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Visitation Evangelism in American Churches

By A. KARL BOEHMKE

THIRTY-FIVE years ago the term "visitation evangelism" had, in all probability, never been spoken. Today it is in common usage in nearly every major Protestant church body in America. The method of visitation evangelism is widely employed throughout the country. Some enthusiastic advocates anticipate its use in every city, village, and hamlet. With voice seldom raised and with methods far from spectacular, visitation evangelism has been instrumental in gathering large numbers of members into Protestant churches. It is estimated that in the past five years three million men and women have been trained in visitation evangelism. In large measure this work accounts for the rapid growth of the churches in America in recent years.

Whence came this new development in the field of evangelism?

RISE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE VISITATION METHOD

The story involves a basic change in evangelistic method. Therefore a brief description of evangelistic practice in the nineteenth century is presented, together with the twentieth-century circumstances indicating that change was in progress. The question is raised whether theological or sociological factors were principally determinative in the change and the direction it took. The sociological explanation is considered to be more pertinent. The development, then, proceeds from a changing cultural background. The new method appears as a part of the churches' attempt to meet the spiritual needs of people living in a new urbanized environment.

I. *The Effectiveness of Revivalism Questioned*

For almost two centuries America felt the powerful effects of revival evangelism. Before the War of Independence, the Great Awakening swept through the American colonies: in New Jersey and Pennsylvania under such leaders as Theodorus Freylinghausen and Gilbert Tennent, and in New England principally under the influence of Samuel Stoddard and Jonathan Edwards. From Georgia to Massachusetts, George Whitefield stirred tens of thousands. A frontier nation responded with enthusiasm to the beginnings of evangelical revival.

During the post Revolutionary War era the republic experienced a second Great Awakening, both in the comparatively domesticated seaboard regions and, particularly, in the more remote frontier sections of the newly opened West. Timothy Dwight in New England, Charles Finney in New York and Ohio, Barton Stone and James McGready in Kentucky and Tennessee, exerted notable influence in the revival movement. This was the era of the camp meeting and the protracted meeting, in which manifestations of emotional release frequently accompanied religious conversion. Specialized techniques of revival were developed and skillfully employed.

Throughout the nineteenth century successive waves of religious fervor passed through the nation. Significant revivals took place during the 1850's. In Civil War days revivals were experienced among Union as well as Confederate armies. There were notable post-Civil War revivals. The 1880's saw Dwight L. Moody and Ira Sankey at the height of their evangelistic influence. The beginning of the twentieth century saw the notable revival campaigns of William A. Sunday.

True, not all church groups looked with equal approval on the revival method; some, indeed, reacted against it. Yet, broadly speaking, those American churches that were most assiduously devoted to revivalism increased most rapidly in numbers and influence. Among the Protestant churches revivalism was the dominant means of doing mission work during the nineteenth century.

Weakening Faith in Revival. Approximately with the arrival of the twentieth century, there appeared within the evangelical

churches evidences of a weakening faith in the revival method. Voices had long been raised against excess and emotional extravagance in evangelistic practice. Such skillful users of the revival technique as Charles G. Finney¹ and Charles Spurgeon² had felt impelled to caution against farcical methods or undue emotional excess—this by way of strengthening faith in the revival method as such. With the turn of the century, however, it was no longer merely the excess or extravagance that was subjected to criticism but *the basic philosophy of the revival method itself*. With some of the greatest revival campaigns still in progress or in prospect, certain church leaders, comparing the methods of the tabernacle with the needs of the local parish church, were beginning to ask: Is revivalism our most effective mission tool?

