

Frances S. Adeney. *Graceful Evangelism: Christian Witness in a Complex World*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010. 204 pages. \$22.

Frances Adeney is the William A. Benfield Jr. Professor of Evangelism and Global Mission at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. In her classes she encountered strenuous debates and disagreements among the seminarians about the goals and nature of evangelism; “what it is, whether we should do it, how to go about it, what results we seek” (xi) These questions, she observed, were dividing the students. They are likewise “dividing our churches” (xi). Out of that has come a review of evangelism and a challenge to re-think, re-imagine, and re-craft a “more graceful approach to evangelism” (xii) in the twenty-first century.

Adeney begins with a survey of the biblical, historical, and theological landscape of evangelism. She argues that before developing an approach to evangelism that appeals to a contemporary audience, we must understand the complexity of the term *evangelism* and we must sort out “the myriad perspectives, opinion, definitions, and biases” (1), because she found that her students thought there was only one way, one understanding of evangelism—their way.

Therefore, in Part One Adeney identifies and describes three broad categories into which most definitions can be placed: inclusive, ideological, or lifestyle. She also argues that, besides describing these different definitions of evangelism, one must understand the importance of context, “the *location* of those doing the defining.” (6) Most of us are unaware of our culture, our location. It shapes and limits us, but we ignore those limitations. Therefore, in order to move beyond our location and search for new approaches, “we need to expose ourselves to different perspectives and seriously try to learn from them rather than simply opposing them” (7), which was what she found her students were doing.

I found her discussion of context and location most accessible and thought that this would be helpful for an introductory preaching course. Adeney offers a “Context Worksheet” small group exercise for congregations that I believe will be equally as appropriate for seminary students. I, too, find that my students believe that the preaching they are used to is the only right way.

After reviewing approaches to evangelism in the Bible as well as historical approaches, from the early church to the twentieth century, Adeney narrows her focus to the American missionary movements in the nineteenth century because their “powerful ideas met with conditions that allowed people to travel the globe . . . Its influence is still with us in the twenty-first century.” (41) They developed new approaches to evangelism: evangelistic preaching, church planting, education, medical work, and care for the poor. (43-45) These had far ranging positive effects. However, they also included negative effects: “colonialism, economic exploitation, racism, and cultural imperialism.” (49)

In Part Two, Adeney surveys the contemporary scene. For example, those seeking to enact a contemporary evangelism must wrestle with diversity, religious pluralism, relativism, conflict between fundamentalists and modernists, and the understanding that evangelism is outdated. In spite of these, Adeney believes that there is still a time and a place for evangelism; hence her challenge to create a graceful evangelism. But before turning to her approach, she reviews contemporary mission trends and identifies seven contemporary theologies of evangelism. In the end, she argues, these help us to understand that “No single method characterizes all Christian mission . . . [and] Evangelism is multidirectional.” (75)

In the third part of the book Adeney stakes her claim, making the argument that the ultimate goal of evangelism is to reach toward and proclaim abundant life in Christ. (105) She

then describes a way that congregations might understand how evangelism will “fit into the mission of the church,” (108) and how they, in turn, might develop their own particular mission statement for evangelism. She takes, in effect, a rhetorical approach, arguing that a congregation must “look around, assess needs, cooperate with others, and act together.” (113)

The closing part of the book turns, once again, to contemporary theologies of evangelisms, helpful sources, and offers ways that we can reform our perspective. While interesting, the end of the book is a bit confusing for she seems to be reviewing earlier sections of the book. Had I been the editor of the book I might have suggested that Adeney place the final chapters earlier in the book. I would also have encouraged her to move beyond a focus solely on Protestant approaches to evangelism. For the past twenty years the Roman Catholic Church has been involved in crafting a “New Evangelization,” yet Adeney never mentions their discussions and efforts.

However, these weaknesses do not deter me from offering a strong recommendation for this book. I will definitely include this on future bibliographies.

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