AN EVANGELISM TRAINING MANUAL
FOR GROUP OR INDIVIDUAL USE

FOURTH EDITION

TELL
THE
TRUTH

THE WHOLE GOSPEL WHOLLY BY GRACE
COMMUNICATED TRUTHFULLY AND LOVINGLY

WILL METZGER

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Preface

What Is the Biblical Model for Evangelism?

***

The Word became flesh and
made his dwelling among us.
We have seen his glory,
the glory of the One and Only,
who came from the Father,
full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

Picture this: The crucial battle of a war in ancient Greece has been fought. A runner is dispatched with a memorized report of the all-important results. The long journey completed, he arrives exhausted and falls before the Grecian potentate. Gasping, he blurts out, “My lord, I was given an urgent message, but . . . I’m afraid I’ve now forgotten it!”

This book, originally published in 1981, was written to address a concern that many Christians, entrusted with the gospel message, had forgotten the message and their responsibility to accurately convey it. I wish I could now say that the message has been remembered. The recovery of a God- and grace-centered gospel, or, as Dr. James Boice has put it, a “rediscovery of the doctrines that shook the world,” is imperative.
A Confused Gospel and Confused Evangelism

Have you ever been stymied by evangelism? Do you feel you are tossed between two unacceptable alternatives and can’t find your niche? On the one side you see Christians who have great rapport with others but don’t say much about Jesus Christ. On the other side are those who are always “giving out the gospel” but seem to know nothing about genuine friendship. The frustration of bumping into these two extremes in Christian circles is very real.

I was one of those Christians who believed in friendship evangelism, but for me it turned out to be all friendship and little evangelism. Motivation was not a problem for me. I had gone through a life-changing conversion to Christ during my high school years, and Jesus Christ was very real to me. I had a strong desire to tell others about him, yet most of my models for doing so tended toward one or the other of the extremes I mentioned. I had other liabilities: my own lack of Bible knowledge, my personal immaturity, my tendency to view God as existing only for my benefit and a fear of being rejected. With those drawbacks I began my personal pilgrimage to find out what it meant to be a witness for Christ.

At first, witnessing seemed so simple. I knew the message and I knew who needed it. What could be so confusing or difficult about that? I found out all too soon. I didn’t have a clear grasp of the content of the gospel. Therefore, my Christian life was stunted, and my ability to winsomely expose nonbelievers to Christ was handicapped.

I was soon beset by a barrage of advice. I was told I should witness by showing others a good time, bringing my high school acquaintances to fun gatherings at church or in the inoffensive setting of a home. The evening would end with a challenging talk. That sounded easy. Others would articulate the gospel for me.

In college I met Christians who emphasized a more direct approach: I should invite anyone and everyone to a small group Bible study or a talk by a layperson in a “neutral” setting. Nonbelievers should be confronted directly with the Scriptures. Well, I said to myself, that sounds reasonable. Perhaps this is the approach to take. Yet these seemed impersonal and manipulative. I hungered for an effective evangelistic method. Training seminars and booklets abounded.

Not too much later my confusion was intensified because I came in contact with still other Christians who exhorted me to evangelize by the
apostolic pattern of preaching: I should bring my friends to hear gifted speakers at church or at special meetings. Still, I was relying on others to do the talking.

Then I had a grand awakening. I saw that I was to witness, not just bring people to others who would witness for me. Fearful, and yet convinced of my duty, I looked for help. Again, I met some Christians who were very zealous and explained to me an entirely new set of ideas and techniques for personal evangelism. I was motivated by an awesome sense of responsibility and increasing guilt because I was led to believe that I was unspiritual—or at least unfaithful—if I hadn’t “led someone to Christ.” So I uncritically grabbed onto various methods of witnessing. This approach did involve me in speaking the truth to others. Yet the criterion of success was a numbers game: counting those who prayed, raised a hand or filled out a card.

I was a failure. I had started out with misgivings about the appropriateness of the slick techniques advocated by various “successful” evangelists. I ended up with misgivings as to whether they fit in with Scripture. My concerns led me to some basic questions of theology.

Uncertainties whirled in my mind. Could a person be motivated to witness, yet actually dishonor God and misrepresent his message through ignorance or manipulation? Was I motivated by guilt or the expectations of others? Was I trying to make excuses for my lack of enthusiasm and success? How could I limit God’s use of me to just “friends” and “invitations to meetings”? How could I deny that God’s providence brought people into my life, even if for just a few minutes?

