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# Faithful Educators: Evangelism in Public Schools

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**Faithful Educators:**  
**Evangelism in Public Schools**

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## **Faithful Educators: Evangelism in Public Schools**

### **Abstract**

Evangelicals serving in public schools share a religious mandate with fellow Evangelicals to spread the gospel. That mandate must coexist with role-based professional obligations to students, staff, and the school community. In this paper, evangelizing in public schools by teachers and administrators is explored with emphasis given to evangelistic instincts rooted in religious socialization. Christian educators generally seek to offer a Christian witness within the boundaries of the law and there is evidence that most Evangelical educators avoid overt proselytizing, however counterexamples are plentiful. An analytical frame is proposed that describes common approaches to evangelism in public schools and points to important questions concerning church-based instruction in this aspect of practical theology.



## **Faithful Educators: Evangelism in Public Schools**

### **Introduction**

The task of Christians serving in public schools “is not (to be) an evangelist or even a missionary,” but rather to be “‘missional,’ in that you live out the truth of the gospel where you are and reveal both the kingdom and heart of Jesus,” according to Donovan Graham (2011, p. 59), Director of the Center for Teacher Renewal, an organization for Christian teachers in public education. Evangelical Christians have a mandate to share the “Good News”—the gospel—in obedience to Jesus’ instruction to his followers (Matthew 28:18–20). That “Great Commission” mandate extends to all realms of life, including work. For Evangelicals serving in public schools, evangelism must coexist with role-based professional obligations to students, staff, and the school community. Evangelicals who aspire to be faithful to both the Great Commission and their duties as public school educators often struggle to successfully distinguish between what Graham termed “missionary” and “missional.” In this essay, I offer an analytical frame describing approaches Evangelical educators employ in public schools in response to the Great Commission in order to promote understanding of this aspect of practical theology.

Research on Evangelical Christians has been plagued by differing criteria used to identify the population of study. Denominational affiliation, self-identification, and beliefs are typically employed (Hackett & Lindsay, 2008). For the purposes of this paper, a range of definitions were included, due to the limited research available on the topic.

Educator preparation programs rarely offer any formal guidance that relates to the integration of faith and work. Programs at Christian colleges and universities generally encourage Christians to live out their faith and be a witness within the boundaries of the

law. Educators are challenged to help students flourish, practice an ethic of care fueled by the love of God, teach and model Godly values and morals, and pray for their students (Eckert, 2012; Graham, 2011; Van Brummelen, 2009). There is evidence that many Evangelical educators follow this guidance and avoid overt proselytizing. A common metaphor used by Christian teachers to describe this approach is “planting seeds” of interest in Christianity through the relationships with students and others. One teacher described this form of witnessing:

My key thought is that God places the students he wants me to pray for in my classes. I continue to pray for these students, long after they have left my class, that they may accept Christ and learn and grow in him. I consider myself as a planter of seeds or preparer of soil for the seed of Christianity. (Baurain, 2012, p. 326)

Practices in the field, however, vary widely among Christians, and context is a powerful factor. It is not unusual, for instance, for the faith identity of Christian educators to remain hidden. In schools and districts where the cultural expectation is that religion is personal and private, and especially where there is a stigma attached to an Evangelical identity, the risks of disclosure can be great (Ragins, 2008). Many Christian educators in such settings err on the side of caution. On the other hand, communities where a collective Christian religious identity “provides group members with a shared psychological field, shared cognitive representations of themselves, their own identity, and the objective world in the form of shared social norms of fact and value” (Turner & Oakes, 1986, p. 250), the stigma shifts to those who do not embrace prevailing Evangelical expressions of faith. Gilbert (2008) provided a fictionalized insider narrative of just such an experience as a

science teacher in her rural, Bible-Belt hometown. Her depiction included a myriad of overtly Christian elements that were a regular part of the school life of staff and students.

Educator proselytizing often takes place in communities with a collective Christian religious identity where actions are in harmony with local religious sensibilities. For example, a South Carolina middle school principal held a mandatory assembly that featured a Christian rapper and a youth evangelist. The event, held during the regular school day in the gymnasium, ended with an “alter call” that challenged Christian students to re-dedicate their lives and non-Christian students to accept Jesus Christ as savior by coming out of the bleachers and filling out commitment cards. News reports quoted the principal as saying, “I’m tired of being a hypocrite and I’m tired of playing the game ... I want these kids to know that the eternal life is real. And I don’t care what happens to me, they’re going to hear it today” (Bindewald & Rosenblith, 2013, p. 305). In a video posted on YouTube, the Christian rap artist who performed at the assembly boasted, “324 kids at this school have made a decision for Jesus Christ” (p. 306). Tellingly, local support for the principal was widespread and vocal. The case received media attention only because an aggrieved family contacted a national organization for assistance. Without the complaint, the incident would not have been newsworthy.

Media attention is more commonly drawn to incidents of teacher proselytizing in religiously non-homogeneous settings. One example is a report concerning a classroom teacher in the Bronx, New York. A moment of silence conducted at her elementary school in honor of a student that had drowned prompted questions from her students about the afterlife. The discussion led to the teacher asking students if they had accepted Jesus as their savior. She invited those who had not to do so with her guidance. The *New York*

*Times* (Hernandez, 1998) reported the teacher's amazement at the furor she caused: "All I did was console my students .... I answered my students' questions and they have treated me worse than a criminal. I do not regret what I did because God is going to give me the victory." The report continued,

She does not believe that what she did was wrong, she said. She is aware of the school's policy against proselytizing, she said, but feels obligated to talk about her faith when asked. "To talk about God is something else," she said. "I did not talk about religion. I don't know why the Board of Education is mixing one thing with another. I respect all religions."

