

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

As I read Frances S. Adeney's *Graceful Evangelism* I was hopeful that this text might provide a balanced view on a difficult issue, but I was ultimately disappointed. Adeney identifies some of the real differences in and difficulties with current and historic approaches to evangelism and then attempts a constructive, graceful approach forward. However, while her goal is laudable, the project suffers from a lack of precision and explanation concerning the theological assumptions implicit in the various strategies of evangelism she advocates. Adeney assumes the various evangelism strategies (of service and proclamation, for example) are complimentary but doesn't identify a sufficient theological basis for such a view.

Adeney is a professor of evangelism and global missions at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, having earned her Ph.D. at Graduate Theological Union. She has written broadly on issues of evangelism and world religions from within and primarily to a strong denominational (Presbyterian) church context.

As her thesis, Adeney states, "This book attempts to assess this situation [the past abuses of evangelism and the growing anti-religious sentiment] and move toward a more graceful approach to evangelism." The author charts an at-times helpful path towards this thesis. She discusses past efforts at evangelism, from biblical models, to historical patterns, through to the 19<sup>th</sup> century western missionary movement. This latter was helpful as she acknowledges the successes but honestly admits the abuses of 19<sup>th</sup> century western missionary efforts, which were too often callously imperialist and colonialist. This historical basis allows Adeney to better assess the current evangelism environment. Her conclusion is that these historic evangelism trends have brought the church to a time and place today in which many are questioning the value, role, and goals of evangelism. Thus, there is a need for a more graceful approach. This historic review and assessment was generally helpful.

To ground her graceful approach to evangelism, Adeney then identifies realities which explain our current questioning of evangelism, including religious pluralism, a relative notion of truth, and the fundamentalist/modernist controversy. As she insightfully assesses some modern trends in missions, she concludes there is no single method of evangelism characteristic of all Christian missions today.

She then proceeds to explore several different contemporary approaches, examining them for the positive contributions each makes, from serving others, to inviting others into community, to political activities of liberation, to proclamation. Adeney lauds each for their positive approach and contribution to evangelism.

After investigating from where we have come, the author proceeds to explore where it is we are going and how we can get there gracefully. She defines the goal of evangelism as “the abundant life,” and uses this definition to craft her proposed mission statement for evangelism – to bring the abundant life to people. She concludes the book with projections for the future of evangelism, acknowledging challenges but believing it can be done – with grace.

While some of the information and insight Adeney provides is helpful, her advocacy of multiple approaches to evangelism suffers primarily because she extends an uncritical tolerance and advocacy, or false grace, to these vastly differing approaches to evangelism which reflect deep theological differences which are in many ways incompatible. She desires to find a way for these differing evangelism approaches to “play nice” together, but neglects the fact that these approaches are different precisely because they each best represent a different theological segment of Christianity. Her “graceful” approach thus minimizes or ignores these theological differences and ends up being naïve and simplistic.

But those theological differences are real. For example, theological conservatives focus on evangelism through proclamation precisely because their theology focuses on the reality of a divine savior Jesus Christ who came to give his life as a sacrificial substitute on the cross to remove our sins and restore us from alienation to right relationship with God. This truth must be embraced, and it must be proclaimed before it can be embraced. Similarly, theological liberals primarily employ evangelism through activism, liberation, or tolerance precisely because their theology focuses on Jesus as the divinely sent man who shows us, by example, the best life to live and how to love God. These are not the same gospel message. Adeney completely ignores this important difference, treating the different methods of evangelism favored by theological conservatives and liberals as if they are mere “preferences,” rather than the differing theological expressions they actually are.

Further, although projecting herself as a mediator in this discussion, Adeney has her own theological bias. In defining the goal of evangelism as “the abundant life,” her description focuses

overwhelmingly on service through improved living conditions and relationships in this life. She states directly that the reason Jesus came was to help us find human flourishing by modelling the path to it for us (102). Theological conservatives would not disagree that being a disciple of Jesus Christ should lead to increased human flourishing, but that is not the primary reason Jesus came to earth, which they view as his atoning substitutionary death and resurrection. Thus, for them the evangelistic message proclaimed is not that Jesus is primarily our example or our model, but that Jesus is the only one who can heal us of our disease of sin. Adeney repeatedly states that Jesus came to set the captives free (Luke 4) but again reveals her theological bias in defining this as release from oppressive material conditions and relationships only, rather than from personal sin which leads to those oppressive conditions and relationships.

This bias is also evidenced in Adeney's use of history. When discussing John Wesley's contribution to evangelism she cites his 1735 expedition to the American colony of Georgia as an example of his "service" methods of evangelism to the native Americans (44). However, Wesley considered this two year mission trip to be a disappointment, even leaving under a cloud. Adeney holds this failed "service" missions trip up as an example of great evangelism, completely neglecting to mention the tremendous success and impact of his "proclamation" evangelism through 40,000 sermons preached. Her personal preference for evangelism by "service" over "proclamation" and her accompanying theological bias is clearly evident here.

Though Adeney approaches evangelism in the pluralistic context of other faiths, she is a clear advocate of inclusive Christianity, refusing to identify Christianity as that faith which alone is true and salvific. This leaves the reader with the nagging question of why bother to evangelize at all if other religions are the equal of Christianity? Adeney never addresses this all-important question.

While Adeney's work provides some good information on the historic origins of the current difficulties and differences in evangelism, her assessment of the current situation and path forward are both deeply flawed because she fails to acknowledge the differing theological perspectives necessarily embedded in the various evangelism methods. In truth, evangelism should always be conducted in an attitude of grace, and many methods of evangelism are valid and can be compatible: we should "proclaim" the message of salvation in Christ and "serve" our fellow human beings. But a consistent, consciously acknowledged theological base must first be constructed to support this

methodological variety. Adeney advocates a potpourri of evangelism approaches without acknowledging this theological need. Ultimately, this neglect undermines her thesis.

by Dr. Richard Goetz, lecturer in theology, TCA College in Singapore