

**BOOK REVIEW**

## **Osmer, Richard R. 2021. *The Invitation: A Theology of Evangelism***

Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.  
ISBN: 9780802876225

**Reviewed by David Reissmann**

Evangelism and evangelization have been largely neglected in Western academic theology. This has left a research gap that spans the discussions and curricula of many theological faculties and seminaries in the so-called “Western” world. This gap extends to current publications in areas such as practical theology and systematic theology. Meanwhile, there is a dynamic global discourse on this topic, which is reflected primarily in ecclesial and ecumenical documents.

Richard Osmer’s book bridges these and several other gaps in a way that is probably unique to date. It is unique in that it is less an exploration of this global discourse or a historical discussion of these ecclesial and ecumenical documents. Rather, the book offers what one might call a “triadic conversation” between Scripture, dogmatic theology (almost exclusively Karl Barth’s) and case studies. This serves the main purpose of the book, which is to support new thinking about evangelism that goes beyond the previously dominant particular way of thinking about evangelism, which Osmer calls *evangelism as conversionism* (8). “The new evangelization” then, as Osmer calls it, is a reimagining of evangelism in terms of Reformation theology and implies the transformation of evangelistic practice, especially in that it represents a fundamental shift in soteriology – from being saved by conversion on the basis of human choice to affirmation that we are saved *in toto* by Jesus Christ who takes our place in justifying and sanctifying us before God (193). In terms of terminology, this shift is demonstrated by Osmer using “evangelization” instead of “evangelism”. But he sees this shift as more than just a shift in terminology. Rather, it is part of a broader transformation of the Church from an established part of Western culture to a missional community.

The various parts of the book roughly follow what I have called the “triadic conversation”: The introduction outlines the idea of evangelism as an invitation. It is followed by the first part of the book and develops the basic principles of evangelism in dialogue with Scripture. By reflecting on case studies, some basic questions are first extracted, such as “What is the gospel?” or “How do we invite people to respond to the gospel?” Answers to these questions are sought using theological guidelines from the Apostle Paul. The Gospel according to Mark and the Gospel according to John then serve to lay important biblical foundations on the topic of evangelization based on the different thematic focuses of these authors.

The second part of the book locates evangelism in dialogue with Karl Barth. Osmer offers in this part much more than a recapitulation of some important passages in Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*. He develops an independent interpretation of Barth that demonstrates detailed knowledge of the most current Barth research and knows how to deal with the blindspots of other current theological traditions. This detailed dialogue with Karl Barth also provides well-founded impulses for the debates in missiology, in which Barth has already been widely discussed.

Here – and thus also to answer the question of what is actually new about the “new evangelization” – Osmer gains his own point of view. Instead of thinking within the old framework of conversionism, Osmer wants to look with Barth through a “lens of witness”. Instead of trying to save people, the Church’s role is to serve as a witness and to point beyond itself to Christ. This is the mission of the Church. Osmer gains this understanding of the Church as a witness through an intensive theological discussion of salvation and sanctification. Both election and reconciliation as the fulfilment of election are, with Barth, located entirely in the forensic atonement “in Christ”. *De iure* sanctification, and thus also conversion, takes place *de facto* through the Holy Spirit. This is precisely where the implications for the “new evangelization” lie: By taking (1) the Chalcedonian pattern of the unity and yet distinction of Christ and his Church, (2) the Church as witness and (3) the justifying, sanctifying and electing work of Christ in our place seriously, human agency is (4) decentred from the central role it often occupies in the ministry of evangelism of the Church. Instead, it places our reliance on the Spirit through prayer more at the centre, so that the guidance of the Spirit plays a much larger role as the mediator of communion than it often does in the “old” model of evangelism.

This rich dogmatic discussion leads into the third part of the book and back to a practical-theological discussion of evangelistic practice. The discussion of this is based on the already mentioned understanding of soteriological objectivism and the broader transformation of the Church from an established part of Western

culture to a missional community. In this final part of the book, Osmer takes up the initial definition that he presented in the introduction – that evangelism is the invitation to respond to the gospel, the good news of God’s salvation of the world in Jesus Christ, which is offered to others as part of the witness of the Church under the guidance and persuasive power of the Holy Spirit – and completes it through numerous “guidelines” that emerged in tandem with the insights of the Apostle Paul, the Gospels according to Mark and John, as well as through the dogmatics of Karl Barth. For example, Osmer emphasizes in his guidelines that it is important for the new evangelization to recognize not only significant moments of change but also longer processes of coming to trust in Jesus’ call. It is also less the individual than the congregation that is the first witness to the gospel. Evangelization then develops not only a variety of ways of sharing the gospel, it also involves entering into the pain and suffering of other people as well as celebrating the glory of God and God’s beauty. More could be said about these guidelines – about church planting, focusing on children’s experience, beginning with God’s Yes, helping Christians hear the gospel again and again, good leadership – but it all serves the vision of a broader transformation of congregations becoming missional communities. Ultimately, this reflects the book’s normative commitment to practical theology and concrete congregations, which grows from the roots of Osmer’s theology in the *Church Dogmatics* of Karl Barth.

The last chapter of the book outlines in more detail what looking at evangelization through the lens of practical theology means, especially to teach evangelization. Here Osmer makes his case for case studies as his methodological tool of choice, and he provides specific insights and materials from his own teaching experience. The materials are prepared in such a way that they can be easily adapted for one’s own teaching or even adopted directly. Case studies, Osmer argues, give students the opportunity to think about problems they may face when they begin work in the future. They also help students learn the importance of attending to the particularities of each case, which is the prerequisite of learning to contextualize. And they also learn a lot about themselves, their personality, gifts, history and how to develop their own point of view out of this. After all, practical theology ought to bring practice into the classroom and put knowing in relation to doing, thus turning theology into a lived theology.

Whether the book will develop enough argumentative power to advance the case of evangelization in Western academic theology and cement the issue in their debates remains uncertain. To achieve this, it must reveal the blindspots of the powerful alternatives in the discourse and illuminate their contingencies on the basis of the new evangelization. But Osmer does so and reveals some contingencies of the old

paradigm of evangelism as conversionism in this book. The rich biblical and theological material is a milestone on the Church's path towards missional communities. The fact that Osmer, as a practical theologian, gives this topic a place in practical theology is a process that is, not entirely but almost, unique, in terms of the field of practical theology.

The final pages of the book are devoted to an exploration of the relationship between Practical Theology and Karl Barth. This is where the discussion moves beyond the core topic of the book to a general discussion of the foundations of practical theology. While this part is somewhat disconnected from the rest of the book, this move from the concrete to the general not only concretizes Osmer's point of view and methodological commitments, which, as is good scientific practice, he does not hide behind cloudy formulations. It also takes the topic deeper than an awareness and analysis of context and to the Word of God in its threefold form (God revealed through Jesus Christ, Scripture, and the proclamation of the Church) as prerequisite of ultimately resisting all forms of systematization, including the formulation of a practical programme.

In any case, the combination of biblical anchoring and profound dogmatic discussion with practical theological reflection and embedding in concrete case studies is a ray of hope from the field of practical theology. It fits into the framework of a small but fine renaissance of exactly this kind of working method, which is also becoming evident in other places of theological work where the theologically mostly dry wells of mere correlational approaches to theology fail to nourish and convince. The subject matter of theology must, as Karl Barth argued, determine the methods appropriate to its investigation. For anyone who can agree, the book offers some of the best theological material on evangelization that I know of. For those who disagree, the book still contains a number of fine arguments to engage with. In any case, it will help to rethink the currently prevailing ideas and concepts about evangelism and evangelization.

## About the author

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