The middle school principal in South Carolina considered himself a hypocrite if he did not provide an opportunity for his students to hear the gospel and respond, and he did not care what penalty it might trigger. The sixth grade teacher in New York felt she had to answer her students' questions and then offer the plan of salvation and provide an opportunity for them to accept Jesus as savior. The opinions of fellow Evangelicals concerning these events varied widely. Some viewed them as heroes of the faith while others condemned their actions. The range of reactions reflects differing beliefs among Evangelicals concerning evangelism in public schools. In keeping with that diversity, Evangelical educators from different church backgrounds carry different evangelistic instincts with them as they enter the schoolhouse door. Combining that range of instincts with the varied contexts that exist in different public schools and the communities they serve across the nation results in diverse expressions of Christian faithfulness.

## **Varieties of “Witnessing” among Evangelical Educators**

Questions about how to express faith at work apply to all Evangelicals. James Schwartz (1997) narrowed the faith at work question to Christian public school teachers, and he described three options. In his categorization, the “Christian Advocate/Evangelist” is “willing to take some risks and test the limits of the church/state separation line in order to fulfill his calling to be a light in the public school system” (p. 295). The “Agent of Enculturation” focuses on operating peaceably in the system, serving the needs of children, and living as a positive example of Christianity. Finally, the “Golden Rule Truth-Seeker” treats “religious questions and concerns as a normal and healthy part of public human life” (p. 295).

By emphasizing the relationship between teachers and students, Schwartz highlighted the teacher-student interactions at the heart of the proselytizing tension in public schools. In his critique of the “Christian Advocate/Evangelist,” Schwartz directly addressed the issue of child Evangelism. He noted that when conversion is achieved by use of the state’s authority in a school setting, such evangelization fails to honor the role of human free will and such a conversion “only occurs at a very shallow level” (p. 301). Schwartz clarified his objections:

The notion that the greatest good for Christians is in advancing the Christian gospel seems to be beyond question. In fact, [his criticism of the Christian Advocate/Evangelist approach] is not based on a disagreement with the goal of spreading the gospel, but rather on a disagreement about acceptable means to achieving this goal. (p. 301)

That “disagreement about acceptable means to achieving this goal” is my focus here. Varied beliefs, assumptions, and practices lead to different Evangelical instincts and perspectives on what constitutes “acceptable means,” and these are rarely examined. Instinctual rather than reflective practice is undesirable in any aspect of educational practice. In the current hyper-polarized culture-war context, proselytizing by Christians in public schools may be the most contentious issue on a long list of conflicts that divide secularists and Christians. Lack of reflective practice in this area is especially indefensible.

Schwartz’s categories are helpful but limited. His focus is on the work of teachers with students day-to-day in classrooms. When the options offered by Schwartz are applied to school leaders, his model is found lacking since administrators and teacher leaders address systemic contexts and issues. Taking Schwartz’ categories as the starting point, I offer a revised list describing a broader range of Great Commission practices demonstrated by Christians working in public schools. My contention is that these approaches to witnessing are most often guided by evangelistic instincts rather than thoughtful reflection.

1. *Stealth Evangelist*—Infiltrate “enemy” territory of public schools to bring the gospel to others, ignoring policy and law if compliance hinders this vital mission.
2. *Path Maker*—Help children accept Jesus Christ as their savior by using their position in public schools to create as many opportunities for students to hear the gospel and respond as is possible without intentionally breaking the law.
3. *Light Bearer*—Live as a testimony of faith by treating others well, being a good teacher and colleague, and modeling servanthood in order to draw others to an interest in God and, hopefully, salvation, and being ready to answer any question about faith that may come from students, fellow staff, or community members.

4. *Purifier*—Serve as “salt” in order to create and sustain a positive moral culture in the school—and, by extension, the community—that is more aligned to Biblical values. Actions range from quiet, informal actions to overt promotion of opposition to policies and practices.

5. *Practical Servant*—Focus on serving children, families, and the community in order to promote the “flourishing of the city” and help bring “shalom,” a healthy wholeness that addresses all aspects of life.

6. *Justice Activist*—Work for social justice through the public schools, especially for “the least of these”: the poor and marginalized in our society.

As suggested above, these approaches are most often guided by evangelistic instincts shaped by personal experience of religious socialization. A Christian educators’ instincts are further modified by ongoing participation in the Evangelical subculture, the influence of the broader culture, and the conflicts that arise between these two influences. Christian educators may demonstrate several of these approaches depending upon the situation. Some of the approaches are difficult to align and some are in direct conflict. For example, those who typically assume the role of *Practical Servant* or *Justice Activist* are unlikely to ever endorse the strategies of a *Stealth Evangelist*.