For example, F. Watson Hannan of Drew Theological Seminary considered the revival from the point of view of the local pastor and questioned whether it made the pastor more effective in meeting local parish needs. Hannan wrote: "The pastor comes to believe there is only one kind of revival, and that is the high-pressure kind which the professional evangelist conducts, and for that kind of evangelism the cultured pastor feels he has no aptitude; so he attempts no evangelistic work whatever. The quieter way for which he may be far better prepared is often not considered evangelism."³

A. Earl Kernahan, a revival evangelist of the Methodist Church, gathered statistics, over a period of years, concerning the number of new souls won in his own revival campaigns and the campaigns of Billy Sunday. His conclusions cast serious doubt on the effectiveness of the revival method, and their impact, as will be seen below, affected the subsequent course of evangelistic method.⁴

H. C. Weber, a Presbyterian evangelism leader, made sociological inquiry into the previous century of evangelistic endeavor. Charting the gains and losses of the various American denomina-

¹ *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1856), pp. 246 ff.

² R. A. Torrey, *How to Promote a Successful Revival* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1901), p. 230.

³ *Evangelism* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1921), pp. 93 f.

⁴ *Visitation Evangelism, Its Methods and Results* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1925), p. 15.

tions under the over-all influence of the nineteenth-century revivalists, he concluded:

It may be said broadly, perhaps too broadly . . . that revival evangelism has done as much harm as good, that its defects have about balanced out its excellencies, and that this balance has been effective in relegating the evangelist and his methods to a very subordinate area in the general working of the churches. . . . Each revival was followed by a depression sufficiently acute to negate the high mark of its climax and to average out that line at the approximate period-level. . . . Unless other methods are immediately introduced to supplement the revival method of stimulating productivity, it may be considered to be as it has been according to the records, an unprofitable method on which to rely predominantly for the extension of the Kingdom. . . .⁵

Austen K. de Blois and others considered the vast amount of organization and effort put into the revival meeting: the advance agents, the leaflets, the news releases, the cottage meetings, the committee meetings, the sweep into town of the evangelist, the sins denounced, the tent or hall, the lights, the melodies both pathetic and victorious, the appeal, the quiet, the intense psychological pull, the confession, the cards, the pledges. Then de Blois proceeds: "The ordinary pastor in the ordinary church must resume his customary burdens in the same old way. He must work when the lights are out, the tabernacle dismantled and the excitement ended."⁶

Some were convinced that the day of revivalism was rapidly passing. A few churchmen were declaring that newer methods of personal evangelism must be devised if the churches were to meet the challenge of the new day effectively. It is significant that these men were found within churches which had formerly supported the revival method, not among those that had traditionally opposed or shunned it. A basic change in method was taking place. What forces were responsible for such a fundamental reappraisal of the churches' evangelistic strategy?

⁵ *Evangelism, a Graphic Survey* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929), pp. 132 f.

⁶ *Evangelism in the New Age* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1933), pp. 67 ff.

II. *The Rising Urban Culture and Its Problems for the Church*

The search for the primary answer to this question may be made on either theological or sociological grounds. The theological approach is considered first.

Theological Approach. Certain theological considerations may have caused some to question the traditional strategy of revivalism. This was a time of controversy between the fundamentalist and liberal schools of thought. Perhaps this cleavage was reflected in their attitude toward methods of evangelism. The liberal theologians perhaps were searching for a newer approach to humanity, whereas the more conservative fundamentalists may have been holding to the traditional revival. No evidence was discovered to indicate any such correlative movement from theological inclination to evangelistic method. In fact, the evidence here appears to point in the opposite direction. Both conservatives and liberals were questioning the validity of the revival method. Both conservative and liberals were proposing new methods to take its place.

Some churchmen may have felt a less urgent need for evangelism per se. These would be willing to forsake revivalism as the principal method of church work. But at present our concern is not so much with these as with men of either persuasion who saw the need both for evangelism and for new methods for a new day.

Some of these may indeed have clung to the revival as a mark of orthodox conviction. They may have felt that a change of traditional method would somehow entail or permit a weakening of doctrinal position. The number of these could, conceivably, have been large. But even though other conservatives were anxious to break with the revival, there was nevertheless a general reluctance toward change. This fact indicates that something aside from their theological position influenced their thinking.

