

Book Review

Green, Michael. *Evangelism: Learning from the Past*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023, 151 pages. ISBN 9780802883438

By Susan Booth, PhD

Michael Green (1930-2019) was educated at Exeter College, Oxford, and Queens' College, Cambridge. Graced with an exceptional ability to balance scholarship and praxis, Green was an academic, writer, Anglican priest, and fervent evangelist. His long and varied career included stints as a lecturer and principal at theological colleges, a parish rector in Oxford (1975-1987), Professor of Evangelism at Regent College, Vancouver (1987-1992), Advisor on Evangelism to the Archbishop of Canterbury (1992-1996), and even in retirement, a co-rector in Raleigh, North Carolina (2005-2007). Green authored more than fifty books, including the enduring classic, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, (1970; rev. ed. Eerdmans, 2004).

These notable achievements were eclipsed by the way Green lived. In the announcement of his death, former Regent College President Jeff Greenman paid tribute to the beloved professor: "Michael Green was an unforgettable, exuberant, and contagious Christian." In his own words, Green identified "the great passion of [his] life" as sharing the good news of the gospel with others (xiii). Although Green finished writing the manuscript for this present volume before his death, *Evangelism: Learning from the Past* was published posthumously.

Green's plan for the book is "to trace some of the path from Jesus to the present day and to highlight some of the most effective evangelists" (xiii). Although the bold scope of such a plan could result in a multivolume work, Green intentionally pared down his sampling to a few historical examples in eleven historical periods with a specific focus on the evangelical tradition as it unfolded in Britain (xiv). The result is a concise overview—only 138 pages—and an analysis of salient features, methods, and takeaways from each of these periods that help today's believers engage in effective evangelism. Every chapter concludes with several reflection questions that lead readers to cross the bridge from knowledge to application.

For example, Chapter 1, "*Evangelism, Jesus Style*," begins with the foundational statement: "Jesus of Nazareth is God's good news in person" (1). In other words, Jesus not only proclaimed that the kingdom of God with unparalleled authority; he embodied it—through his miraculous deeds, compassion, justice, love, and sacrificial death. Green lists ten characteristics of Jesus's style of evangelism that today's disciples should emulate: confidence, clear vision, awareness of spiritual battle, public engagement, fearless proclamation, intentional conversations, training

others, readiness to debate, spiritual authority, and a passion to do God's will. Reflective questions include asking readers if they seek to introduce individuals to Christ in personal conversations and whether their lives commend the gospel.

In Chapter 2 Green condenses his voluminous *Evangelism and the Early Church* (474 pages) to four “astonishing” elements: (1) The message of the early church concentrated on Jesus; (2) their encounters with Christ utterly transformed them; (3) they experienced “a complete and exclusive change of allegiance” (p 10); and (4) these untrained lay evangelists exhibited power and courage produced by the indwelling Spirit of God. Green also delineates the appeal of the gospel even in the face of opposition on several fronts. Their methods included bold proclamation in synagogues and home meetings, personal conversation and testimony, evangelistic literature, and missionary journeys. He highlights two key principles that resulted in the incredible spread of Christianity. Filled with the Spirit, these early believers worked outwards from “hot” centers like Jerusalem, Antioch, and Ephesus; and they considered every member an informal missionary, spreading “a living, burning faith” that resulted in Christian communities (21-22).

Many of these same features continued in “*Evangelism in the Second to Fourth Centuries*,” but Green underscores the apologetical significance of the transformed Christian life—even in the face of persecution—and the development of persuasive proclamation that sought to make the gospel intelligible, true, and wholesome. Green also notes that demonstrations of divine power in exorcisms and healings had an incredible impact on the spread of the gospel.

The massive shift in Christian history that began with Constantine's Edict of Toleration (AD 313) is evident in the title of Chapter 4: “*Nominalism, Bishops, and Monasteries*.” Still, Green observes that the work of evangelism continued in three primary ways: the lay witness of ordinary Christians; a handful of faithful bishops like Ambrose, Augustine, and John Chrysostom; and monastic communities established with an aim of evangelizing people in the surrounding areas.

Chapter 5 introduces some unique, vibrant developments of “*Celtic Evangelism*.” Green points to the understanding of church as a flexible movement rather than institution; a rich lay community that led to belonging before believing; and the culturally relevant incorporation of the Irish love of song, poetry, imagination, and nature.

Although Green acknowledges in Chapter 6 many factors that contributed to the decline of evangelism in the medieval period, he cites three courageous examples who swam against the prevailing current of the corrupted Roman Catholic Church: Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe, and Jan Hus. Their desire to reform the church, their study of the Scriptures, and their fearless preaching set the stage for the coming Reformation.

In Chapter 7 Green looks at many achievements of the great Reformers. He highlights Martin Luther's rediscovery of the biblical truth that salvation comes not by good deeds or self-mortification, but by faith in God's grace. Green strongly dispels the "myth about Calvin's disinterest in evangelism," citing his encouragement of missionary work across Europe and how eighty-eight missionaries sent to his native France resulted in two-million French Calvinists or "Huguenots" (75). He also outlines the work of Reformers in Britain like William Tyndale and Thomas Cranmer.

Once the renewed spiritual life of the Reformation waned in Britain, Green explains in Chapter 8 how God fanned the spiritual flames of revival through the ministries of brothers John and Charles Wesley and George Whitfield. This era saw a renewed emphasis on the new birth and the Holy Spirit's work and power. It also saw a willingness to try new methods: open-air preaching, music, organization, and class meetings on discipleship.