### **Proselytizing in Public Schools: Polarized Perspectives**

Admonitions concerning proselytizing are a consistent theme in resources for Christian educators serving in public schools, suggesting a consensus: “Christian teachers may not evangelize or advocate a particular religion” (Parker, 2012, p. 17); “You may not promote your own beliefs” (Van Brummelen, 2009, p. 270); “Christian teachers are not permitted to coerce their students into participating in Christian prayer or other religious

activities, nor are they permitted to use their power as teachers to proselytize” (Birmingham, 2009, p. 194); Public school educators cannot “use their position to promote their religious convictions” (Laursen, 2015, p. 6). In most cases, all that accompanies such assertions is a review of legal boundaries for religious topics and expression in the classroom. For example, Julia and Gloria Stronks (1999) asserted, “Of course it is wrong to be directly evangelistic with students in the classroom” (p. 17) and then provided specific guidelines concerning questions students may ask about the teacher’s faith and conversations with students about faith that would be within the law (p. 91). This expressed consensus would appear to signal a common objection to the *Stealth Evangelist* approach. However, even if such a consensus existed in educator preparation programs, there are many in the larger culture who are convinced Evangelical educators are determined to act as *Stealth Evangelists*.

Secular liberals and progressives often question the motives of Evangelical Christians regarding public school students, and there is special concern about an agenda of conversion (Boston, 2014, Ch. 4). One critique directed at teachers of English as a second language (Baurain, 2007) caricatured “pompous fundamentalists who will do whatever it takes to trick, shove, or drag people into ‘faith’” (p. 203). Another accusation is that evangelizing is linked to a conservative political agenda. In her sharp criticism of Good News Clubs, Katharine Stewart (2012) saw nothing less than a social war engineered by the Religious Right:

...there is a movement in our midst that rejects the values of inclusivity and diversity, a movement that seeks to undermine the foundations of modern secular

democracy. It has set its sights on destroying the system of public education—and it is succeeding. (p. 7)

Stewart's portrayal of the Good News Clubs and other "stealth" strategies to slip child evangelism into public schools drips with dark comparisons to both war and insidious corporate practices. A siege mentality and foreboding sense that fundamentalist Christians are bent on converting all children in public schools pervades the book. Stewart's contention was that Christians are incrementally taking over public schools and are unconcerned about the consequences for local communities divided by the related conflict. Christians leverage the law through appeals to individual rights, equal access, and viewpoint discrimination, and then create deceptive methods that are promoted as non-religious, but, in Stewart's depiction, are actually elaborate "bait and switch" programs. Aggressively evangelistic Christian ministries and *Stealth Evangelists* provide plenty of fuel for this kind of conspiratorial analysis and there are many Christian organizations seeking to equip students to evangelize their schools with specific, active roles for Christian educators in those schools (Lawrence, 2013). Both *Stealth Evangelists* and *Path Makers* are the school "insiders" most closely aligned to the strategies of such organizations.

Critics are also wary of the Evangelical focus on the "4/14 Window" (Brewster, n.d.), a shorthand reference to data on the age span when most Evangelical Christians make personal decisions for salvation. Though the term and related initiatives are most often considered in the context of international mission work, application to "home missions" in the United States is common. Stewart (2012) viewed the "4/14 Window" as the uniting focus of many school-targeting programs used by Evangelicals. She wrote,

Schools are especially attractive because small children are easily swayed by representatives of authority, such as teachers and school officials, and typically can't distinguish between schoolteachers and the people who teach them in school classrooms after hours. (p. 4).

### **Forces Shaping Evangelistic Instincts**

Given the mistrust of Evangelical intentions concerning public schools and the assumption that proselytizing is central to that mission, it is important to consider the evangelistic instincts of Christian educators. Though it is tempting to emphasize a set of common core beliefs across differences within the Evangelical subculture (e.g., Stronks & Stronks, 1999, p. 53), different evangelistic approaches are expressions of important theological variations.

For example, many conservative Christians are raised within a "Christ Against Culture" (Niebuhr, 1951) tradition, acting with profound wariness of the values and behaviors promoted by popular culture and media and fear of negative influences on children. A *Purifier* will often be motivated by values and beliefs deemed unbiblical being passed on to children in schools. *Practical Servant* and *Justice Activist* approaches reflect more positive theologies of engagement, such as intentional culture-making (Crouch, 2008), incarnational living in the service of the most vulnerable (Claiborne, 2006), and "faithful presence" (Hunter, 2010, pp. 276-278). Differing understandings of what the "gospel" is and what it means to "witness" faithfully are at work in this range of lived theologies.

Perspectives on work and vocation also differ in significant ways that influence views on evangelizing. Theologically traditional Evangelicals tend to view work as a

negative consequence of the Fall. It is a price paid by all humans for sin. James Davidson Hunter (2010) described this view:

For generations of faithful Evangelicals and Fundamentalists, vocation in the secular world was at best a necessary evil. To the extent that work had “kingdom significance,” it was a platform for evangelism. The mark of true piety for a committed believer whether in skilled or manual labor or in the realms of business, law, education, public policy, and social welfare, was to lead a Bible study and evangelize their associates in their place of work. In this paradigm, work was instrumentalized—it was regarded as simply a means to spiritual ends. (pp. 248-249)

Many Evangelical educators come from churches with a low view of work and a high view of personal proselytizing and consider work as a place to earn a living, seek converts, and little else. Other Evangelicals understand work within a more positive theology of vocation (Keller, 2012; Sherman, 2011; Stevens, 1999). Roles such as *Justice Activist* enact belief in the possibility of doing good in the world through paid employment. However, the mundane world of work is rarely addressed in Evangelical church teaching beyond the importance of personal purity lived out before others and evangelizing co-workers.