I began to feel like I was caught in a revolving door. Certain questions kept twirling me around. In what way could I lovingly speak to those (even strangers) God brings across my path? Why are the converts of different Christian groups often distinguished by certain personality types? Am I evangelizing only when I see conversions? What are the essential elements of our message? Do I unite with anyone in evangelism because of the great need of people to hear or because of a mutual commitment to gospel doctrines? Why is there such reticence to examine the biblical basis for methods of witness (especially if they are the ones our church uses)?

Why is there such disagreement, confusion and vagueness among those who witness, even on some very basic elements of the gospel? For example, do we just present to the unbeliever Christ as Savior or also as Lord? Is repentance and teaching the law of God part of the gospel? Why is the new
birth necessary? What actually happens in the new birth? What is our part in salvation, and what is God's? How can a person know he or she has been born again? The gospel—is it a set of doctrines or a person? If God has done all he can and now leaves the appropriation of salvation to our willpower, how can spiritually dead people respond?

It boggled my mind that once Christians passed beyond the common notion that everyone needs Christ for salvation, there was confusion and even contradiction on what triggered the new birth—our faith and repentance or God's enabling Spirit? These are haunting, important, fundamental questions. How could the majority of evangelicals be so oblivious to the need to research what is the biblical gospel? I could see there were many wrong methods, and I began to despair that I could ever find a way to witness that would take its shape from truth, not pragmatism or the sovereignty of our will in salvation.

All my questions could be boiled down to one: what was the way to witness that would be shaped by a high view of a Creator-Redeemer God who does not merely make salvation available but actually empowers a person to respond by repenting and receiving?

In spite of the unhelpfulness of the advice initially given to me about personal evangelism, I have to admit that the resurgent interest in this topic in evangelical circles is healthy. Who can deny that there has been an increased participation in evangelism? Who could find fault with the new evangelistic concern of many Christians? They have made great sacrifices in money, time and energy. People are using modern media creatively. I am truly thankful for these things. Yet something bothers me—and I believe others also have an uneasy conscience. Could some aspects of contemporary evangelism lack biblical integrity?

A Brief Overview of This Book: Attempting a Biblical Model

Before we can find an answer to this central question, we must evaluate the current practices in evangelism. Let me paraphrase Francis Schaeffer's address before the World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin (1966): Because we are committed to evangelism, we must speak in antithesis at times. If we do not make clear by word and practice our position for truth and against false doctrine, we are building a wall between the next generation and the gospel. The unity of evangelicals should be on the basis of truth and not on evangelism as such. If this is not so, “success” in evangelism can result in
weakening Christianity. Any consideration of methods is secondary to this central principle. Though we need to evaluate doctrine and methods, however, we are not to judge the motives of others.

**Part one.** In part one of this book I will pose pertinent questions concerning the theology underlying the method of modern evangelism. I do not pretend to give an exhaustive theology of evangelism. I speak as a family member to those within the family of God. May we look into our hearts and into the Bible to find how to be better change agents. I hope that my analysis will lead to constructive dialogue and modification for all of us. Should any tradition, technique or person be beyond our evaluation by scriptural standards? I think not. Has the gospel been unconsciously or even consciously reduced? I think so. Foundational is a correct definition of evangelism that avoids confusing our task, conveying the message accurately and lovingly, with God’s responsibility as the one who saves. We plant the message. The outline “Come Home” is an attempt to recover the gospel by linking its five primary points. No summary is perfect; hopefully this one is balanced.

If it is true that there are serious differences among evangelicals on the message and methods of evangelism, then we must ask: to what extent are these differences justified? If the differences are simply due to the different audience we are reaching or the variety of gifts God has given us, these differences are not bad. But if in evangelism we are just being loyal to our tradition, molding truth to our personality, diluting the gospel or manipulating people, we are wrong. If we are convinced there is a theological foundation for our method, we may be justified in evangelizing accordingly. Then our difference is a matter of our conscience bound by what we conceive Scripture teaches. A scriptural doctrine of evangelism should be the controlling element in any practice of evangelism.

Nevertheless, even when we can articulate a theological base for our evangelism, I do not believe our responsibility has ended until we compare our doctrinal interpretation with that of others and in humility be willing to rethink what the Holy Spirit is telling us in Scripture. Not doing so is to say that we cannot learn from each other. It is to deny that new light can break forth on our understanding of the Scripture. It is to limit the Holy Spirit in communicating to us through other Christians. It is to evangelize a certain way out of tradition and not out of conviction.

