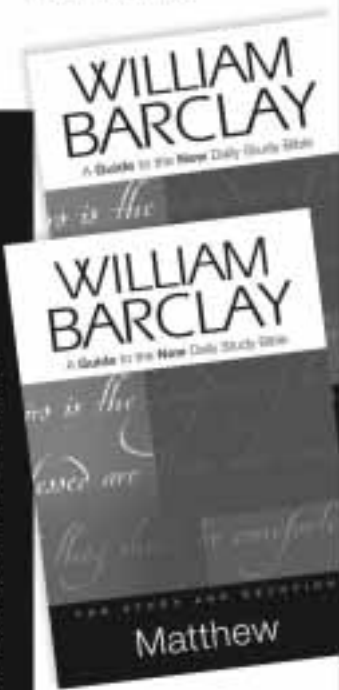


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WJK



## The Four Doors of Wesleyan Evangelism

By Jack Jackson

Some of my best and worst experiences as a pastor center on evangelism. I'll never forget when one of our most faithful women was walking through the church neighborhood inviting people to a community festival. The day went great until a man opened his door fully naked. Equally, I'll never forget the young couple who had been far from God for a long time who came in one day and said they were ready to follow Jesus.

Many modern Methodists have mixed emotions about evangelism. Some see evangelism as merely a way to keep the church afloat and aren't primarily concerned about expanding the reign of God. Others picture outlandish television personalities with little connection to our own church. As we've talked, I've been reminded that the early British Methodists understood the evangelistic task (a term they never used but which seems to best describe the early Methodists) as a specifically verbal concept that occurred in four primary contexts of ministry: field preaching, Methodist Societies, class meetings, and individual visitation.

### Field Preaching

Through field preaching early Methodist preachers and lay people took the Gospel to the people. Field preaching was not limited to fields, but also occurred in homes, town squares, churchyards, coal mines, or any place a non-churchgoing crowd could gather. Though John Wesley initially resisted the idea, introduced to him by George Whitefield, it took on greater and greater importance in Meth-

odism. For Wesley, field preaching became the primary means by which "God is found of them that sought him not."<sup>1</sup>

One of the challenges in the church I serve is how we take the gospel to those who have no interest in it. While revivals worked in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because of their entertainment value, they have lost their relevance in many places today. Many people no longer have a dormant faith to be revived, having never had a faith in the first place. Servant evangelism was effective for a while, but now many people are skeptical of anything that is "free." Social media may be the new frontier through which to reach people outside the church "where they are."

### Methodist Society Meetings

The second door of evangelism in early British Methodism was Society meetings. Society meetings were similar to most worship services today, but it was also clear that these meetings were places of evangelism. Wesley explains their purpose as to give "proper instructions and exhortations to them that are convinced of sin."<sup>2</sup> Conversion was not mandatory for membership in a Society. All that was required was an awakening to God's reality and a willingness to attend the Society and class meeting. Societies were a door through which people came to faith in Christ and made a greater commitment to the Methodist movement.

Part of the reason Societies were such an important door was that people had been prepared to respond to the gospel in field preaching. Then, in the more in-

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timate Society meetings people heard the gospel proclaimed in preaching, their living faith was engaged through testimonies, and they sang of God's love, grace, and call in Charles Wesley's hymns.

I'm frequently struck by my own failure as a preacher to call people to fully respond to their awakening to the gospel. My own memory is so corrupted by what I experienced as problematic altar calls that focused on an individual, instantaneous response without a corresponding call to holiness and sanctification. The early Methodists didn't believe in a truncated response to the gospel, but rather called people to respond in a process of sanctification. Conversion was critical, but it was never the end of Methodist discipleship. Christian perfection is the final response.

### Class Meetings

Despite the importance of Society meetings, many Methodists needed another door to faith. John Wesley understood class meetings to be a critical third door to faith. In class meetings people encountered the gospel in a still more personal way through exhortation, worship, and teaching. Class leaders understood that an important part of their ministry was to "press" people to maturity as disciples of Jesus and to encourage them to respond to the gospel with repentance and faith or perfection.<sup>3</sup>

Tom Albin's work confirms that on average a Methodist took approximately two years to progress from awakening to conversion and that conversion often occurred in the class as opposed to Society meetings or in field preaching.<sup>4</sup>

One of my growth areas as a pastor is in training church leaders in how to have faith-filled conversations. So many of us are so turned off from bad evangelistic examples that we don't see and appreciate the opportunities we have to guide those in our classes or small groups, or our friends from work or the neighborhood in Christian discipleship. Evangelism in early Methodism was less a call to immediate conversion and more a call to a conversation with the Spirit that led ultimately to a life of holiness. Encouragement along the road of discipleship happened primarily in the final door, individual visitation.

### Individual Visitation

Visitation was a final, and in some ways most critical, context of ministry for proclamation of the gospel. Wesley called for

"every Preacher, having a catalogue of those in each society, [to] go to each house."<sup>5</sup> The purpose of visitation was to provide the most intimate caring for the members of the Society and classes. It was the final and most intimate context of ministry in which someone could be "pressed" to make a commitment to Christ. Visitation was the primary way to inquire about a person's spiritual state and to "deal closely" with others about their sin and need for God. The importance of visitation seems rooted in Wesley's belief that most, if not all, Christians need encouragement to advance to the next phase of discipleship.

So often in contemporary ministry, visitation is seen as simply a checking in on people's physical well-being. Certainly it was this in early Methodism as well. But it was also a way to check in on someone spiritually, to "look upon" them in love. And if someone needed more preaching, teaching, instruction, or encouragement in order to fix the gospel "in their memory" and make sure it was written "on their heart," then visitation was the final door.<sup>6</sup>

Evangelism in early Methodism included these four doors as interconnected ways to call people to respond to the gospel through awakening, conversion, and sanctification. Evangelism today includes similar doors to faith and church life. We must go to the people who will not come, invite those who respond to a regular life of worship and community, share the gospel within the context of a small group, and finally, take the time to meet with people individually to "look upon" them in love. □

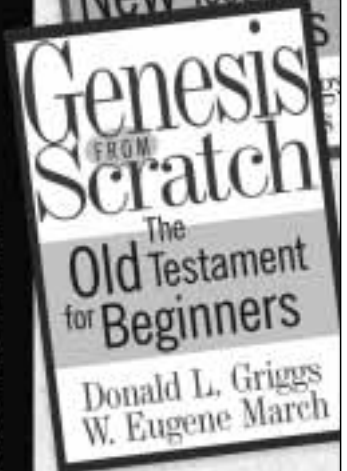


**Jack Jackson is Senior Pastor of Christ UMC in Lakeland, Fla.**

- 1 Jackson ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, "Journal entry 30 September 1767," 3:301.
- 2 Wesley, *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences*, 450-451.
- 3 Hardt, "The Evangelistic and Catechetical Role," 14.
- 4 Tom Albin, "Finding God in Small Groups," *Christianity Today* 47/8 (2003), Date Accessed 12 November 2008, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/august/2.42.html>.
- 5 Jackson ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, "Minutes of Several Conversations," 8:305.
- 6 Wesley, *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences*, 69.

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