Finally, there is disagreement about the very essence of the salvation process. For many Evangelicals, proselytizing is approached as a simplified, narrowed presentation of the Gospel, and a decision to follow Jesus is condensed to a simple prayer. Gordon Smith (2012) refers to such approaches as a “revivalist” view, in which conversion is understood to be “a punctiliar experience: persons [can] specify with confidence and assurance the

time and place of their conversion, by reference, as often as not, to the moment when they prayed what [is] typically called ‘the sinner’s prayer’” (p. 1).

The focus on a moment of personal decision has been critiqued as an incomplete presentation of the full biblical portrayal of salvation. Missionary and scholar Christopher Wright (2010) pointed to the “tendency to reduce the gospel to a solution to our individual sin problem and a swipe card for heaven’s door” (p. 31). In a piece for *Christianity Today* (October, 2009), Wright exhorted Christians to embrace and spread the “whole Gospel”:

The gospel as a whole, true to the Bible as a whole, shows us God's heart for his broken, suffering, wicked world. For the last and the least (socially, culturally, and economically) as well as the lost (spiritually)—not that these can be separated, since human beings are whole persons. For those who are dying eternally in their sins, but also for the causes of their preventably premature dying in this world. For those who are without Christ, without God, and without hope in the world, but who also suffer all kinds of other lacks—the landless and homeless, the loveless and limbless, the family-less and state-less. For the creation itself, frustrated in its supreme goal of giving glory to its Creator, and groaning under the onslaught of human greed and violence. (p. 32)

Views of conversion as a more gradual process that reflect Wright’s “whole Gospel” definition have been articulated by the Evangelical Christian missionary community. James Engel (Engel & Norton, 1975) of Wheaton College developed an early model, but others have followed. These models describe the movement of individuals on a journey of belief rather than focusing on a decision point, though the decision point remains the lynchpin event. Such gradualist views of conversion open up a more diversified range of actions that

are “faithful” in promoting movement along a conversion continuum, and offer affirmation for *Light Bearers* and *Practical Servants*.

Evangelical differences extend to the conversion of children. In spite of the “4/14 Window” focus, there are differing views about children in that age range having the capacity to make an independent and informed decision to become a Christian. Often this question is tied to the age of baptism (George, 1999; Horton, 2010; Olson, 2005), since baptism often occurs soon after a decision is made. The disagreements about what is generally called the “age of accountability” calls into question child evangelism efforts that view “decisions for Christ” as the singular goal.

The beliefs of Christians in public schools concerning conversion may be the most powerful theological driver behind the diversity of evangelistic instincts evident in practice. Those targeting “decisions for Christ” as the sole goal are likely to act as *Stealth Evangelists* or *Path Makers*. Christians who seek to help students and colleagues along a pathway of faith are quite likely to consider *Light Bearer*, *Practical Servant*, and *Justice Activist* to be fully faithful gospel-sharing approaches.

### **Personal Evangelism**

Evangelicals in public schools generally agree on the centrality of relationships. Students in educator-preparation programs hear much about the power of relationships in effective practice. This language is familiar to most Evangelicals since it has long been the foundation of witnessing strategies under the label “personal evangelism.” However, for Evangelicals who believe that saving souls is the ultimate goal in all relationships, relational and personal practices are not simply educational but eternal. Personal evangelism promotes the development of genuine relationships between Christians and

non-Christians, but those relationships are to be intentional and the objective is a point of decision to accept Jesus Christ as savior.

This approach has deep roots in the Evangelical subculture. J. R. Macaulay taught personal evangelism at Moody Bible Institute in the 1950's and defined "the Gospel" as "a vast theme [that] includes all that God does for men within the whole scheme of redemption" (Maccaulay & Belton, 1950, p. 11), but went on to narrow the focus of evangelism to "the telling of that portion of the Gospel which has particular reference to the unsaved" (p. 11). As much as being salt and light and spreading seeds is embraced by most Christians preparing for public school service, Christians socialized into a relational approach to witnessing that climaxes in a "God appointment" will have strong instincts to lead a potential convert in the "sinner's prayer" regardless of the setting.

An instinctual tendency towards relational evangelism is to be expected from those raised in American Evangelical churches where personal evangelism is emphasized in youth programming. As court decisions blocked adult-led religious practices in schools, student religious rights became a powerful lever in school-based evangelism strategies. This "school as mission field" approach features students in the role of missionaries to their peers. Witnessing to friends and holding evangelistic activities to attract peers continues to be a dominant feature of youth group culture. Christians' assumption of roles as adults in power-over positions relative to students is a profound status shift for someone raised to walk through the doors of a public school as a missionary trained to lead others to faith in Jesus. Most Evangelical Christians preparing for careers in public schools are likely to bring such a "school as mission field" mindset rooted in their religious socialization. These

educators are also likely to lack self-awareness of this instinct and the power issues that accompany assuming a new role in the school setting.

### **Ethics and Evangelism**

Evangelism is often at the heart of Evangelical church programming for youth, especially with children. Though children of church families dominate, most churches invest significant resources in reaching out to unchurched children. Conversion stories (and tallies of “decisions for Christ”) from vacation bible school, summer camps, midweek programs, and other activities that include a presentation of the plan of salvation and an opportunity to accept Jesus as savior are prized evidences of success. Evangelicals in local churches rarely consider ethical aspects of evangelistic strategies geared toward children from families outside the church. Instead, the focus is on a version of faithfulness that views obedience to God as sharing the gospel and “leading others to Christ.” For educators socialized within such churches, evangelistic instincts are likely to influence interactions with non-Christian students in schools, even though the ethical issues become much more complex.

