
The Priority of World Evangelization

by Robert E. Coleman

The Purpose of Asbury Theological Seminary

Some time ago in a friendly exchange with the president of a distinguished ecumenical seminary, where deviation from evangelical doctrine was at issue, I was reminded that “in a climate of theological co-existence, nothing suffers quite so much as evangelism.”

I have thought many times how right he was. Evangelism is indeed the point where the erosion of faith and devotion becomes most apparent. For it is here that the conflict between light and darkness becomes most intense, where powers of the satanic world seek by every devious means to subdue, or at least nullify, the blood-bought witness of the redeemed. To maintain a fervent Gospel initiative, institutions, like people, must draw upon the deepest resources of supernatural grace and storm the gates of hell. How easy it is for a theological school, under the illusion of academic immunity, to withdraw from the battle for the souls of men!

The founders of Asbury Theological Seminary, keenly conscious of this danger, sought to guard against indifference and confusion by clearly stating in the Charter that the objective of the Seminary was “to prepare and send forth a well-trained, sanctified, Spirit-filled, evangelistic ministry.”¹ In this statement, there is no diminishing of concern for the highest in intellectual and spiritual attainment, but it all has its focus in evangelism. Here, finally, is conceived the reason for the School’s existence. Moreover, this has always been understood in the context of making disciples of all nations. Hence, inscribed on the official seal of the Seminary is the motto: “The

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whole Bible for the whole world.”

The Departments of Evangelism and Missions, integral components of the teaching curriculum, have explicated this concern with specific courses of instruction. However, it has never been assumed that the responsibility of the great commission resided only with these departments. Every member of the academic community, through his own disciplines of study, shares the same missionary mandate of Christ.

With the establishment of the E. Stanley Jones School of Evangelism and World Mission, this commitment is further objectified. Now much more complete professional training will be available for persons looking toward vocational ministries in evangelism and missions, both on the Master's and Doctoral levels. Yet basic courses will still be offered for students enrolled in other degree programs. The School of Evangelism and World Mission, thus, simply enlarges the academic proficiency of the Seminary in fulfilling its stated purpose. In so doing, it also serves to give greater visibility across the world to that missionary vision which gave birth to the Wesleyan movement.

The Spirit of Original Methodism

Methodism was born in the burning heart of an evangelist who viewed the world as his parish. In Wesley's mind, there was no distinction between home and foreign missions; it was all world evangelization, and every follower of the Lamb in some way was involved in the task.

The church which Wesley engendered in the new world bore the same mark. Francis Asbury said that in 1771 he “came as a missionary to America,” and to the day of his death, 45 years later, he continued to think of his work as missionary service.² This feeling was shared so generally that the terms “preacher” and “missionary” actually came to be used interchangeably.³ Typifying this outlook was the remark of Thomas Ware, a pioneer circuit rider, who was asked one day by a stranger if he was a missionary. “I replied,” he said, “that I was a Methodist, and we were all missionaries.”⁴

Evangelism was the heartbeat of the church. Every Methodist preacher went to his appointment with the purpose to evangelize virgin territory and thereby “to reform the continent.”⁵ Though his duties involved caring for the spiritual needs of his church members, nothing could deter him from the primary objective to win new

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converts. He was a missionary, and he was out to make disciples from the raw materials of society wherever they could be found. “The Methodist plan,” Asbury explained, was not like that of some other churches which in effect declared the principle: “Seek me out . . . or advertise and offer a good salary, and I will seek you.” No, he said:

Our discipline is too strict: We cannot leave four or five thousand congregations unsought, like the Church of England, the Presbyterian, Independent, and Baptist Churches. *Go*, says the command; go into all the world — go to the highway and hedges. *Go out* — seek them. Christ came seeking the lost sheep.⁶

Articulating this conviction, the Methodist *Discipline* displayed in all its early editions the charge of Wesley:

You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore, spend and be spent in this work. Observe: It is not your business to preach so many times, and to take care of this or that Society, but to save as many souls as you can: to bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance, and with all your power to build them up in that holiness without which they cannot see the Lord.⁷

Attitude Toward Theological Education

Since this commission rested so heavily on the conscience of early Methodists, understandably there was concern that making of disciples was not be separated from theological education. To train preachers in the Wesleyan tradition without due regard to evangelism would simply be inconceivable to our forefathers. Indicative of this attitude, when the question was raised as to what an itinerant should do if, in the demands of constant evangelizing, there was no leisure to follow his studies, *The Discipline* answered:

We answer, (1) Gaining knowledge is a good thing; but saving souls is better. (2) By this very thing you will gain the most excellent knowledge, that of God and eternity . . . But (4) If you can do but one, let your studies alone. We would throw by all the libraries in the world, rather than be guilty of the loss of one soul.⁸

There was reason for Methodist leaders to have this concern, for as they observed, the churches which had large endowments in colleges generally proved to be relatively unsuccessful in church growth.⁹ Many of the unlettered itinerants believed that the establishment of colleges actually tended to draw away “ministers of God, divinely called to the holy work of saving souls.”¹⁰ In the latter part of the century when Methodism began to give more attention to formal Seminary training, some of the earlier generation expressed a serious alarm over the increasing tendency of preachers to neglect their soul-winning ministry in preference to the more refined occupations of learning. This sentiment was expressed forcefully by Peter Cartright, in 1856, in his *Autobiography*.