Theological inclination is here considered to have been a secondary factor in changing the evangelistic strategy.

Sociological Approach. An approach to the question at hand may also be made from the sociological point of view. It may be that in American culture certain changes were taking place which caused church leaders to reappraise their methods of evangelism. Perhaps new circumstances of living were affecting the

people and rendering traditional techniques less valid. This approach yields more satisfactory explanations. Specifically, the process of urbanization with its attendant new problems may have caused a re-examination of the revival method and gave rise to new methods, among them visitation evangelism.

The Revival a Reflection of the Frontier. The early American revival was, to a large extent, a reflection of early American frontier life. Elizabeth Nottingham conceives of the revival as speaking to the religious needs of people within the framework of a social pattern created by the frontier.

Life on the frontier was not controlled by a formal institution. Nor was religion controlled by a formal institution. The expression of religion was free, spontaneous, close to the earth. Gatherings for religious purposes were not distinguished or distinguishable from neighborly gatherings, clubs, and other secular activities. Camping was part of the life of people who had journeyed into the wilderness by foot or covered wagon and who still might travel a day's journey or two to visit nearest neighbors. The camp meeting was a natural association of people for social and religious gratification in a big world in which life was often tedious and lonely.

It is important to remember that the early pioneers were starved for sociability—starved for the comfortable security of the herd, for the emotional warmth generated by the corporate sharing of a common fear. . . . There was a natural urge towards meeting together for religion perhaps, but also for gossip, for communal eating, and for promoting one's sense of solidarity and security. . . . Not only the zeal for righteousness but the longing for a spectacle motivated the crowds which rushed from preacher to preacher at a big camp meeting if it were whispered it was "more lively" at some other point.⁷

Nottingham says that this "early" revival is still a part of the American scene, living on, under similar cultural conditions, in remote mountainous regions of Kentucky and Tennessee. Geographical and social circumstances similar to those of pioneer days produce religious meetings reminiscent of the times and travels of

⁷ Elizabeth Nottingham, *Methodism and the Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), pp. 26 ff.

Francis Asbury. Today, however, newer holiness sects have fallen heir to the techniques of the earlier evangelical pioneers.⁸

As for the frontier in general, it experienced, as time went on, continuous modification. The forest and wilderness gave way to well-ordered farms. Towns and villages grew. Modified cultural circumstances were reflected in a modified mode of revival. The revival largely remained the accepted vehicle of conversion and religious expression. But it was more formalized now, more routinized. The emphasis was on method. Spontaneity was giving way to form and tradition.⁹

Following Nottingham's lead of thought we take the revival to be a reflection of certain rural cultural circumstances within which it spoke—and still speaks in varying localities and degrees—to the religious needs of men and women and their families. The modification of the frontier was and is a dynamic, ongoing process. Similarly, the modification of the revival was and is a dynamic, ongoing process. When the effectiveness of the revival was increasingly questioned in the early years of the twentieth century, very likely the questioning was done in varying localities and degrees, depending upon how purposefully the traditional method still spoke to the religious needs of men and women and their families within the framework of their cultural circumstances.

The Rising Urban Culture. During the latter half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, the United States experienced the rise of a new industrial economy. The accompanying modification of cultural patterns was profound. The nation shifted from a culture predominantly rural to a culture increasingly urban. As America shifted increasingly from farm economy to industrial economy, the American people changed increasingly and predominantly from farm dwellers to city dwellers.

