



COVENANT DISCIPLESHIP QUARTERLY

The Method and Principles of Evangelism and Social Action

by James Reuteler



Covenant Discipleship Groups are designed to help Christians witness to Jesus Christ in the world and follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is a very methodical way of doing both evangelism and social action at the same time. By doing these things we are attempting to fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20b).

As soon as we try to carry out this method of evangelism and social action, we run into some difficulty. Today evangelism is frequently confused with proselytizing and forcing our beliefs on others. In light of this cultural confusion, we need to observe a couple of principles as we bear witness. These principles are found in the Bible and in the practices of the Methodist movement.

Be Different!

The first principle to be made in carrying out our unique method of evangelism and social action is to *be different*. Let us go back to the way in which God called his people to love their neighbors as they loved themselves. In Leviticus 19:2 (NRSV), the Lord spoke through Moses, saying to the entire congregation: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." The basic meaning of *holy* is to *be set apart* or *different*. The Sabbath was holy because it was different from other days; the temple was holy because it was different from other buildings; and the Bible is holy because it is different from other books. The difference in all these things is, of course, that each is dedicated solely to service and praise of God. This meant, therefore, that God's people should be different.



While they were commanded to love God (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) and their neighbors (Leviticus 19:18b), God put other responsibilities on them as well. Faithfully attending to these divine responsibilities made them different. They were to follow ritual and ceremonial laws, which would make the world aware of their differences. Three examples of this are given in Leviticus 19:19. Because of their obedience to the law, God's people simply could not hide their witness.

Jesus called his followers to be different as well. The Sermon on the Mount contains many examples of those differences. We see this call to

be different, or holy, in Matthew 5 when Jesus repeatedly uses the phrase, "You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you. . . ." Matthew 5:38ff (NRSV) — "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also . . ."

In 1 Peter 1:15-16, we discover the repetition of the call to holiness found in Leviticus 19:2 (NRSV): ". . . as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'" The call is to be different. The purpose of the call is given clearly in 1 Peter 2:9 (NRSV), ". . . you are a chosen [people], a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." We are called to express those differences as we live as witnesses to Jesus Christ in the world and follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Answer Questions!

The second principle in our method of evangelism and social action is to proclaim those mighty acts by being ready at all times to answer questions for the hope that lies within: ". . . in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15-16a, NRSV). When we are different, there will be plenty of questions; but will we be ready to answer them in ways that will inspire people to become disciples of Jesus Christ? John Wesley put it this way:



"THE question between us turns chiefly, if not wholly, on matter of fact. You deny that God does now work these effects: At least, that he works them in this manner. I affirm both; because I have heard these things with my own ears, and have seen them with my eyes. I have seen (as far as a thing of this kind can be seen) very many persons changed in a moment from the spirit of fear, horror, despair, to the spirit of love, joy, and peace; and from sinful desire, till then reigning over them, to a pure desire of doing the will of God. These are matters of fact, whereof I have been, and almost daily am, an eye or ear witness. What I have to say touching visions or dreams, is this: I know several persons in whom this great change was wrought in a dream, or during a strong representation to the eye of their mind, of Christ either on the cross, or in glory. This is the fact; let any judge of it as they please. And that such a change was then wrought, appears (not from their shedding tears only, or falling into fits, or crying out: These are not the fruits, as you

seem to suppose, whereby I judge, but) from the whole tenor of their life, till then, many ways wicked; from that time, holy, just, and good.

"I will show you him that was a lion till then, and is now a lamb; him that was a drunkard, and is now exemplarily sober; the whoremonger that was, who now abhors the very 'garment spotted by the flesh.' These are my living arguments for what I assert, viz., 'That God does now, as aforetime, give remission of sins, and the gift of the Holy Ghost, even to us and to our children; yea, and that always suddenly, as far as I have known, and often in dreams or in the visions of God.' If it be not so, I am found a false witness before God. For these things I do, and by his grace will, testify." (The Works of John Wesley, ed. Thomas Jackson, Volume 1, pages 195-96.)

Living arguments are answers to questions people ask about the practical value of faith. In Covenant Discipleship groups, we learn how to answer questions with living arguments.

Enter Into Dialogue!

The third principle in the method of evangelism and social action is dialogue with people with no faith and with people of other faith traditions. Learning another language helps us understand our own language better, and engaging in dialogue with others enables us to understand our own faith better. It also provides us with an opportunity, as it did for Paul in Athens, to tell the story of Jesus (see Acts 17:16-34). The Athenians would never have gone to hear Paul in a monologue about faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ. What he did in Athens could only be done in dialogue, through courteous conversation.



It was not only apostles like Paul who won the minds and hearts of people. Augustine mentions the three *incredibles* that came from the witness of the common people. One of those *incredibles* had to do with Jesus' resurrection, but the other two had to do with people of low rank and little education who managed to persuade the world, even its learned elite, of so incredible a thing. They were not just talking about ideas, but about the transforming power of God in Jesus Christ. We should not shrink from dialogue for we have wonderful good news to share. At the same time, we need to be ready to listen to what others have to say to us. The purpose of dialogue is not to create a generic religion that satisfies everyone, nor is it to force our beliefs on others. The purpose of dialogue is to share with others the transforming power of grace. Covenant Discipleship groups are where persons are equipped for faithful dialogue.

Every Christian should be practicing the method of evangelism and social action with these three principles. Neither the method nor the

principles are complicated, and they will keep us humble as we witness to Jesus Christ in the world. God calls us to be holy so that we will have to explain our differences. What we need to explain as we enter into dialogue is how the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ transforms us. The church that equips its members to do that will have discovered the true method and principles of evangelism and social action, for it will have become a light shining in a dark place (Matthew 5:14-16 and 2 Peter 1:19).

James T. Reuteler, Ph.D., is Pastor of Christian Discipleship, Grace United Methodist Church, Denver, Colorado.

[Spring 2004 Covenant Discipleship Quarterly Home Page](#) | [To Witness to Jesus Christ in the World](#) | [The Method and Principles of Evangelism and Social Action](#) | [Sprouts](#)
| [CD Quarterly Needs Your Support](#)
| [Dynamics of a CD Group](#) | [Send Us Your Covenant](#) |
| [Acts of Justice](#) | | [A Perfect Love](#) |
| [>Resources for Accountable Discipleship Ministries](#) | [Discipleship Journal](#) | [CD Pins](#) | [CD Website!](#)
| [CDQ Spring 2004 in PDF format](#) |
| [Covenant Discipleship Quarterly Home Page](#) | [Small-Group Ministry Home Page](#) |