Among the thousands of traveling and local preachers employed and engaged in this glorious work of saving souls, and building up the Methodist Church, there were not fifty men that had anything more than a common English education . . . And not one of them was even trained in a theological school or Biblical institute, and yet hundreds of them preached the Gospel with more success and had more seals to their ministry than all the sapient, downy D.D.'s in modern times, who, instead of entering the great and widespread harvest-field of souls, sickle in hand, are seeking presidencies or professorships in colleges, editorships, or any agencies that have a fat salary . . . while millions of poor, dying sinners are thronging the way to hell without God, without Gospel; and the church putting up the piteous wail about the scarcity of preachers.¹¹

The old preacher's apprehension cannot be gainsaid. For it is a matter of record that the phenomenal growth of American Methodism, at least within the parent Methodist Episcopal Church, began to level off about this period. To this time, the denomination had grown from a few thousand worshipers in 1784 to a membership embracing more than 5.3 percent of the United States population, which comprised roughly 27 percent of the total numerical size of Christendom in the country, both Protestant and Catholic. Beginning around mid-century, however, the church gradually lost momentum, not growing significantly faster than the population, and in recent years, even falling behind the natural biological

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increase of its people. All the while, other denominations have moved ahead, with the result that only about 7.3 percent of church communicants today are United Methodists, or less than one-third of its comparative strength a hundred years earlier.¹² Some of this slack has been taken up, fortunately, by Wesleyan groups which have spun off from the original body. But, on the whole, Methodism's evangelistic initiative has been taken over by the other communions.

There are many factors influencing this diminishing of effectiveness, of course. What may be observed in the shifting priority away from aggressive evangelism doubtless is only symptomatic of deeper and more pervasive problems. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that the decline of statistical growth of main-line Methodism has paralleled the increase of emphasis upon graduate theological education.

During its first century of existence in America, the period of its rapid expansion, the denomination did not have a single full-fledged seminary in operation, and even the few undergraduate colleges established were largely failures. This is not to suggest that there was lack of concern for ministerial training, for by assigning new men to ride a circuit with a veteran preacher for a few months, the church demonstrated an ingenious way of equipping ministers. But with their limited resources, the circuit riders were not able to give attention both to seminary study and reaching a lost continent with the Gospel, therefore, they chose the better part.

In our situation today, we do not have that choice. The accelerating growth of knowledge in recent years, and the demands of our society call for a well educated ministry. The Church must meet the challenge head on and provide the best possible training for those who wear the cloth. But I would hope that in this endeavor, with all our modern sophistication, we would not lose our first love. It may sound ironic, but I believe that a seminary can be a dangerous place, even a deadly snare to the ministry of Christ if the mandate of His Great Commission is not obeyed.

Let us pray that Asbury's School of Evangelism and World Mission signals a new day for excellence in evangelical scholarship, while keeping preminent the priority of world evangelization. Herein is the heritage of the Wesleyan revival. It is our Seminary's calling, and by God's grace, it shall be our fulfillment as young men and women go forth in the beauty of holiness to herald the Gospel to the ends of the earth and to the end of time.

Footnotes

¹From the Purpose and Doctrinal Standards in the Charter of Asbury Theological Seminary.

²Francis Asbury, *The Journal of Rev. Francis Asbury* (New York: N. Bangs and T. Mason, 1821) III, p. 386; also see II, p. 164.

³For example, see Abel Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York, 1867), II, pp. 49, 50; Jesse Lee, *A Short History of Methodists* (Baltimore: Magill and Cline, 1810), p. 166; J. B. Finley, *Sketches of Western Methodism* (Cincinnati, 1855), p. 169.

⁴Thomas Ware, *Sketches of the Life and Travels of Rev. Thomas Ware* (New York, 1852), pp. 263, 189.

⁵*Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (Philadelphia, 1785), p. 4.

⁶Francis Asbury, *Journal, op. cit.*, III, p. 367.

⁷*The Discipline, op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁹Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: T. Mason and C. Lane, 1839, 40), II, p. 414; Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography* (New York: Methodist Book Center, 1856), p. 80.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 408.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 410.

¹²These percentages are computed from membership statistics compiled from the best sources available, though a margin of error must be allowed. Church statistics of the 18th and early 19th centuries rely heavily upon contemporary writings, and minutes of conferences, as with the Methodist figures. After 1850 the U.S. Census included records of church membership, though these reports are inadequate until 1890. Census reports particularly helpful were: *Special Reports, Religious Bodies: 1906*, I (Washington, 1910); and the comparable volume for 1926, I (Washington, 1930). Other publications consulted include Daniel Dorchester, *The Problem of Religious Progress* (New York, 1895); H. K. Carroll, *The Religious Forces of the United States* (New York, 1893); Benson Y. Landis, *Religion in the United States* (New York, 1965); *Canadian and American Churches* (Nashville, 1979).