

Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007.

Is it possible to write a book about evangelism in the 21st century with virtually no reference to “techniques,” “strategies,” “target audiences,” and “seeker-friendly worship?” You can if you are Bryan Stone and believe the church has been largely seduced by its own history and surrounding culture, and needs to take a hard look at what it means to “be the church” as a “new and distinct society,” a “new and unprecedented social existence” in today’s world (16).

Stone believes the time has come to recover and reconstruct the “ecclesiological foundation” of evangelism. The church is in and of itself “evangelism,” the witness to God’s reign in the world. This is true, according to the author, because the body of Christ “constitutes both the public invitation and that to which the invitation points.” Consequently, “the church does not really need an evangelistic strategy. The church *is* the evangelistic strategy” (15).

Such is the argument set forth in the Introduction and in Part 1. In Part 2 Stone bolsters his position by retracing the biblical story of God’s people through the history and calling of Israel, the ministry and message of Jesus, and the birth and apostolic evangelism of the early church. Part 3 addresses in considerable detail what the author calls “rival narratives”—the Constantinian story and the story of Modernity, with all their accompanying “dead ends, detours and derailments” (113)—stories that have sadly subverted and ultimately distorted beyond recognition the church’s understandings and practices of what true evangelism might and should look like.

Stone presents the case in Part 4 for “the evangelizing community”—a community formed by the Holy Spirit through the core practices of worship, forgiveness, hospitality, and economic sharing, present in and offered to the world in such a distinctive way that it can be “touched, tasted, and tried” (21). One can, in fact, “only ever be *drawn* to the reign of God,” he claims, “by first encountering it in the world embodied in the life and work, patterns and practices of the church” (267).

Some readers, unaccustomed to this type of church-centric approach to evangelism, may find themselves a bit disoriented, if not downright scandalized, by the author’s central thesis. Other readers, including many Anabaptist-Mennonite ones, will find themselves on more familiar turf and

will quickly recognize the influence and perspectives of John Howard Yoder and other like-minded scholars scattered throughout the text.

In fact, the works of Stanley Hauerwas and Yoder appear in larger numbers than any others in the book's footnotes and bibliography. Stone even includes a "John Howard Yoder" subsection in his Introduction, where he asserts that "any evangelism that seeks to be fully post-Constantinian rather than merely free of the embarrassing shackles of Christendom will [...] have to engage Yoder seriously" (21). And "engage Yoder seriously" he does, so much so that he suspects some readers may find his book to be "little more than a gloss on Yoder's thought or, at points, an introduction to his theology of evangelism ..." (22). Stone's thesis, whether inspired by Yoder or others, is nonetheless a timely reminder of the church's role as primary model and messenger (or "paradigm" and "pulpit" in Yoder terms) of God's reconciling plan for the world.

The author also helpfully insists that, contrary to many evangelistic methods employed by the church today, "the gospel is not something that can be tossed at others at a distance, shouted out by megaphone, or beamed in by satellite; it must be made available in bodily form so that it can be tested and tried" (285).

While Stone's central thesis on the embodiment of the gospel is an important corrective to much that is called evangelism today, the author paints himself in a corner by becoming categorical and overstating his case. Is it really true that "evangelistic witness is *impossible* apart from a Spirit-created social body" (311, my italics)? I don't think so. There are simply too many ways over the years that people have been drawn to faith, and too many locations around the world where the church is growing but where Christian witness and body life are restricted or forbidden, to make this claim.

However, Stone's book makes an important contribution to understanding the post-Christendom world in which the church today seeks to live and share its faith. It is a dense but essential read for any church leader seeking to "relearn the practice of bearing faithful and embodied witness" (21).

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