IJAAR PUBLISHING®

West African Journal of Interdisciplinary Research | ISSN: 3027-1878
Volume 2, Issue 4 (December, 2024) | www.ijaar.org

The New Evangelism Art: A Blessing or a Curse

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Abstract

Evangelism is not a new lingo in the body of Christ. It is a well-known art. A lot of churches now have an evangelism team or department with lots of resources committed to it. There are several thousands of Christians as well running evangelism programs in various capacities. There are so many activities going on under the label of evangelism. Whether or not they mean evangelism is another thing. It seems either the word "evangelism" or the art of evangelism has evolved. Today, it seems what we call evangelism is slightly different from what is listed in the Bible. Should we agree that the change in times has affected the word or the work of evangelism? If it does, do we now have a unified definition of what evangelism means? In any case, there is an urgent need to check what evangelism has evolved into today.

https://doi.org/10.46654/mpvr4f67

Introduction

The concept of evangelism is a major theme in Christian theology as well as ecclesiological practice. From the time of the early church, evangelism has been the major tool used to communicate, disseminate, and embrace the Gospel of our lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, across lands, cultures, and generations. It has been and remains the lifeblood of Christianity. Evangelism can be understood as a central component of Christian mission through which the church participates in God's redemptive activity in society (Penner, 2018).

In the 21st century, there is an emergence of a discernible tension between the Biblical model of evangelism and a diversity of forms of activities tagged as evangelism. It appears that the contemporary church has gotten to a crossroad between being theologically right on evangelism and the contextualization of evangelism.

Muswubi (2024), while addressing the tension that is often generated from the confusion between the Gospel and cultural expression, argued that all theology is contextual, but it must remain within the confine of the word of God. Bennette (2020) shares the same opinion as he argues that evangelism must remain faithful to the scripture while engaging culture.

In practice, evangelism methods often favour one side over the other. And for many evaluators, they would rather choose to side with theological correctness than the cultural context of evangelism. Litwak (2014) warns against evangelistic methods that prioritize contextualization over Biblical truths. While contextualization is great and may seem to be the bridge between the people and the Gospel, we must be careful to avoid it being the stumbling block to the substance of the Gospel.

This paper undertakes a missiological and systematic theological check on evangelism. It begins with scriptural foundations, analyzes the commandments given to the church on evangelism, and assesses the goal of evangelistic activities. It examines the goal of today's evangelism, evaluates the impact of such evangelistic practices, and provides recommendations based on its conclusions.

The urgency of this examination can not be overstated. Wright (2021) opines that a church has lost its fundamental raison d'etre if it loses clarity on its evangelist calling. Also, a church with evangelistic activities that is disconnected from the Holy Spirit and scriptural truth will produce converts but lacks disciples, crowds void of community and activities that lacks kingdom expansion.

Evangelism as recorded by the Bible

The history of evangelism can be traced to the Old Testament. The Abrahamic covenants (Genesis 12:1-3) house a universal missional impulse: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" This means that Israel's existence was not designed to be isolational but as a representative- a kingdom of priests relating the knowledge and person of God to other nations on earth (Exodus 19:6). This is visible in the book of Psalms (Psalm 96:3) and prophetic writings evident in Isaiah (Isaia 49:6).

The synoptic Gospels provide a clear view of the evangelistic ministry of Jesus Christ. It contains the proclamation of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15), engagement of individuals across status and ethnicity (John 4, Luke 19:1-10), and showcased signs and miracles that confirmed his messages and led people to repentance and faith. Jesus method was all-encompassing as it addressed spiritual, physical, and emotional needs simultaneously while proclaiming that the kingdom of God is near.

In the book of Acts of the Apostles, we see the records of the explosive growth of the early church due to the evangelistic activities of the Apostles. Starting with the upper room

experience (Acts 2), the apostolic message was characterized by proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the lordship of Jesus Christ, call to repentance and baptism as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit. This led to the conversion of thousands of people. A consistent pattern can be viewed in the evangelism of Philip (Acts 8), Peter's evangelist (Acts 10), and that of Paul (Acts 13-28).

The Pauline epistle further deepen theological depth in our Biblical understanding of evangelism. Paul's writings reveal a strong commitment to gospel proclamation and conversion as indispensable elements of Christian mission (Mackenzie, 2012). Urga (2021) opines that Paul's ministry model demonstrates that evangelism is fundamental to the church's missionary mandate. For Paul, it is impossible to separate evangelism from theology. According to Kim (2015), Paul's apostolic identity was deeply connected to evangelism, conversion, and the establishment of churches. This shows that evangelism was not just in his writings but also what he lived for.