Urban places varied in size, population, and influence. Significant within the developing urban pattern was the rise of the metropolitan area. The metropolitan area is an urban complex embracing a comparatively large geographical area, with a well-defined central

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 197 f.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 208 ff.

business district, a system of rapid inner transportation, industrial and commercial areas, residential areas, outlying shopping areas, and suburban residential and shopping districts economically dependent on the central city. It was toward a comparatively small number of such metropolitan systems that the population increasingly moved. In 1950 a comparatively small total of 168 metropolitan areas accounted for 56 per cent of the entire United States population.¹⁰

Change in Cultural Pattern. In the urban setting, basic patterns of living underwent drastic revision. Two areas of life were particularly altered: occupation and family. On the farm, occupation and family were, of economic and social necessity, integrated. In the city economic and social necessity separated occupation and family. Under the farm economy a man worked in company with his family to produce many of the basic commodities of life. In the city under a labor-wage system, a man worked apart from his family. He sold his services on a labor market and was subject to the fluctuating pressures of that market. Often he worked in one locality and lived in another. He brought home wages in dollars and cents which he and his family then spent on the consumers' market to avail themselves of necessary commodities and services. The basic economic function of the family was no longer seen as production. Rather it was seen as consumption of the goods and services produced by various units within the industrial economy. The family, which on the farm tended to be large in number of persons, in the city tended to be small. Sensitive to fluctuations in the labor-wage economy, the urban family tended toward increasing geographic mobility. Family life reflected the associational structure of urban society, for husband, wife, and children largely went individual ways to a variety of institutions to satisfy the necessities of physical existence, health, education, recreation, and religion.

This shift from rural to urban culture was gradual and infinitely complex. The statistical relocation of population from farm to city might be measured from an over-all point of view. But the

¹⁰ U. S. Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1953), pp. 16 f.

process of change in patterns of thought, work, worship, recreation, and family association could not be so readily perceived or gauged. Rate and manner of change varied from city to city, from neighborhood to neighborhood, from family to family, and from individual to individual. Rural influence continued to be felt in the cities in varying ways and degrees; sociologists studied the phenomenon of "rural survivals in urban life." By the same token, the influence of the urbanization process extended outward from the cities into the surrounding rural areas, particularly along the trade traffic routes leading from and to the growing metropolitan regions. The urbanization of cultural patterns was a dynamic process, working within the city in varying degrees and extending outward into the rural areas surrounding the city.

The Urban Evangelism Challenge. It was in the cities that the need for new methods of evangelism was first and chiefly felt.

When the churches first sought an answer to the spiritual challenge of the rising urban area, they largely followed the traditional evangelism pattern. The revival was transplanted to the city, where continued success was expected and was, indeed, for a time, experienced. Had not many of the greatest revivals, through the years, centered in the cities? New tabernacles were built for city revival; for a time their programs flourished. As, however, the pattern of city life became increasingly complex, the traditional methods were often found to be wanting. Crowds no longer flocked to the tabernacles. No longer was the announcement of a protracted meeting enough to insure a goodly crowd of believers and nonprofessors alike. No longer did waves of religious fervor pass from home to home. No longer did neighbor witness to neighbor the things of the Kingdom as they walked to the meeting with a Bible under their arms. Now neighbor scarcely knew neighbor, much less paid attention to habit of worship or manner of belief. Urban life was increasingly recognized as a different mode of existence. The churches were being forced to rethink their evangelism programs. "Radical changes . . . compel constant changes in the program of all enterprises. . . . Evangelism need not expect to be the exception."¹¹

¹¹ Charles R. Zahniser, *Casework Evangelism* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1927), p. 23.

III. *Antecedents of Visitation Evangelism*

The early decades of the twentieth century became a time of search and experimentation in the field of evangelism. As the necessity of dealing with people on a new, individualized basis became apparent, new methods of personal evangelism were proposed and tested. Some of these methods included points of technique or philosophy later embodied in the visitation plan. For example:

a. In 1905 Howard Johnston of the Young Men's Christian Association published his *Studies for Personal Workers*.¹² He sought to catalog the various types of prospects who might be encountered in personal evangelistic work and offered principles for an effective approach to each type of prospect. Visitation evangelism later stressed the importance of estimating the prospect's spiritual need and offering Christian faith as the answer to that need.