In short, to be unwilling to evaluate our evangelism in the light of the Bible is to not take Scripture seriously. We could end up being less than
honest, allowing unbelievers to be misled and frustrating those who wish to learn to witness. This could condemn our children and the church to untold problems and dishonor the God of the gospel. I suggest we take a thorough look at current evangelistic practice to see if we who witness to Christ have a balanced and whole gospel. The prevalence of *nominal* (in name only) Christians is a plague in America and many parts of the world.

I consider what the total effect of the gospel should be on our lives and on the lives of those we evangelize. What is genuine conversion? Evaluation is again necessary and right in order to determine why there are so many “false” conversions. A commitment to Christ is not a mere prayer and that’s it. Rather, it is a *conversion* in the true sense of the word; our whole lives are changed. Paul says we become new creations. I discuss how this change must affect our entire being—our minds, our wills and our emotions—the whole person. It leads to a worldview moving us outward from our individual lives to focus on a new family (the church) and into a world which God will renew as his kingdom.

**Part two.** Part two plumbs the depths of how the grace of God operates in salvation. Grace uproots three myths—my inalienable rights, my human goodness, my free will—that act as barriers, shielding people from the full impact of the gospel. These barriers are penetrated by the scandal of grace. Only a grace-centered gospel saves and gives *response-ability*, which solves the nonbeliever’s main problem. This results in passionate worship, which is the goal of evangelism—not just decisions but fervent disciples.

**Part three.** Part three is devoted to the practice of witnessing, plus some practical ideas on how to get started. We are to be truthful and loving. Our responsibility does not end with correct understanding of the new birth; we must put that gospel into action. We are called to obedience in telling the truth to others. Help is given for communicating, and more diagrams are used.

Finally, in the appendixes are numerous worksheets that can be duplicated for training yourself and others. An outline of a God-centered gospel with a relationship theme, “Come Home,” unifies the points. It contains a diagram to illustrate our road in life, a Bible story, illustration from life and pointed application of the objective truths of the gospel. There are two versions: (1) the amplified version for training Christians and (2) the simplified version for telling non-Christians. The extensiveness of this gospel summary may surprise you. I do not apologize for this. I am convinced that God purposes our speaking the *truth* in love as the means of salvation. If all
Christians learned these truths, their witness would be more God-honoring and their spiritual growth enhanced as they daily reexperience a gospel of grace. The gospel is for Christians. God may use a minimal amount of truth to quicken someone; that’s his prerogative. Our privilege is to enter into the depths of the whole gospel, sinking roots into that life-giving water. I hope that “Come Home” will help Christians to be thoroughly knowledgeable of the life-giving truth content of the gospel. Then, not speaking misleading half-truths but the whole truth in love, they can lift up the living Jesus and let him draw many to himself for salvation. The gospel is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16).

If you’re wondering what’s new that necessitates a fourth edition of a book published in 1981, let me begin by saying what’s not new: My love affair with God’s revealed truth and alluring grace manifest in a gospel of justification by faith alone that precisely “fits” the sinner’s needs. Christ suffered the death penalty I deserved for my self-exalting rebellion. The divine law’s requirement of justice was fully met. The just charge of treason against our Maker was obliterated. God is reconciled. Having given the gift of forgiveness, will he deny the ribbon? No! Because there is an additional requirement of perfect righteousness. We must be holy. So, he confers an inheritance of the substitutionary life of Christ’s perfect obedience on his adopted sons and daughters through grafting us into him by an indissoluble union. Then, a solely Spirit-given faith joins the still-sinning yet forgiven person to Christ, birthing a new creature who is given a ministry of reconciliation.

We witness by planting the gospel-seed truths in the hearts and consciences of others. We plead for our Father God to save many. Although trusting him to accomplish this in his time, as humans we experience anguish and have a holy ache in our hearts when responses are few (Rom 9:2). Then, as the Spirit regenerates, we rejoice, welcoming new brothers and sisters into their spiritual family, the church.