The theological starting point for ethical reflection among Christian educators is typically the belief that all people are created by God and bear the image of God. A Christian interpretation of the ethic of care translates that high view of each student into educational practice (Freytag, 2015). As noted above, Evangelical educators are often perceived as instrumentalizing all relationships with the intent of religious conversion, but within an ethic of care it is inappropriate to approach students as evangelistic targets. Nel Noddings, perhaps the most influential proponent of care ethics in education, draws a distinction between teachers who are “virtue carers” and those who are “relational carers”

(Noddings, 2012, p.773). Noddings is not a Christian, but Christian educators have found in the Ethic of Care substantial overlap with Christian beliefs (Freytag, 2015; Shotsberger, 2012) and many have infused programs at Christian universities with a Christian Ethic of Care. In Noddings' view, "virtue carers" make assumptions about what students need and work for those outcomes, while "relational carers" follow the ethic of care's focus on the expressed needs of the learner. Christian teachers who presume to know the spiritual needs of students and manipulate students with evangelistic intent follow a "virtue carer" track, contradicting the essence of the ethic of care espoused by Noddings.

Limited research on Christian teachers has documented a non-proselytizing ethic of care in action in public schools and linked it to positive outcomes for students. Hartwick (2014) found that religious devotion and a sense of calling evident in Christian teachers resulted in more positive relationships with students. Such a teacher "is more likely to treat students as unique individuals, giving students personal attention, caring about their well-being, and emotionally extending themselves to students" (p. 15). He described teachers with other-oriented, servant attitudes. In the classroom, these attitudes were expressed as loving and serving in the name of, and in the power of, Jesus, rather than using the classroom as an opportunity to pressure students into "making a decision for Jesus." What remains little-studied is how Christian teachers demonstrating a non-proselytizing ethic of care respond to student-initiated questions about faith, especially in one-on-one settings. It is quite possible for a *Stealth Evangelist* to exhibit all the behaviors observed by Hartwick, all the while covertly angling to prompt individualized opportunities to convert students.

While there is evidence from daily practice in classrooms of Christians embracing an ethic of care that eschews overt proselytizing, there are also plentiful counter-examples of Christian educators blatantly violating the ethic of care and yet considering their actions “faithful.” National advocacy groups provide regular chronicles of such incidents in schools. Though media reports may be biased or sensationalized, court documents provide detailed accounts of experiences of non-Christian students at the hands of Christian educators. One example will suffice. In Chesterton County, South Carolina a consent decree (Anderson v. Chesterfield County School District, No. 4:11-cv-03300-RBH, January 24, 2012) was issued in a case involving a middle school student who was discriminated against repeatedly for his non-belief by Christian students, teachers, and staff. The details reveal the actions of *Path Makers* and *Purifiers* who worked in a school where pervasive Christianity allowed them to be overt in promoting faith and challenging and belittling non-Evangelical beliefs and practices.

The vast majority of Christian educators are quick to vehemently reject belittling any student and do not condone learning environments that are not welcoming to all. However, many also argue that evangelism can be done in a welcoming, positive manner, and some assert that evangelism is the logical extension of an ethic of care. Returning to Noddings’ distinction between virtue and relational caring (Noddings, 2012), Christian teachers who are other-centered, practice deep listening and empathy, and recognize the spiritual needs of a student through such care-based relational engagement may—if given an opportunity—address that expressed spiritual need by sharing the hope of the gospel, and consider it the most caring act possible.

Christian philosopher Elmer Thiessen (2011) embraced an ethic of care as foundational to his defense of proselytizing. He explained:

Ethical proselytizing that respects and protects the dignity of persons must always be an expression of concern for the whole person and for all of his or her needs— physical, social, economic, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. To care only for the salvation of the souls of persons is unethical. (p. 165)

“The ‘best interests of the student’ is at the heart of the ethic of the educational profession,” according to Stefkovich and Begley (2007, p. 212), and yet the meaning of the term “the best interests of the student” is unclear in research and in practice. Different working definitions flow from different beliefs about the “good life” and the worldviews that reflect those valued outcomes. For Christians, the needs of the “whole child” typically include spiritual needs, and to ignore that aspect of a child would not be loving.

The ethical concept of respect for persons, which posits the autonomy and agency of each individual, is at the heart of an ethic of care. Much of the concern about child evangelism centers on protecting that right in adult-child encounters, and this has particular salience in school settings. Baurain (2007) explored these concerns in regards to teachers of English as a second language, but the observations apply to all Christian educators. Students may convert to Christianity to please, obey, or imitate the teacher. It was suggested that the “greatest danger” for Christian teachers is being “insufficiently aware of how the power inherent in their roles affects the way students respond to their interest in proclaiming the gospel, whether in or outside of class” (Snow, as quoted in Baurain, p.216). While Baurain is adamant that such violations of respect for persons are

inconsistent with a Christian view of free will and agency, the practices of many Evangelical teachers indicate that not all concur.

As the preceding discussion has detailed, there are complex ethical questions to address. The international missionary community has a long history of wrestling with these issues. Key insights from that work will now be reviewed to add perspective to biblically informed ethics concerning the evangelization of children with application to public schools. Since missions hold a central place in the life of Evangelical churches, the perspective of the international missionary community is likely to resonate with Evangelical educators.