Therefore, the Biblical witness showcases evangelism as a word-centered proclamation of Jesus Christ (His person and work) with the goal of producing faith, repentance, and conversion into the family of God. George (2013) argues that every baptized Christian is a participant in God's mission and evangelistic work. Niemandt (2015) emphasizes that evangelism is a communal responsibility of the church. This means evangelism is the design by which the church must grow, and the people who must be involved in it are the people in the church.

How We Were Commanded

The mandate for evangelism is not merely ecclesiastical tradition or some form of institutional preference; it is a deeply rooted divine command. Key passages show what missiologist refer to as commissioning text in the New Testament, which is profoundly called the Great Commission. This is evident in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles.

The locus classicus of evangelistic commission is Matthew 28:18-20. These verses show the supreme authority of the risen Christ with the comprehensive commandment. We are designated with the responsibility to make disciples, which is to make people believe what we believe and live the way we live, bringing them into the same awareness as we ourselves are.

There is a parallel record in Mark's Gospel (Mark 16:15) which also emphasizes the proclamation of the Gospel to all creation. This shows the universality of the scope and the proclamatory nature of the evangelistic mandate. Luke's Gospel also accounts for the evangelistic mandate (Luke 24:46-48), stating that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in the name of Jesus to all nations. Here, the disciples are referred to as "witnesses".

In the book of Acts, we find another record and dimension of the evangelistic mandate. Acts 1:8 reveals pneumatological evangelistic commission. It shows that evangelism is not mere human activity, even though it is accomplished by human beings. The essence of evangelism is spirit-enabled. It also emphasizes from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. This parallels the records in the Gospels.

Apart from the commissioning texts, the New Testament shows and reinforces the evangelistic obligation. In Romans 10:14-15, we see Paul asking a number of rhetorical questions which emphasize the need for evangelism. We also observe a command to do the work of an evangelist in 2 Timothy 4:5 in a context that applies to all servants of God. A

similar directive to all saints can be found in 1 Peter 3:15, where we are all encouraged to be ready to defend the faith.

In view of the afore stated scriptures, evangelism is to all nations, Christ centered, powered by the Holy Spirit, discipleship oriented, carried out by those already saved, and in obedience to the commandment of our lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Any activities tagged as evangelism outside of these premises must be subject to theological review.

The Goal of Evangelism

A theology of evangelism must be able to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that it possesses goal(s) that legitimate its pursuit. The Bible offers a multi-layered goal structure that begins with redemption, transformation, and communal development. This means evangelism has more than one goal attached to it from the scriptures. However, an individual or group may engage in evangelism for one or more goals.

The immediate goal of evangelism for an individual is conversion. This encompases repentance, putting forth faith and regeneration. The term repentance (metanoia) means a complete shift into a new normal in mind, will, and preferences from both self and sin to God (Acts 2:38, 3:19). Faith (Pistis) addresses the putting of personal trust and hope in Jesus Christ as one's lord and Saviour (Romans 10:9-10). Regeneration means being born again, and this is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit, which is what shows conversion is genuine and a new life is powered by this reality (John 3:38).

Compton (2018) argues that regeneration is closely associated with the response of faith generated through hearing God's word. Das (2018) opines that conversion is the central outcome of evangelistic ministry. He points out that the proclamation of the Gospel leads people into a transformative process of conversion and new life in Christ. All of these are in agreement with the exegetical study of Acts 10, which shows that preaching the Gospel is the means through which people enter into the saving faith and spiritual renewal.

However, the Biblical goal does not end at the conversion of the individual. The evangelistic commission in Matthew 28:18-20 takes a step further when it says "making disciples". This denotes committing to being influenced by the life of Jesus Christ. It also silently says that if evangelism is done right, it opens the door for discipleship. Beard (2015) reveals that discipleship is a missional process that flows from evangelistic engagement. Parallel to this, Jun (2022) opines that discipleship is both the result and continuation of the evangelism mission.

The goal of evangelism at the cosmic and eschatological level shows the ultimate goal, which is God being glorified through the gathering of the redeemed from all people, tongues, tribes, and nations (Revelation 7:9-10). This seems to be the end of it all, as expressed "end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). With this, we can consider evangelism as an eschatological force that brings people into awareness and preparation for the last days with God.

The Biblical narrative also show us the goal of evangelism from the compassion and justice point of view. This is evident with the mandate that follows the pneumatological commission of the evangelistic responsibility expressed in Luke 4:18-19, which was drawn from Isaiah 61. Giving liberty to captives, good news to the poor, recovering sight to the blind, and declaring the year of God's favour means more than just proclamation; it is compassion, and it is justice being served.