But what are these new children of God finding in some churches and Christian organizations? Picture a gigantic cruise ship filled with happy people. It’s the S.S. Evangelical Gospel. In the midst of their fun and excitement, passengers have not noticed holes in the ship under the water line. Well-meaning leaders are attempting to plug them with new methods, technology, social activism and cultural savvy. All these are important, yet they are not the life-saving message of evangelism. The structure of the ship has
been compromised by years of neglect. Its truth framework has begun to deteriorate. Biblical illiteracy among evangelicals increases. Theological discernment between truth and error is slighted. In June 2009 a survey found that close to 50 percent of evangelicals believed people who follow other religions, atheists included, would end up in heaven. The cruise ship may sink, and lifeboats are beginning to fill with people. Painted on their sides is T.M.D.—Therapeutic Moralistic Deism.

What then is new? An addition to the introduction titled “The Doctrine Is the Drama,” which is foundational for the book because it describes doctrine as “health giving.” A major shift continues to undermine absolute truth. Our culture has influenced Christians to look to their inner self and find their identity through self-actualization. Be true to your self-generated feelings, opinions, thoughts. Find out what feels right for you and live by these “truths.” This is how many nominal Christians, and also a growing number who wear an evangelical nametag, live. The crisis is exacerbated by negativity within the evangelical community toward any doctrine or theology. This results in an emphasis on Jesus and the Gospels with little willingness to use the writings of the apostles to explain, model or teach the meaning of the person, ministry, miracles, actions, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. This happens in spite of the fact that in the Gospels Jesus promises a unique inspiration by the Spirit to help them accurately remember and interpret data they didn't understand before Pentecost. Concluding the introduction is a short story, “The Downfall and Recovery of the Doctor,” an allegory communicating what I've been describing in the introduction. Also new is a recommended reading list, additions to the training materials in appendix 1 and occasional clarifications and expansions in the text of the book. What was previously part two, “Genuine Conversion,” is now condensed in chapter two of part one. Note that permission is granted to reproduce any material in the three appendixes, as well as diagrams and charts in the text of the book. For instructions on credit information to include, see copyright page of the book.

Evangelism: Won by One

I have intentionally confined my subject to personal witnessing. This is not because other forms are invalid but because, as the evangelical statesman Carl Henry contends, a one-to-one approach initiated by every believer still holds the best promise of evangelizing the earth in our century. Renowned
Yale historian Kenneth S. Latourette reinforces this concept when he reminds us that “the chief agents in the expansion of Christianity appear not to have been those who made it a profession . . . but men and women who carried on their livelihood in some purely secular manner and spoke of their faith to those they met in this natural fashion.”

Some may question the validity of stressing person-to-person evangelism. Perhaps their questions stem from the many abuses of this approach. But legitimate misgivings should not cause you to neglect the Scripture emphasis on speaking to others. An overreaction to extremes of individualism has made some people promote exclusively the corporate nature of Christian witness. “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (Jn 17:23). The body of believers, united out of various economic and ethnic backgrounds while retaining individual personalities and interests, should be like a flashing neon sign to the world. The amazing unity in the diversity of Christ’s body can convince unbelievers that Jesus Christ was sent by God. A dynamic community of vibrant Christians forms the base for ongoing evangelism, yet if individuals in the group are not verbalizing the gospel, the net result will still be weak evangelism. Although not readily admitted, reasons for downgrading personal initiatives in witnessing might be pride, a critical spirit, fear of offending or even the well-meant attitude that “glorifying God in my vocation” is enough.

In Scripture we find many examples of the gospel being spread in a person-to-person fashion. Jesus himself constantly converses with people to whom he is providentially led. He brings the word of life to them in the midst of their daily life. Christ promises the disciples that they will become fishers of men and then twice sends his followers out in pairs to spread the glad tidings (Mk 6:7-13; Lk 10:1-24). In the early church the average Christian is found gossiping the gospel (Acts 8:1, 4). A leader in the church, Philip, is commanded by God to leave a successful ministry in order to speak to an individual who is searching (Acts 8:26-40). Paul emphasizes the responsibility of all believers to be Christ’s ambassadors and says that the ministry of reconciliation has been given to them (2 Cor 5:17-20). God gives greater ability in evangelism to certain people not in order that they might do it all but in order to equip each believer in the body to do this ministry (Eph 4:11-12).