### **Ethics from a Missionary Perspective**

Child evangelism is the specific focus of an international mission document, *Evangelization of Children* (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 2005). The need to build relationships with parents was emphasized along with transparency in all ministries reaching out to children. Respect for family beliefs and respect for the role of parents in the lives of children are presented as paramount.

Dan Brewster provided perspective from within the Evangelical missionary community. Brewster voiced concerns in his role as Director of Holistic Child Development Academic Programs for Compassion International, a high-profile child evangelism ministry. He made a strong case for the appropriateness and urgency of child evangelism, but he also echoed many of the concerns articulated in the Lausanne document in *Ethics and Cautions in Mission with Children* (nd). Though written for international Evangelical missionaries, Brewster's language is likely to resonate with those who serve in public schools and bring a strong sense of duty to proselytize to the schoolhouse. He asked, "How can Christians

provide material love and care for children and not share the Good News, which can transform the lives of children both now and forever?" However, Brewster also argued for "non-manipulative integrity and respect" in that effort. He also asserted,

Evangelism and Christian training with children of non-Christian parents is neither exploitative nor unethical provided there is understanding and acceptance on the part of the parents. In ethical ministry to children, we must always be *particularly* sensitive to the proper time, place, manner, and approach for evangelism.

Inattentiveness to the situation and circumstances may make overt evangelism *in that time, place, and manner* insensitive or even unethical.

Brewster's argument led to a recommended "starting point" in international evangelism work with children: "No child should be subjected to religious teaching and training without the knowledge and consent of the parents." His next point was,

Christian workers should never be secretive or deceitful about their motives or intentions. God is not divisive, deceitful, or secretive. And neither should we be, *especially* in any dealings with children. There is no place for hidden agendas, hidden identities, deception, or failure to speak the truth.

Roger Greenway (1993), former Professor of World Missiology at Calvin College, proposed principles for ethical evangelism that align closely with Brewster's cautions. One of the principles was, "Respect for the person, and his or her freedom of choice, coupled with respect for the person's total needs." He included his own admonition that those evangelizing should "make no effort to convert a child or adolescent without the parents' knowledge and consent" (p. 153). Greenway noted that coercion is not ethical since it

“treats people as objects to be used and manipulated rather than as image bearers of God and worthy of respect” (p. 154).

The recommendations and cautions offer guidance for Christians who have only considered child evangelism from the perspective of acting in obedience to God through evangelism. However, such admonitions are certain to come as a challenge to educators raised in churches where attractional evangelistic events were both common and celebrated, but did not clearly communicate to parents the intent to encourage children to accept Christ. *Stealth Evangelists* and *Path Makers* are most likely to find themselves at odds with these ethical guidelines, but *Light Bearers* who pray for enough influence to trigger questions from students that can be answered in the form of an invitation to accept Jesus will be confronted by this recommendation.

### **Advocacy Groups**

Few Evangelical educators receive intentional teaching about vocation or evangelism ethics at church. An array of national Christian advocacy groups that target public schools are eager to promote a particular vision for evangelizing schools. Often Evangelical educators in public schools are solicited by such organizations as allies and collaborators. Turning to sources of guidance from beyond the local church is a common practice in the Evangelical subculture. As Lydia Bean (2014) has described it, Evangelicals' cultural toolkit is often crafted by such organizations outside the local church. National voices promote narratives of what “good Christians” do, and local lay leaders help translate that into practice. For educators, the lay leaders may be in the local church or may be fellow Christian staff members at school, but the power of the national voices is strong across both settings.

Many of these national organizations approach public schools primarily as mission fields and encourage Christians who participate in public education in any way (students, parents, educators, community volunteers, etc.) to view themselves as missionaries. Finn Laursen, Executive Director of Christian Educators Association International (CEAI), has often referred to Christian educators as missionaries in public schools (e.g. Laursen, 2015, p. xv). Laursen exuded, “CEAI considers our public schools a mission ripe for harvest. Through public schools we have access to many who will never enter our churches,” and he added, “those of us playing the role of missionaries in public schools often plant the seeds that will be harvested later” (as quoted in Graham, 2011, p. 18).

However, Laursen also stated that, “the Christian educator cannot use their public position to force their beliefs on students” (Laursen, 2015, p. 6). Faithfully witnessing as a “missionary,” yet not “forcing” faith on students in violation of the law is presented by Laursen as a tightrope Christians must learn to walk. Critics of Evangelical involvement in public education view such assertions as little more than semantic sleight of hand intended to cover up the goal of conversion (Stewart, 2012). It is common, for example, to offer assemblies to schools that are part of an overall strategy of evangelism, while keeping the proselytizing goal from public view. Students enjoy a “school-appropriate” assembly and are invited to an evening event by the same organization. The community event promoted in tandem with the school day assembly is often an example of what has been described as the “ambush method” of evangelism (Aldridge, 1981):

The non-Christian is invited to an event where a high-powered speaker unloads both barrels. Often the “guest” has no idea of the function or purpose of the invitation and feels trapped and embarrassed. This method reminds some of

sawdust trails or scalding tears fueled by people skilled in manipulation of both emotions and Scripture. (p. 18)

The fact that these programs have evangelistic goals but offer school elements that are not overtly religious provides a legal crack in the door for school access. Religious released time programs have been similarly characterized. Benjamin Bindewald (2015) detailed how Evangelicals “reconceptualized” such programs from devotional and educational time for students who already identify with a faith to proselytizing programs in disguise. Ministries of this stripe generally expect Christian administrators and teachers in public schools to be overt or covert allies of their programs, and *Path Makers* are inclined to be strongly supportive of this strategy.