The Evangelism Today

Contemporary evangelism seems to embody a complex and varied standpoint that reflects and refracts biblical tradition. Over the past few decades, forms, methods, vocabularies, and

structures of evangelism have significantly transformed. It has been driven by cultural shifts, technological advancement, ecclesiological innovation, value shifts, and demographic change.

The most visible shift has been the advent of mass evangelism. This includes large scale crusades and stadium outreaches associated with Gospel ministers like Reinhard Bonnke, Dag Heward Mills, Billy Graham, T.D Jakes, etc. Also, there have been similar movements for worship sessions for ministers like Dunsin Oyekan, Bethel Music gatherings, Hillsong Conferences, etc.

While these large-scale crusades and worship gatherings have historically led to significant responses with millions exposed to the Gospel message, the success rate measured by their altar calls has no genuine conversion measurements and no subsequent discipleship that will fulfill the evangelistic mandate. This invariably means that there is no confirmation of the genuineness of the responses to the altar call in these large-scale crusades.

A more dominant form of evangelism that has evolved in recent times, especially after the global COVID-19 pandemic, is digital and social media evangelism. Gospel ministers and lay Christians are now able to reach large audiences through Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Podcasts. While the reach is undeniably massive, concerns arise about accountability and engagement depth, and discipleship. Domm (2020) noted that the effectiveness of digital evangelism should not be measured solely by online responses or professions of faith but by the extent to which converts are integrated into ongoing discipleship and spiritual formation.

One highly theologically contested contemporary form of evangelism is prosperity gospel-influenced evangelism. This approach uses material blessings, physical healings, financial prosperity, and success as bait to woo people to Christ. While this has recorded a very high decision for Christ results especially in places like Africa and Asia. Concern about this is rooted in the misrepresentation of the Gospel as reflected in the scripture.

Furthermore, the megachurch movements seem to use a different evangelism approach. The approach is seeker-sensitive. The focus is on removing every barrier to church attendance, especially for the unchurched, blending across cultures, doctrinal complexity is removed, and engaging contextualization is at its peak. In this approach, worship is entertaining, and preaching is application-oriented. The concern is whether true disciples are produced or mere churchgoers.

The Goal of Today's Evangelism

Today, there seems to be a high divergence from the goals of evangelism known in the scriptures. While no generalisation can capture the full diversity and extent of contemporary evangelistic practices, several dominant goal frontages can be recognized that deserve critical theological review.

A known goal and perhaps widespread is numerical growth as primary goal. Evangelistic organizations and churches often measure success using attendance figures, altar call responses, baptisms, and membership numbers. Although this success metric is not entirely bad for evangelistic activities, the New Testament record shows this as well (Acts 2:41; 4:4), but it often places no value or gives room for quantitative metrics. This is a distortion of the pastoral and theological representation of such evangelistic activities. Hunter (2022) noted that churches often prioritise evangelistic methods that produce rapid, large-scale numerical responses over methods that produce genuine conversion and lasting discipleship.

In contemporary evangelistic contexts, entertainment and emotional experience have received a boost as an operational goal. This model of evangelism uses proclamation, reason, and appeal to the conscience (Acts 17:2-3; 2 Corinthians 5:11). Churches now recalibrate emotional engagement and excitement as a spiritual encounter. This is not to mean that lack of emotional responses to the gospel is the standard; this is reflected even in the New Testament, and people are bound to respond to the Gospel emotionally even in our contemporary time, but caution must be taken to avoid it being designated or mistaken for genuine repentance and faith.

Another prominent evangelistic context is community and social belonging. Evangelistic operational model for this uses connection, belonging, and community as bait to draw people. This model tends to address a major human need of relationship, identity, and connection, but may be sidelining the actual proclamation of the Gospel. This puts a dent in the results of evangelistic activities and programs and makes us ask if evangelism is still being done or if something else. Chester & Timmis (2020) noted that when people join a church primarily for social belonging rather than in response to gospel proclamation, the resulting "conversions" may be sociological rather than spiritual.

Evangelistic context has also been used in line with political and ideological goals. This is evident in the environment of religious nationalism, cultural identity, or political fraternization. Evangelism is used as a tool to pilot political interest rather than individual faith in Jesus Christ. This is a complete departure from the Scriptures while still masquerading as being regulated by the dictates of Scripture.

Furthermore, there is yet another complete departure from the biblical goal of reconciliation with God to integrate converts into the body of Christ, which is the prosperity and material well-being goal of evangelism. When evangelism offers prosperity and material blessings, it misses the point it was meant to address, which is guilt, sin, and spiritual death. This has led to a disappointing experience for many who take their evangelistic words for the literary meaning without having an actual encounter with God.

