphorical journey of Abraham, its extensive vocabulary of travel, the significant role *Heilsgeschichte* plays for Israel, the paradigm offered in the Exodus event, the future hope promised in the major prophets, and the pronounced place of the journey motif within the wisdom literature, to name a few examples, offers a rich source of potential study and insight for pastoral leaders desiring a significant dialogue with the Hebrew texts.

Furthermore, the New Testament is replete with journey metaphors depicting the quest for spiritual truth as a fundamental component of human life.<sup>17</sup> The lexical data also reveals the prominent place of the pilgrim motif in the NT documents. The recurrence of the formulaic *the way* (η οδός), and the use of *race* (ῥαγών) in Paul, serve as literary signals to the journey metaphors embodied in the NT writings. The response to God's initiative in

seeking after the lost is a "walk of faith," seen as a dual turning to God in faith concerning his promises, and from a sinful world where the sojourners are both strange and alien. The context for all this is a pilgrimage of faith which involves continual perseverance along The Way.

Third, the spiritual dimension of the conversion process needs to be explored. Through the three stages of quest, encounter, and transformation the Holy Spirit interacts with humans to effect what is known as Christian conversion.<sup>18</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, I believe the three phases provide a 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 encounter is an explicit experience of the incarnation, power, and ongoing presence of the risen Lord which accomplishes reconciliation between God and humanity. Finally, this movement entails a progressive spiritual transformation, embodied in the processes of sanctification and of salvation as movement toward a specific destiny.<sup>19</sup>

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 them to take one step closer to Christ.<sup>20</sup>

Fourth, the communal context of conversion needs to be highlighted and understood. 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 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, that 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 evangelism should embrace the conviction that the messianic community is the context of all genuine Christian conversion.

Fifth, and finally, the wholistic 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>21</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>22</sup> Therefore, conversion is understood to be the process whereby wholeness is restored.

Moreover, it is wholistic 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. Thus the purpose of the spiritual journey and the fruit of Theopraxis is to recognize and assist God's work in the midst of all creation to restore wholeness to every aspect of its existence.

### Implications for Evangelism

I have tried to provide pastors, teachers, and other leaders in evangelism with a model for developing an effective Practical Theology of Evangelism for their context. By using the four interactive phases (description, dialogue, intention, and application) as a teaching structure, they will be well on their way toward the development and implementation of this theology. I make no specific assertions concerning methods, as they rightly emerge from the concrete intentions that are formulated from the ensuing dialogue within each local context. Once sensibly applied, they can be critiqued and evaluated, evoking a whole new dilemma for the process to be again. Furthermore, the five aspects of evangelism that I propose are purposively meant to be "grist for the mill," so to speak. They will provide structure, as well as provocative content, for the inception and continuation of an ongoing dialogue with those in, and outside, the church. Such a Practical Theology will, I pray,

facilitate movement toward the restoration of a lifestyle of involvement in the vital ministry we call evangelism.

This article represents a brief synopsis of the author's Ph.D. dissertation, *Toward a Practical Theology of Evangelism: Spiritual Journey as an Essential Paradigm for the Conversion Process and Its Implications for Evangelism Methodologies*, submitted in the Spring of 1999 to Fuller Theological Seminary.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Green has noted how lay persons were the key to the spread of Christianity as they went about "gossiping" the gospel in their everyday tasks (cf., Acts 5:20-21, 42), Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Guildford, Surrey: Eagle, 1970), 211.

