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Book Review: Graceful Evangelism: Christian Witness in a Complex World by Frances S. Adeney

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Frances S. Adeney, *Graceful Evangelism: Christian Witness in a Complex World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010, 240 pp., \$21.99.

Reviewed by Laurie Fortunak Nichols, Editorial Coordinator, Billy Graham Center at Wheaton, College; Managing Editor/Book Review Editor, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*

Appropriately quoting theologian and ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr that “we are in history as a fish is in water” (118), author Frances Adeney seeks to present a case for “graceful evangelism,” which honors both the people we are seeking to reach and those of other Christian backgrounds in a complex, ever-changing world. Adeney seeks to help us step out of our worldview to get a wider vision of what evangelism looks like across denominational lines.

Currently as William A. Benfield Jr. Professor of Evangelism and Global Mission at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Adeney was also on mission assignment from 1991 to 1996 with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Indonesia. She weaves in her personal stories—as well as others from mainline, Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant traditions, to build a case for an evangelism that respects a variety of approaches and includes being in touch with the needs of the communities in which God has placed us.

Graceful Evangelism is divided into four parts: part one: Where Did We Come From?, part two: Where Are We Now?, part three: Where Are We Going?, and part four: Can We Craft a Graceful Evangelism? Part one is divided into four chapters, each addressing specific issues related to evangelism historically. Chapter one asks, “What has evangelism looked like historically?” Adeney explores common definitions of evangelism across the theological spectrum, as well as how and why they developed. She states, “One’s background, context, and theology may predispose one to define evangelism as proclamation, witness, seeking justice, social service, making disciples, presence, or worship. . . . Those definitions need not be mutually exclusive but can build upon one another collaboratively” (13). Herein lies the heart of Adeney’s argument—that our individual presuppositions as to what the “E” word is—needs to be challenged so as to more effectively woo others into the kingdom and grow our own selves in the process. In chapter two, Adeney looks at five models of evangelism found in the Bible (the Great Commission, Jesus as model, daily living, speaking of hope, and relieving expression) and how each displays God’s love in word and deed. Chapter three examines additional patterns of evangelism historically, beginning with Jesus, Paul, and the early church fathers, and moving through the Monastics, the Reformers,

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the Age of Reason, the Great Awakenings, etc., and concluding with twentieth century Protestantism. Chapter four backtracks to the nineteenth century Western missionary movement, which included such forms of evangelism as proclamation, church planting, education, medical work, and alleviating poverty. Here Adeney also discusses the helpful impact of this movement, including a knowledge and interest in other religions and the birth of the ecumenical movement.

Part two addresses the current landscape of evangelism throughout the various Christian traditions. “Many in the contemporary United States believe Christian evangelism . . . to be obsolete or incompatible with religious tolerance,” (56) Adeney writes in chapter five. She continues on to discuss the pros and cons of religious pluralism, a relative notion of truth, a fundamentalist/modernist controversy that divides the church, postcolonial critiques of Western Christian missions, and a mishandling of evangelism by charlatans. Chapter six details nine current mission trends, including a shift in authority and church growth, the growth of nondenominational missions, the growth of national church leadership, and more. She concludes, “There is no one method for Christian evangelism and mission” (75). Chapter seven provides a good synopsis of contemporary theologies of evangelism. Although not exhaustive, the seven presented give the reader a good starting point for understanding how evangelism can look different in various contexts. These include discipleship in context, fulfilling needs, community practices, transforming worldview, prophetic preaching, faith sharing, and church planting.

Part three addresses the future and is the most practical of the sections, helping readers to understand what graceful evangelism looks like as they confront Christians and people of other faiths going about the work of the kingdom in vastly different ways. This section examines abundant life (chapter eight, which includes trying to understand the world, thrive in our relationships, and know God [102]), developing a mission statement for evangelism (chapter nine), and understanding our changing context (chapter ten). Although not all Christian communities are involved in all methods of evangelism, all focus on three essential themes: our relationship with God, the necessity of serving the poor, and a vibrant fellowship surrounding worship (105).

Part four concludes by helping us move beyond our “evangelism wars” and toward “developing theologies and methods of evangelism that address contemporary realities with a sensitivity to tradition while remaining true to the biblical models” (xvi). By far the most helpful chapter in the book is chapter fourteen, in which Adeney details a “spiral of knowledge acquisition” (162). She presents six steps that can help us to interact with our changing contexts in a way

Nichols: Book Review: Graceful Evangelism: Christian Witness in a Complex that is honoring to all parties and moves us to a more secure place in our own faith and evangelistic calling. These steps include acknowledging experience, bracketing convictions, encountering the strange situation with openness, evaluating the strange culture, fusion of horizons, and developing new practices. Adeney's examples from her own time in Indonesia prove quite helpful in explaining this spiral. The book concludes with a look at "giftive mission" and seven practices (and people) that "further the gospel through the witness of grace and love toward others" (175).

Interactive questions and group dialogue sprinkled throughout the book, along with an appendix to help congregations take an historical look at evangelism in their own church, make this resource applicable for small group study and broader church Sunday school classes.

Graceful Evangelism is an excellent overview of a holistic view of evangelism—sharing God's love in word and deed—from an ecumenical landscape. The book covers much territory—historically, socially, denominationally—and the 240 pages leave the reader wanting more. This concise synopsis is perhaps its greatest asset and its biggest downfall. Many chapters are chock full of models and metaphors, which could easily be expanded. As a guide to the Western missionary movement and its view of evangelism, it has to be read as such, for Adeney only rarely touches upon evangelism in a more global context.

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Today's relativistic world demands the kind of insight Adeney demonstrates. It demands that we listen and learn from those around us that we not only proclaim Jesus as Lord, but live as though we believe Jesus is Savior. Being a Christian today demands that we see the kingdom as now and yet to come—that we look on those we meet as both spiritual and physical beings. To my unease, there are movements where social justice is the rage but proclamation is abandoned. I find great joy in that Adeney seeks to help us step into the social while not denying the verbal. May we be humble and receptive as we live out the "E" word in our wonderfully changing world.

Collin Hansen and John Woodbridge, *A God-Sized Vision: Revival Stories that Stretch and Stir*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010, 194 pp., \$16.99.

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