b. In 1910, John T. Stone published a volume of addresses given before the Young Men's Christian Association in Chicago, under the title, *Recruiting for Christ, Hand to Hand Methods with Men*.¹³ He reported on the work of a young men's evangelism club in Chicago, which held weekly luncheon meetings; then made evangelistic visits to the men of the downtown rooming and boarding house area. Assignments were made by card, and written reports were returned. Visitation evangelism later included the sharing of a common meal by workers as well as the card system of written assignments and reports.

c. In 1921, Ingram E. Bill, an advocate of the social gospel school of thought, published his *Constructive Evangelism*.¹⁴ He suggested a number of methods of evangelism, among them: school missions, shop missions, theater missions, and family group missions. Of special interest is his recommended use of pledge and commitment cards, a technique long in use in connection with revival evangelism and now carried over into the field of personal

¹² New York: International Committee of the Young Men's Christian Association, 1905.

¹³ New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910, pp. 221 ff.

¹⁴ Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1921.

evangelism. Visitation evangelism also strongly advocates the use of pledge and commitment cards.

d. In 1922 J. E. Conant published *Every Member Evangelism*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1922) pp. 184 ff. proposing a parish plan for evangelistic work that includes a community canvass, the use of a card-assignment system, and the preliminary instruction to visitors.¹⁵ Similar features with varied emphasis were recognizable in the visitation method.

Most of the techniques and points of philosophy which visitation evangelism ultimately employed are seen as having been variously in use prior to the appearance of this method. No direct or chronological relationship is necessarily implied. Their use appears to reflect the growing recognition of a changing missionary challenge and an increasing desire to adapt the method to meet this challenge.

IV. *The Influence of Business Method*

Significant also in the early years of the twentieth century was the expressed desire for personal evangelism techniques that would match in efficiency and effectiveness the methods of modern business.

Charles Goodell introduced this theme in his *Pastoral and Personal Evangelism*:

The layman knows that the personal touch is the secret of business. (This) is the age of the agent and the promoter and the commercial traveler. Seventy per cent of all the trade of our time is accomplished by personal solicitors.¹⁶

Stone (p. 46) observed:

. . . The effectiveness of [personal dealing] . . . has actually become the essential principle of business activity. It is the modern method in business as well as in political life.

¹⁵ Conant cites the successful use of a personal evangelism program by Rev. A. C. Archibald, of First Baptist Church, Lowell, Mass., between the years 1914 and 1917. Large membership increases had been realized, yet ". . . During this period no evangelist has been called in, and no special meetings have been held, the great ingathering resulting as far as human agencies are concerned from the enlisting of the members of the church in the work of definite, personal evangelism." (p. 217)

Archibald later became one of the influential proponents of visitation evangelism.

¹⁶ New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1907, pp. 74 f.

Hannan (p. 22) likewise noted:

Every good business house has a policy to reach a constituency, to handle goods, to expand the business and to make profits. The church which is doing, or supposed to be doing, business for God, ought to have as much sagacity and enterprise in religion, extending the Kingdom, getting new members, building up old ones, and helping new and old, as the business houses conducted by the members of the same churches have.

Conant (pp. 43 f.) pleaded:

. . . Stop and think a minute. No wholesale house could ever be run on such a program, and no more can the Church of the living God! Suppose it should be considered the duty of the sales manager . . . to go out and do all the selling . . . while the salesmen support him by their encouragement and their faithful attendance on his weekly lectures on the quality and value of their goods. . . . How long do you think that house would last? . . . The fact that the Church has not gone to the wall for good on such a program is certain proof that it is a divine institution.

The theme recurs throughout much of the evangelistic literature of the period. The business world is considered to be ahead of the church in its techniques. Such expressions as "age of the agent" and "modern method" denote the realization of a change of circumstance. Toward this change, it is felt, business has proved more sensitive and flexible than has the church. Visitation evangelism borrowed the techniques of the sales meeting and sales approach. It stresses businesslike system and efficiency in the utilization of lay strength for evangelistic purposes.

In such a period of change, searching, and experimentation visitation evangelism came into being.

(To be continued)

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