

Stone, Bryan. *Evangelism after Pluralism: The Ethics of Christian Witness*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018. 151 pp.

Bryan Stone's *Evangelism after Pluralism* is the clear sequel to his earlier *Evangelism after Christendom*. Both texts define evangelism as a form of ethics, traveling down the same postliberal path blazed by scholars such as Hauerwas and Yoder.

In his new book, Stone doubles down on his original approach to evangelism, using postliberal theory to deconstruct the "unities" that political powers (what Stone denominates "empires"), the marketplace, and other institutions arising out of Modernity have used to entrap people's thinking. These unities cause people to ignore or simplify the "pluralisms" they encounter, which require more nuanced and careful analysis. These unities are deployed in such a way that allows those who are in power to remain unchallenged by people beginning to have more sophisticated views of how the world works (11-12).

For example, Stone points to how both empires and the marketplace collapse the pluralism of various religions by convincing people that there is a single concept called "religion." Ignoring the variety of distinctive beliefs and practices held by these religions, this broad, unified concept of religion is something that both empires and the marketplace can manipulate. Empires can do this by claiming to be the true object of loyalty while making use of religious individuals as chaplains to their greater, militaristic causes (33). The marketplace can winnow down religions to interchangeable brand names and commodify them as inoffensive talismans (88).

Stone's antidote to this broken way of thinking is for the church to evangelize those whose imaginations are ensnared by these false unities. To practice evangelism is for the church to be a visible community that lives according to an alternative ethics than what the empires and marketplace prescribe. These ethics demonstrate that it is possible for people to live in abundance, sharing, reconciliation, and forgiveness (8), even as they recognize and honor the pluralisms surrounding them.

Stone argues that this sort of ethical living will be beautiful, attracting people to it. This, he claims, should replace the more common approach to evangelism, which has allowed itself to be defined by the unities of empires and the marketplace. The common approach is to compete for people's loyalty, seeking to draw people away from what they already believe, replacing it with a commitment to the beliefs and practices endorsed by the evangelist (17). This competition, per Stone, runs afoul of the very logic of the gospel. The gospel is pacifist to the core, and so should

never compete. Instead, it should only attract people through its beauty and so sanctify their imaginations and thoughts so that they recognize the fullness of God's grace in the midst of plurality (133).

The strength of *Evangelism after Pluralism* is in how Stone offers a thought-provoking critique of how Christians have allowed their thinking to be hijacked by Modernity along with the rest of Western culture. By forcing us to look at our assumptions about what the nature of the church is and how the church relates to social structures, such as the military, Stone can awaken us to some unexpected insights about how we practice evangelism. Chief among these is the assumption that evangelism requires fighting for people to recognize the Christian faith when the beauty and power of the gospel allows the goodness of its message to transcend the competition for people's minds and hearts promoted by secular modernism. This is reminiscent of C.S. Lewis' comment in the prologue to *The Screwtape Letters* reminding readers that spiritual warfare is not between two evenly balanced sides, but between a far more powerful God and a far less powerful evil.

However, the strength of Stone's writing stops with these critiques. This is because he falls into the same trap that most postliberals do, desiring to create such a beautiful alternative community that they cannot describe the church in a concrete and practicable way. Stone acknowledges as much, stating that his brief description of Christian communities who match his ideal is "lacking...in detail" (102). Consequently, those looking for firm recommendations on how to live according to this alternative way will be disappointed with Stone's book.

More concerning are the standard blind spots of postliberalism that Stone ports into his work. One of these is the anemic definition of salvation. For Stone, salvation is participation in the beautiful community of the church (43). Given the lack of definition around what this community actually looks like, though, and the intentional lack of reference to any sort of eternal glory, this view of salvation falls short of the biblical notions of Paradise. Even if Stone wanted to read these passages as metaphorical, they still would point to a situation in which God overrules all the oppressive and evil forces of the world. Grounding his depiction of the church in this biblical vision would make for a much stronger, more compelling, and biblically accurate depiction of what salvation entails. It would also give his readers hope that Christians have something more to look forward to beyond just living as martyrs (125) because God will intervene to set all right in the end.

Along the same lines, Stone tends to create his own unities in the midst of the pluralism he tries to defend and protect. One of these is to create the unity of the “empire.” In doing this, he ignores the vast complexity and plurality within nation-states and national governments. For example, while the United States Federal Government maintains a massive military, it also employs vast numbers of people to promote diplomacy and international development through the State Department. It further pays enormous sums of money into the United Nations and the World Bank to help improve the basic standard of living around the globe. Both of these organizations can be tools of the market and can be militaristic, but both also do a vast amount of good for the poorest of the poor throughout the world. Stone needs to take a page from his own critique and consider how he may find beauty in the pluralism of empires, not roundly condemn them in totality.

Part of the reason that Stone struggles here is because he relies on ethicists to interpret history for him. Rather than looking at the work of actual historians, who tend to be much more nuanced in their approach to nations and governments, he reads the gloss of history provided by the ethicists that espouse the same postliberal view that he does. The result is a reinforcing cycle of postliberal data, rather than a more accurate depiction of his subjects.

Stone is more successful in avoiding placing a unity over the pluralism of religions. Turning to his own Wesleyan tradition, he deploys the idea of prevenient grace to suggest how Christians can see all people from all religious traditions as loved by God and capable of demonstrating beauty without collapsing all their various traditions into being “anonymous Christians” (112-114). This is fine as far as it goes. However, Stone goes off the rails in his next move, which is to suggest that this prevenient grace means that Christians need not engage people of other faiths beyond living as a beautiful church community and humbly trying to learn from them. Gospel proclamation, and even interfaith dialogue is proscribed as being competitive and, therefore, sub-Christian (114-116).

Wesleyan theology understands God’s grace as God’s means of empowering people into holiness. More than this, it insists on Jesus Christ being the unique Way that God has offered for people to live into that holiness. Stone ignores these theological emphases, leaving his discussion only at the point of prevenient grace. In doing this, Stone shows that what he is presenting as Wesleyan theology is actually process theology. Certainly, process theology often draws heavily out of the Wesleyan tradition, but it does so by truncating Wesley’s soteriology to allow for a

kind of universalism that Wesley did not. Wesley acknowledged that all were loved and selected for salvation, but he also demanded that people use their agency to accept this grace through Jesus Christ and live holy lives. This undercuts Stone's effort to marshal Wesley as the basis for a pluralism of religions in a way that remains agnostic as to whether those religions can be salvific.

Stone offers a solid apologetic for how to approach evangelism from the perspective of a postliberal ethicist. Those who lean in this direction already will find this a refreshing approach to evangelism. For those who are not convinced of this perspective, his writing will offer some rich food for thought, however it will likely not persuade them away from more traditional approaches to holistic evangelism. For all readers, it will likely present itself as lacking enough specifics to put into practice. For this reason, the book is best used in a doctoral level evangelism course where students are already familiar with postliberalism and where they are more concerned with learning about evangelism from a wide variety of lenses instead of looking to find immediate practicability from what they read.