We cannot fail to acknowledge the fact that some contemporary evangelistic organizations have been able to come up with goals that is in total alignment with the Biblical evangelistic instruction. These goals focused on holistic discipleship, spiritual formation, societal transformation, and Spirit-empowered proclamation. Every other evangelistic goal that is not in alignment with the Biblical evangelistic instruction needs to be critically examined.

The Impact of Today's Evangelism

In order to gain a true picture of the impact of evangelism today, both quantitative and qualitative assessments are required. These assessments show both remarkable outcomes and concerns. Both require attention to move the church forward.

There has been an extraordinary numerical increase in Global Christianity in the past decades, and it is as a result of no other thing than evangelism. Johnson & Zurlo (2021) noted that the Centre for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary estimates that Christianity grew from an approximate of 2.2 billion adherents in 2000 to over 2.5 billion in 2020, with particularly significant growth in Sub-Saharan Africa, China, and parts of Asia. A large percentage of this is attributed to Charismatic and Pentecostal evangelism. It was observed that they were able to reach populations that were previously resistant to traditional Christian witness.

Digital evangelism has been highly instrumental in reaching younger generations. American Bible Society (2022) documented significant numbers of individuals who report first

engaging with Christian content through online platforms in their research. Many churches reported high attendance and conversion during the COVID-19 pandemic by streaming services online and engaging in online evangelism programs. Barna Group research (2020) also found that digital church attendance increased substantially during the pandemic, with many first-time attenders accessing Christian content who might not have entered a physical church building.

Relational and missional evangelism has also played a significant part. The impact of relational and missional evangelism, while harder to measure quantitatively, has demonstrated significant depth. Research on church health and conversion retention consistently indicates that people who come to faith through long-term relational witness are significantly more likely to maintain their faith and become active disciples than those who respond to mass evangelism events or online content (Addison, 2019; Schnabel, 2020). The quality of conversion, as measured by subsequent discipleship indicators, appears to be substantially higher in relational evangelism contexts.

However, the concerning impacts of modern evangelism must also be frankly evaluated. Research on the retention rates of evangelistic decisions reveals significant concern. Studies indicate that the majority of individuals who respond to altar calls in crusade evangelism do not subsequently become integrated, committed members of local churches (Hunter, 2022). The "back door" of contemporary churches remains widely open: many who respond to evangelistic invitations do not continue in faith past the first year. This pattern raises profound questions about whether contemporary evangelism is making genuine disciples or merely producing momentary emotional decisions.

The impact of prosperity gospel evangelism has generated notable missiological and theological concern. McClymond (2020) noted that prosperity gospel evangelism produces significant numeric growth, particularly in developing-world contexts, prosperity gospel churches have been associated with financial exploitation of vulnerable believers, theological distortion that leaves converts ill-equipped to face suffering and adversity, and the creation of celebrity pastor cultures that undermine authentic Christian community. Critics have argued that prosperity gospel evangelism may inoculate its converts against the true gospel by offering a replacement that bears resemblance to the gospel of the cross.

The societal impact of evangelism varies depending on the approach deployed to achieve social cohesion and transformation. Churches that engaged in holistic mission by combining gospel proclamation with medical, educational, nutritional, and justice-seeking initiatives have recorded significant positive impact on community and individual well being. Interestingly, Flemming (2019) noted that forms of evangelism that prioritise individual spiritual transaction without communal or social dimensions have been criticised for producing a form of Christianity that is socially disengaged and culturally ineffective.

We can not bypass the theological impact of the modern evangelism methods on the church itself. A church that consistently uses evangelism methods that compromise biblical dictates in favour of numerical growth risks producing a congregation that is numerically fat but theologically thin. Such congregation will be inadequately prepared for suffering and persecution, lacks quality pastoral care, and highly susceptible to heresy. Tennent (2020) warns that the greatest threat to the church's evangelistic mission in the 21st century may not be external opposition but internal theological compromise in the name of relevance.

It must therefore be concluded that the impact of today's evangelism is best described as decidedly ambiguous — simultaneously exhibiting extraordinary fruitfulness and significant dysfunction. The blessing and curse of the paper's title are not mutually exclusive categories;

they may coexist within the same institutional landscape, sometimes within the same church or evangelistic ministry.

Conclusion

This paper has undertaken a comprehensive assessment of evangelism from its biblical foundations to its contemporary expressions with the aim of assessing whether the changes in the evangelistic art translates to a blessing or a curse for the body of Christ.