<sup>2</sup>For a thorough discussion of this premise see Brian J. 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>3</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. Mudge, 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>4</sup>*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." See Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: The Way of Shared Praxis* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 135. The *Theopraxis* envisioned here has a dual dimension, 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. 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>5</sup>The complete report is entitled *Statistical Relationships: Conversion Story and Evangelism*, yet to be published in whole, but portions are contained in Kelly, *Toward a Practical Theology of Evangelism*, Chapter III.C.4., 55-99. The Unconscious category is the label given to those who "have known the Lord all their lives," that is, there has never been a time in their life when they were conscious of not knowing the Lord.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Edwin Diller Starbuck, "A Study of Conversion," in *The American Journal of Psychology*, Vol.8, (1897), 270f.; Elmer T. Clark, *The Psychology of Religious Awakening* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1928), 48, 86-87; Gordon W. Allport, *The Individual and His Religion: A Psychological Interpretation* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1950), 33-35; Walter Houston Clark, *The Psychology of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1958), 213-214; Geoffrey E. W. Scobie, *Psychology of Religion* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975), 50-51; Christine Liu, "Becoming a Christian Consciously Versus Nonconsciously," in *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, Vol. 19 No. 4, (1991), 368.

<sup>7</sup>The four are prayer, reading the Bible, sharing faith, and Christian fellowship.

<sup>8</sup>Not only was the idea of evangelism less important, but nearly two-thirds (64.2%) of those who responded indicated they had shared their faith only 3 times or less in the last year, 12.7% not at all. Such a low amount of sharing faith, based on self-reporting, hardly indicates a "life-style" of evangelism.

<sup>9</sup>This is a problem endemic to the whole discipline of evangelism. The lack of accepted definitions add to the confusion when discussing methods, theology, and many other aspects of evangelism, i.e.; differences between "relational," "friendship" and "intentional" evangelism.

<sup>10</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.

<sup>11</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).

<sup>12</sup>Farley, *Fragility*, 97.

<sup>13</sup>I am deeply indebted here to my mentor, Richard Peace, for his model of the conversion process as a pilgrimage that involves these three stages. For a detailed description of this concept see the forthcoming 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 (one of Peace's students) 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.

<sup>14</sup>For a comprehensive discussion of each aspect see Kelly, *op. cit.*

<sup>15</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>16</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.

<sup>17</sup>The cultural milieu of first century Palestine, the numerous examples of spiritual seekers, the vocabulary of seeking, Paul's missionary journeys, and the journeying of the people of God in the book of Hebrews are just a few examples of the prevalence of this motif in the NT. See Kelly, *op. cit.*, 143f.

<sup>18</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.

<sup>19</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, *op. cit.*, 206-259.

<sup>20</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>21</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>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 23.

## EVANGELISM WITH THE POSTMODERN GENERATIONS

Todd Hahn

It is big business and savvy marketing to talk much about Generation X and the Millennial Generation these days. As is usually the case, the church is behind the curve of the culture approximately five years and is just beginning to grapple with Generation X at the very moment when that much-maligned generation is about to be elbowed off the stage by the twice-as-numerous Millennials. Our question is not how to market to these first two postmodern generations, but how to reach them and to disciple them - in particular, how to develop them as leaders for church and culture.

### The Main Difference

At the beginning of our discussion, we must take into account what we call these two groups, which span in age from birth to their early thirties. I contend that it is most helpful and accurate to think of the generations together. For most of the balance of this paper, then, I will refer to the age group in question as "postmoderns."

There are differences between Xers and Millennials, to be sure. There are half as many baby bust Xers as there are Millennials. Xers are noted for their cynicism and despair, while Millennials are viewed as happy go lucky; the seminal rock band for Xers was the nihilistic Nirvana, while Millennials dance to the bubble gum pop of Hanson. Xers speak a dismissive "whatever" to big issues of culture and public policy and Millennials are known to be earnestly engaged in political issues and given to idealism.

Many of these differences can be attributed to the ways children were viewed in the culture during the adolescence of Xers and Millennials. Xers came of age in the 1970's, the Me Generation when parents were told to put their needs and aspirations above the needs of their children, a time when movies about children tended to have "devil child" themes (i.e. *The Omen* and *Rosemary's Baby*). "My parents. Their things are always more important than my things. I'll just have to accept that," said one teenage Xer upon returning home from Girls' Probation House in Virginia.<sup>1</sup>

The noted 1970's book *Ourselves and Our Children* (a revealing title, to say the least) advanced the culturally appealing

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