In Chapter 9 Green considers four initiatives of the eighteenth and nineteenth century that are relevant to today's evangelism. Even as the revivals of the previous era sputtered out, some clergymen and lay people laboured to spread the gospel. For example, the anti-slavery work of William Wilberforce and the social initiatives of the Clapham Sect "changed the face of England in their day" (102).

Chapter 10 recounts "*The Welsh Revival*" of 1904-1905. Green discusses the historical backdrop of Evan Roberts, his message, the revival, and its opposition. He details both weaknesses and strengths of the remarkable movement and draws important lessons for modern evangelists, including extended prayer as preparation for revival, and the use of singing, testimonies, prayers. He also observes that academic theological training alone does not equip a preacher; God's sovereign work depends on an outpouring of his Spirit.

The last period Green surveys is "*Crusade Evangelism*" in Chapter 11. Building on Charles Finney's methods, Dwight L. Moody conducted massive evangelistic crusade meetings in both the US and Britain, over his lifetime drawing estimates of one hundred million participants and a million souls saved (126-27). Moody's innovations included organizing a steering committee made of evangelical churches to train ushers, choir members, and inquiry room volunteers. Billy Graham later took crusade evangelism to the world, conducting more than four hundred crusades across all five continents. Graham also used technological advancements of film, radio, and print media to proclaim the gospel globally, and under his influence the Lausanne Congress in 1974 "spawned massively increased outreach to many parts of the world" (135).

In the final chapter, Green shares personal reflections on his own decades-long experience of evangelism. Providentially, Green was the president of the Oxford University Christian Union that extended an invitation to young Billy

Graham to lead his first evangelistic crusade in England in 1952. Green describes the impact on the country as “enormous” (140). Detecting a subsequent shift toward skepticism in the 1960s, Green saw an increasing need to address the culture through apologetics, and so he began writing books that were often translated in other languages.

In the 1970s, Green and others recognized the importance of worship and creativity in evangelism, and so they adopted imaginative drama, testimony, and even Israeli-style dance groups. As part of the charismatic movement that swept through England, his regular ministry—and sometimes evangelism—incorporated tongues, prophecies, healing, and deliverance ministry. Green annually led hundreds of students on evangelistic missions that creatively engaged crowds and offered opportunities for personal evangelism. Green led his church to open their homes to “Agnostics Anonymous” groups of unbelievers, feeding them, answering their objections to the faith, and gathering new believers into “Beginner’s Groups.” As secularism and political correctness increased in the 1990s, Green observes an even greater need for Christian apologetics, but he argues “[i]t should be the handmaid to evangelism, the stepping stone to faith” (146).

At age eighty-eight, Green concludes his final book with a list of “Essentials If We Are to Be Heard.” He challenges modern evangelists to be well informed on the tenets of Islam, homosexual and transgender issues, but he also espouses an apologetics that speaks not only to the mind, but also to “issues of the heart—loneliness, identity, love and values” (148). The most critical apologetic, however, is a lifestyle that demonstrates love in a broken society. Genuine love and transcendent worship draw people, as do courage and winsome passion. Green commends effective evangelism that includes creativity that resonates with the culture and utilizes the global possibilities of the internet. He also reminds readers that church-planting has proven the most effective way of spreading the gospel across the world. Not surprisingly, Green saves his own favourite method for last—personal evangelism: simply sharing the good news of Jesus with others.

Evangelism: Learning from the Past meets the author’s objective of tracing “some of the path from Jesus to the present day” and highlighting “some of the most effective evangelists” (xiii). By design, the path ends in the author’s native land of Britain, but the journey begins from Jerusalem and winds through Europe over the centuries. This trim book is therefore an excellent introduction to the history of evangelism; it provides the invaluable perspective that God himself oversees and preserves the spread of his gospel across the globe through every generation.

The book’s brevity and readability, however, belie its depth. It quickly becomes apparent that this volume is the summation of a lifetime of research and reflection on an important subject. Green’s condensed ruminations result in multiple lists of features, characteristics, and methods in every chapter. The lists can become

a bit repetitive or tedious if one rushes through them. Although the book can be read in just a few sittings, that would defeat its purpose. Clearly, the author desires that the reader assess his/her own life in view of these historical figures who met the challenges of sharing Jesus in their generation. Perhaps the best way to appropriate the book would therefore be to read one chapter at a time and discuss the questions with others.

The final chapter demonstrates that Green has done this same hard work himself. He has carefully observed those who have gone before and put those lessons into practice. As readers hear echoes of what Green himself learned from the past, they can compile yet another list, which would include the importance of training others, apologetics, evangelistic literature, evidence of a transformed life, culturally relevant creativity, the appeal of belonging to community, a willingness to try new methods and technologies, and above all, a dependence on the Holy Spirit.

Although the reader may not completely agree with Green on every method or theological point, one cannot help but admire his lifelong commitment to sharing the good news of Jesus. Green stood on the shoulders of those who went before him; his final book challenges readers do the same as they “reflect on the past and resolve to take the good news of Jesus into future passionate outreach” (xiv). Michael Otis’s brief *Afterword* lists several current trends that will undoubtedly shape the path forward.

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Susan Booth, review of *Missional Community Engagement: Outreach to the Need and Newcomers*,” Michael Green, Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research, www.nimer.ca, (May 23, 2025).