The biblical record reveals evangelism as a divinely commanded, christocentric, Spirit-empowered proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, aimed at producing repentance, faith, and lifelong discipleship. It is universal in scope, eschatologically oriented toward the glory of God and across nations. The command given to the church regarding evangelism is unambiguous, comprehensive, and permanent.

Modern evangelism comes with a complex and variegated landscape in which true gospel proclamation coexists with compromised forms of evangelism. The blessing of contemporary evangelism is evident in the extraordinary numerical expansion of global Christianity, the innovative use of digital platforms to reach previously unreachable populations, and the development of holistic mission approaches that address the whole person and community. These represent genuine and positive developments that have extended the reach of the gospel in remarkable ways.

The curse of modern evangelism, however, is equally evident in the departure from biblical teleology, the substitution of numerical targets for discipleship goals, emotional experience for genuine conversion, material prosperity for spiritual transformation, and social belonging for reconciliation with God. These departures do not merely represent methodological inefficiency; they represent theological error with serious consequences for the individuals evangelised and the communities that emerge from such evangelism.

The fundamental conclusion of this paper is that the blessing or curse of new evangelism art is not determined by its methods per se but by its fidelity to the content, goals, and power sources identified in Scripture. Methods may legitimately vary across cultural and historical contexts; what cannot vary is the content of the gospel proclaimed, the goal of genuine discipleship pursued, and the dependence on the Holy Spirit for effectiveness. Modern evangelism that honours these non-negotiables, however innovative its methods, constitutes a blessing. Contemporary evangelism that compromises them, however impressive its results, risks being a curse not because it fails to produce activity, but because the activity it produces may not translate to true kingdom expansion.

The church in the 21st century is therefore called neither to embrace of all contemporary evangelistic innovation nor to retreat to old evangelistic forms. It is called to the more demanding task of theological discernment which is to critically evaluate all evangelistic practice against the standard of Scripture, and retain what is good in order to reform what is deficient, and reject what is false.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis, the following recommendations are offered to churches, evangelists, theological educators, and missiological practitioners:

First, churches and evangelistic organisations must begin a deliberate attempt to recover biblical evangelism content and replace with the person of Jesus Christ, his atoning death, his resurrection, the call to repentance and faith, the promise of the Holy Spirit and promise of

eternal life. This must be intentionally proclaimed across lands, cultures and media without a compromise in the process of simplifying or contextualizing the message.

Second, churches and evangelistic organisations must begin to integrate discipleship into evangelism intentionally. A new normal must begin with a robust post-conversion integration processes that ensure new believers are baptised, incorporated into community, and enrolled in ongoing theological and ethical formation. The disconnection of evangelism from discipleship shows a structural failure that no evangelistic method can compensate for. Addison (2019) noted that metrics of evangelistic success must be broadened beyond initial decisions to include retention rates, discipleship participation, and long-term spiritual formation indicators.

Third, churches and evangelistic organisations must return to pneumatological evangelism which is evangelism that is consciously and practically dependent on the power of the Holy Spirit. While methodological innovation, strategic planning, and cultural contextualisation are not entirely discouraged, it is to be noted that the ultimate effectiveness of evangelism is sovereign work of God. Flemming (2019) advised that churches that have replaced prayer, fasting, and dependence on the Spirit with sophisticated marketing and entertainment-driven programming must repent of their practical atheism and recover the posture of the early church, which devoted itself to prayer before its evangelistic breakthrough (Acts 1:14; 2:1-4).

Fourth, theological seminaries, Bible colleges, and church training programmes must integrate relevant missiological education that equips church leaders to evaluate new evangelistic trends theologically. The prosperity gospel, seeker-sensitive extremes, digital evangelism etc. require thorough theological assessment before adoption. Tennent (2020) noted that leaders who are theologically equipped to evaluate evangelism movements from a biblical foundation will be far better positioned to lead their congregations in evangelism that is both contextually effective and theologically faithful.

Five, churches in the Global South which now represent the majority of global Christianity and the frontline of modern evangelism must be supported in developing contextual theologies of evangelism that are not verbatim reproductions of Western models and can accommodate local cultural norms without compromising the Gospel. Wright (2021) opined that the theological resources of the global church must be shared equitably, enabling indigenous leaders to develop evangelistic approaches that are both locally rooted and globally accountable to the standard of Scripture.

Lastly, the church must guard itself against the idolatry of results. The temptation to evaluate evangelism primarily by its quantitative outputs like attendance, conversions, income etc. are subtle but serious theological error. The church is called to faithfulness to its mission, not success as the world defines it. As Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 3:6-7, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." A church that has returned to this theological humility will be a church free to pursue true, Spirit-dependent, biblically faithful evangelism and trust God for the results.

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