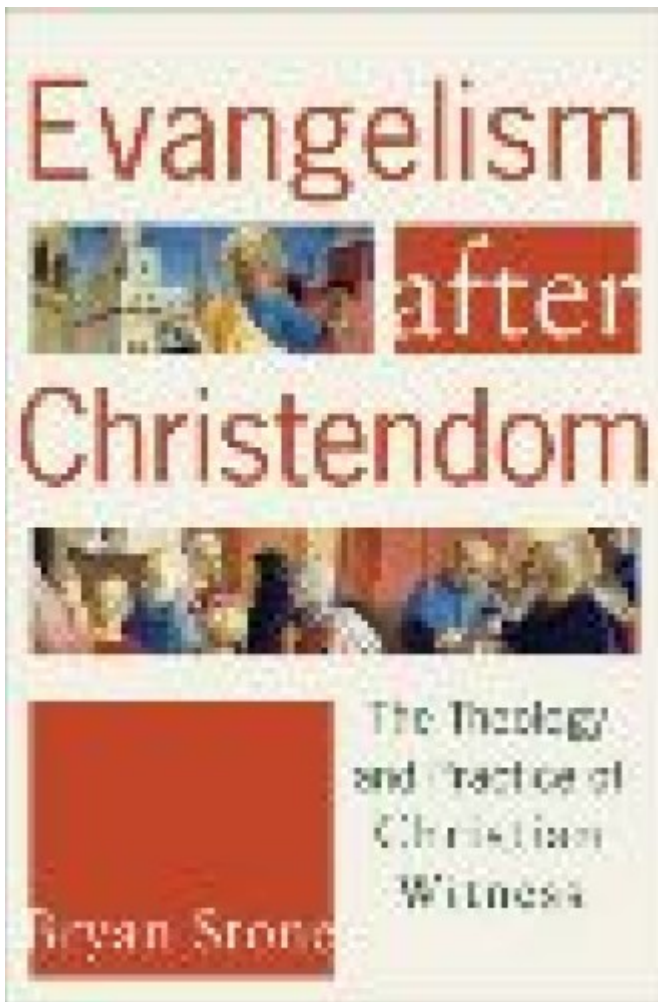


Evangelism After Christendom

reviewed by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [June 26, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness

Bryan Stone
Brazos

Bryan Stone's *Evangelism after Christendom* is a remarkable book that was about 30 years in the making—three decades of thinking, research, experimentation and reflection on the church in post-Christendom. A seismic shift has occurred in American church life, and we liberal mainline Protestants have been among the last to notice. In the context of our disestablishment, where many of us now feel like missionaries in the culture we once thought we owned, we have to rethink everything. Stone, a professor of evangelism at Boston University, leads us in an inspired rethinking of evangelism.

Everybody who is anybody in the post-Christendom, postliberal, communitarian, virtue-ethics, sectarian galaxy gives aid to Stone's sweeping attempt to reconstitute evangelism as a primary practice of the church. John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, William Abraham, Gustavo Gutiérrez, John Wesley, William Cavanaugh, James McClendon, Alasdair MacIntyre and even yours truly all lend their aid to the making of Stone's argument. The result is a book that we will be assimilating and enacting for years to come.

Stone describes faithful evangelism as:

an invitation to be strange, to become a member of a prototypical but inevitably deviant community intended by God for the whole world. . . .
Evangelism then does not seek "customer satisfaction" but is carried out as a response to the new world that in Jesus of Nazareth has broken in and because of which things can never be the same.

The once comfortable hegemony of Protestant Christianity over North American culture has ended. Jesus, who at one time had settled in with American society, is once again becoming strange. The church, which once believed that it was a socially significant powerhouse at the center of American life, now discovers that it has been pushed to the margins. But the margins, it turns out, are a wonderful place for the church to be because that's where Jesus hangs out. Stone puts it this way: "It is precisely from a position of marginality that the church is best able to announce peace and to bear witness to God's peaceable reign in such a way as to invite others to take seriously the subversive implications of that reign."

When the church refuses to be the cement of social conformity but instead enjoys life on the margins—when the church celebrates its strangeness—we find ourselves

moved closer to Jesus and to the adventure of being the church. Evangelism is a practice in which the church embodies the death and resurrection of Jesus. So Stone says that the most evangelistic thing the church can do is to be the church—that countercultural, strange, subversive body of people who demonstrate, through their life together and their hospitable invitation to join them, that Jesus Christ is Lord and that Caesar and his minions are not.

Beginning with an incisive critique of what passes for evangelism in most of our churches, Stone notes that we've tried to evangelize via two main paths, which he calls "Christendom lite": establishment of the intellectual respectability of the gospel in essentially secular terms that are allegedly broader or more plausible than traditional theological phrasings (as in James R. Adams's *So You Can't Stand Evangelism*), and assertion of the practical value of Christianity for individuals, where value has been determined by a market economy (as in Walt Kallestad's *Entertainment Evangelism*). Against such desiccated, overly rationalized, market-driven approaches, Stone says that the most evangelistic thing we can do today is to be a vibrant corporate embodiment of the kingdom of God.

I was particularly engaged by Stone's theological analysis of the problems in many of our evangelistic appeals. The mode and the content of our arguments for Jesus must be faithful to the peculiar way of Jesus, says Stone. "Christian evangelism . . . is *pacifist* in every way." Stone unmasks the subtle coercion behind our attempts to construct a knockdown apologetic that simply can't be resisted by its audience. When evangelism is described as "winning people to Christ," winning tends to be everything, even if we have to jettison many of the most demanding claims of the Christian faith in order to "produce" converts and "make" disciples. The parallels with a capitalist economy are inescapable. When evangelization is confined to the production of "a personal relationship with Jesus," individualistic modernity has triumphed over the essentially communal, corporate salvation that is offered by the church.

As Stone puts it:

Evangelism is a practice that is performed at boundaries and along the edges of difference. Because of that, nothing could be more important to a theology of evangelism than clarifying the nature of that difference and how the Christian community's posture toward the world along those

boundaries is always one of both invitation and subversion.

I agree that evangelism must explore and even celebrate the nature of Christian difference. However, I think that begins with reflection on the difference of Christian salvation, the oddness of Christianity's Savior. The great scandal to which we are inviting people, in inviting them to community in Christ, is greater even than the scandal of a countercultural community. Our greatest evangelistic challenge is not so much to reach people in an individualistic, inherently violent culture, but rather to love a God who was willing to be driven out of the world on a cross.

This is one reason why I wish that Stone had indicated more precisely the personality of the God who is the agent and the focus of peculiarly Christian evangelism. I wish he had used a greater array of biblical material to indicate the peculiar truth that is the subject of Christian evangelization. Having said that Christ produces a pacifist people on the margins who show hospitality to the stranger, we haven't said enough about what Christ has done that makes evangelism possible and imperative in the first place. To paraphrase Barth, God is not Christian community uttered in a loud voice. As someone who makes a living at the center of the Christian community, I'm convinced that those of us embedded in that community need to be slapped afresh with the gospel. The gospel is considerably more than a set of communal practices—even disciplined, pacifist, hospitable communal practices.

I'm sure that Stone agrees with me that our practices don't save us; salvation is a work of God in Christ. Yet his discussion of the church as a practice and of the practices of evangelism lacks the theological substance that characterizes much of the rest of his book. Evangelism is what the living, reaching, embracing Christ does before we do evangelism. Evangelism, as I have experienced it, begins in the heart of God, in the Trinity's relentless determination to have a people, a family—a witness that God, not nations, rules the world.