All of the approaches Christians may take in working in public schools will find some level of support from the many Evangelical and Fundamentalist national advocacy organizations focused on public schools except, perhaps, for the *Justice Activist*. Christians who emphasize the need to address systemic injustice will have a difficult time finding much guidance and support since the common Evangelical solution to societal ills is individual salvation, not social reform (Smith, 1998; Emerson & Smith, 2000).

### **The Law, Authority, and Obedience**

Laws and court decisions addressing religion and public education have been used to craft guidelines for educator practice, and legal boundaries are typically emphasized in educator preparation programs. The First Amendment Center engaged a diverse range of organizations, including the National Educational Association and the National Association of Evangelicals, to produce *A First Amendment Guide to Religion in the Public Schools* (Haynes & Thomas, 2007). Specific practices are addressed. For instance, teachers “should

not wear clothing with a proselytizing message (e.g., a ‘Jesus Saves’ T-shirt)” (p. 52). The question, “How do I respond if students ask about my religious beliefs?” is posed, and the answer includes the specific admonition that “the teacher may answer at most with a brief statement of personal belief—but may not turn the question into an opportunity to proselytize for or against religion” (p. 52). For those committed to following the law, clear legal boundaries affirmed by leading national Evangelical authorities are available, and educator preparation programs strive to teach these legal parameters.

However, research does not indicate that readily available written guidelines or educator training results in school practices that are legal. In fact, teachers are woefully ill-informed regarding the law, especially in matters of religion (Schimmel & Miletello, 2007). Instead, teachers tend to take their cues from colleagues who are equally ill-informed. In some contexts, this results in educators maintaining their faith as a hidden or closely guarded aspect of their identity at school. In others, violations of the law are common, and there are many evidences of this pattern. McGuire (2009) detailed widespread non-compliance with Supreme Court rulings regarding school prayer, especially in the South. Another study of religious practices conducted in the Bible Belt (Bennett & Foldes, 2014) found ample evidence of practices in schools in violation of district policy. A review of prayer at commencement and baccalaureate services in Ohio (Weldy, 2011) detailed the range of superintendent opinions and the extent to which the practice continued in violation of the law, especially in smaller and more rural districts. Berkman and Plutzer (2010) drew from a national survey of high school biology teachers and detailed the ways personal beliefs lead many Christian teachers to defy state standards and law in science instruction (pp. 192-193). Rich qualitative evidence of this problem can be found in the

final chapter of the text Julia and Gloria Stronks (1999) wrote for Christian teachers in public schools. The testimony by teachers wrestling with faith expression in public schools illuminated lack of knowledge and, at times, willful defiance. The authors admitted, “out of [the teachers’] zeal or due to lack of information concerning the law, some of these teachers are saying or doing things in the classroom that are not within the boundaries of what the law allows,” (p. 121). A Christian professor of education who taught in public schools described a personal experience with this pattern of non-compliance:

There were several lawsuits in my area pertaining to religion in the school.

However, most of us in my school ... continued to say a prayer before lunch. Many times our principal would call for a moment of silence to allow our kids to pray for a particular cause. (Stewart-Wells & Patterson, 2006, p. 11)

Clearly, training in the law does not assure compliance.

Beyond simple knowledge of the law is the question of authority. The Bible provides Evangelicals with an authoritative center, but believers must wrestle with difficult questions of how to speak and act. One common source Christians turn to for guidance is other believers. As noted previously, those believers are often fellow educators, but Evangelical voices of authority in the subculture are also valued. Molly Worthen (2013) described the “crisis of authority” among American Evangelicals who turn to a range of trusted authorities within the Evangelical subculture and find that the advice offered is often conflicting.

One such organization promoting a particular approach is the Pacific Justice Institute, a California-based group that provides legal support for conservative Christian causes. The organization’s tag line is: “Defending religious freedom, parental rights, and

other civil liberties without charge.” The overall intent is to explain “the legal basis for evangelizing in public schools” (Dacus & Dacus, 2002, p. 17), reflecting the view of public schools as an important mission field. In the organization’s publication, *Reclaim your school: Ten strategies to practically and legally Evangelize your school* (Dacus & Dacus, 2002), the following question is posed: “What if I break the law but am convinced that God is calling me to share?” The response provided is:

We want to make our position on this very clear. God may be clearly calling you to share your faith with a student, teacher, administrator, or parent in a way that defies the law. You must, however, be prepared to face the potential consequences, including possibly losing your job. (p. 20)

For *Stealth Evangelists* and *Purifiers*, and perhaps even for *Path Makers*, it is assumed that there are times when a “higher law” will demand that laws and district policies be ignored in order to be obedient to God.

Central to that aspect of approaches that include intentional violation of the law is the question of how Christians know what God demands. Seeking God’s guidance is an essential aspect of faith among Evangelicals when faced with difficult decisions. Listening for the voice of God and responding is central to Evangelical notions of obedience to divine authority. Even when seeking the wisdom of experts and fellow Christians, the expressed intention is to tune into the guidance of the Holy Spirit and obey.

Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann (2012) studied this element of Christian discipleship, which is typically referred to as “discernment.” She found that even faithful Evangelicals struggled to describe discernment, yet it played a powerful role in personal decision-making. In her teacher-to-teacher advice, Parker (2012) reflected this reality,

writing, “Naturally, Christian teachers must exercise discretion and sensitivity appropriate to the situation, but the Holy Spirit will guide and provide what should and shouldn’t be said” (p. 21). One doctoral student anticipating instructing teacher candidates captured this practice in explaining how she pondered the question, “What should I, as a future university teacher, be prepared to teach preservice teachers about sharing their faith in a public school setting?” (Varnell, 2003, p. 107). She then detailed the core of what she labeled “the dilemma”:

If Christian teachers ignore the Word of God, they are disobeying the Lord. In disobeying the Lord, we do not bring glory to Him, and are in danger of His reprimand. If Christian teachers do not speak up about the Lord, some people will never hear, and their blood could be on our heads. We must obey the Lord. (p. 108)

Deciding how to respond in the moment is part of the rhythm of a busy educator’s day. For Christian educators sensitized to be alert to opportunities to share the “plan of salvation” at any time, discernment holds particular salience.

### **Connecting Beliefs to Witnessing Practices**

The incidents involving the middle school principal in South Carolina and the New York sixth grade teacher detailed above are exceptional. Situations far from the public eye that occur as part of the routine, day-to-day practice of Christian educators are the norm. Carrie Birmingham (2009), a teacher educator at Pepperdine University, envisioned the common practices of Christian teachers as follows:

They know that they need not hide the fact that they are Christians, and they can honestly answer student-initiated questions about their beliefs. They treat their students in a Christ-like manner, and they pray even as they work. While the First

Amendment constructs many of the boundaries of Christian work in public schools, it should not define Christian work in public schools. (p. 194)

Birmingham suggested that Christian teachers in public schools, though prohibited by law from explicitly sharing the gospel, have “the opportunity to become significant persons in the lives of children, youth, and families who may not be reached through conventional church efforts” (p. 194). Birmingham further advocated “preparing the soil,” which she explained as “prepar[ing] students to hear the word and understand it.” This preparation involves “surrounding students with the love of God, teaching students to love nonmaterial goodness, and helping students to understand and respect the power of narrative” (p. 205). Birmingham’s description captures the essence of the *Light Bearer* and *Practical Servant* approaches.

Stewart-Wells and Patterson (2006) provided an illuminating scenario where the “faithful” practices described by Birmingham are embedded in a scenario used with pre-service teachers in their program:

A first year teacher at a New England Public Elementary School enjoys teaching her third grade students immensely. She especially appreciates the rich diversity in her students who are of many different racial, ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds. While this novice teacher knows her administrators would not allow her to “minister” to her students about her Christian faith, she admits to “accidentally” leaving on her Christian music in her classroom as students return each day from recess, lunch and other activities outside of her class. She hopes that students will ask her about the meaning of the words they hear. (p. 1)

This scenario depicts a teacher whose efforts flow from her foundational perspectives on life purpose, cultural engagement, vocation, public education, and what it means to share through meaningful relationships built on caring. The teacher displays aspects of several approaches, but most prominent are the *Purifier*, who serves as “salt” that brings purity and flavor to the school, and the *Light Bearer*, who brings truth and hope without engaging in overt proselytizing. However, the scenario also portrays a *Light Bearer* who desires to lead children to salvation in Jesus Christ through her efforts in the public school and manipulates her classroom in order to prompt faith questions.

Targeting a missionary opportunity to share the plan of salvation is rooted in the directive Evangelicals read in 1 Peter 3:15: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” When a student, especially a young student, asks a teacher about faith, the situation is fraught with difficult ethical questions, as noted above. However, even before a “decision point” situation, another challenge must be considered. Pursuing an attractional approach to evangelism includes the need to connect the Christian educator’s behavior to their belief in Jesus. In the process, the educator must find ways to define his or her Christian beliefs. In an increasingly pluralistic culture where many have little or no understanding of Christianity, that demands a good deal of explanation that will surely resemble Evangelistic “preaching” at some level.

## **Conclusion**

Molly Worthen (2013) posited three elemental concerns of modern American Evangelicals, one of which is “how to resolve the tension between the demands of personal belief and the constraints of a secularized public square” (p. 4). The dilemma of Evangelical

educators in public schools who consider “witnessing” a core aspect of faithfulness is an example of how this tension is experienced. When the singular goal of witnessing is to encourage non-Christians to make a decision to accept Jesus as savior and lord, how does the right to express faith align with the legal restrictions on promoting a particular faith in public schools? What is the faithful resolution for Evangelicals?

As this essay has detailed, Evangelical educators in public schools respond to these questions differently, reflecting diverse assumptions and beliefs about the mission of the church, engagement with culture, views about public schools, and beliefs about proselytizing. I have argued that educator practices, for the most part, are instinctual and flow out of the stream of the Evangelical subculture within which they were raised, and are then further shaped by national Evangelical voices and fellow Christians, especially other educators, who are likely to be informed by national advocacy groups more than local church teaching. The six approaches I offer provide a model for addressing this important area of practical theology.

While I have examined the issue as it applies to Evangelicals in public schools, it is no less important for social workers, nurses, hospice care workers and others who serve vulnerable populations as part of the daily rhythm of their work. My hope is that this paper will spur consideration of this aspect of living faithfully as a follower of Christ by those who shape the teaching that laypersons receive in church.

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