In our world probably 99.9 percent of all Christians are not in the full-
timely ministry. Unless everyone engages in evangelism—praying, initiating and fervently speaking the gospel—not much will happen. New birth into God’s kingdom usually involves people as spiritual midwives. Like little children, we “show and tell” the gospel. Inherent in every approach to evangelism (small group Bible study, preaching, use of various media and so on) is the need for personal encounter. More often than not, people must speak with non-Christians in order to clarify and urge them to believe. Aren’t you a believer today because someone reached out personally to you? It is Jane and Joe Christian who are Christ’s ambassadors; they are the ones whom God appoints to tell the gospel. Only as your view of God’s active grace in salvation is changed will you find the confidence, joy and gratitude to undergird a new evangelistic lifestyle. Open your mouth. God will fill it with his words.

The gospel shouts the scandal of sovereign salvation. God is blamed for salvation, in the sense that he is totally responsible. He organized a rescue operation within the Trinity—designing, supplying, accomplishing and restoring those who were in peril. Our triune God is the Author and Fulfiller, the Originator and Consummator, the Creator and the Redeemer. It’s all God’s fault—a grace that gives response-ability to the spiritually dead, justifying sinners and marrying them to the Bridegroom!

The Lord of the universe is a lover who woos spiritual adulterers like you and me, providing everything needed to reconstitute a relationship.

“Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will . . . make the Valley of Achor [trouble] a door of hope. There she will sing.” . . .

“In that day,” declares the LORD, “you will call me ‘my husband’; . . . I will betroth you to me forever . . . in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD . . . I will show my love to the one I called ‘Not my loved one.’ I will say to those called ‘Not my people,’ ‘You are my people’; and they will say, ‘You are my God.’” (Hos 2:14-16, 19-20, 23)
Personal appreciations: Mrs. Kathy Wargo, whose ability to translate my handwriting and whose computer efficiency, made it possible to birth the original book and two editions. Help for this final edition came from both Carole Bryan and Rebekah Albano. Allison Rieck and David Zimmerman of InterVarsity Press have edited this book. I’m very thankful for the guidance and patience of IVP editor and my friend Jim Hoover. I also appreciate the many people who surprised me by making this book a success beyond my hopes. It has become a manual for teaching those who will train others in seminaries, Christian colleges, university ministries and churches. Translations exist in Korean, Indonesian and Spanish. The prayers of friends, family and especially students at the University of Delaware undergirded my writing.

Together, let us make God’s name famous.

*Sola Gracia Dei*

By God’s Grace Alone
Part One

THE WHOLE GOSPEL

Lost and Found

Content of Our Message
I waited expectantly as the speaker began his comments. His topic was evangelism. I was taken aback when he started using the phrase *soul winning* to describe his evangelistic practice. *Okay*, I thought to myself, *so this impersonal phrase grates you. Let's see if the rest of the talk gets any better.* It didn't. What followed was a string of success stories about people he had led to Christ. He reinforced his point by citing famous stars and athletes as victorious evangelists. Then came an emphasis on techniques and manipulation of people reminiscent of cults I had studied.

His crowning illustration of how to “get the gospel out to every person” was a detailed set of instructions on how to roll up a gospel tract in such a way that it could be accurately dropped from the window of a moving car. The object was for it to drift to the feet of a hitchhiker—as you passed him by! He justified this technique on the basis of the startling story of a young man who was converted by this sort of “gospel bomb.” The speaker’s conclusion, “It works,” sounded to me like the unbiblical idea “the end justifies the means.” As I left the church that night I wondered, *Instead of sending his Son, why didn’t God just send a tract?*

Perhaps closer to your experience is the evangelistic approach of majoring on the conscious (felt) needs of people (loneliness, lack of love, hurt, stress, discouragement and so on) and molding Jesus into a supplier of their desires. Often the deep sinful nature of their selfishness is never addressed. Well-meaning Christians dilute the gospel into a bandage for surface wounds...
and medicine for selfish wishes. The deeper need of reconciliation with their Maker on his terms of unconditional surrender is omitted. Legitimate desires (to be loved, have health, not be lonely) can become idols.

**What Is Evangelism?**

We have good cause to wonder what kind of a gospel is being conveyed in our day. I am referring not only to individual speakers (this man was a professor of evangelism at a Christian school) but to seminars and books that purport to train Christians in evangelism. I'm embarrassed at the shoddy methods and anemic view of God prevalent among evangelicals. We need a growing concern for a God-honoring witness to his grand gospel. Before we can make any headway, however, we should define our terms. What do we mean by evangelism and witness?

In thinking of witnessing, we have to walk between a narrow and a broad definition. Narrowly defined, witnessing is confined to a rehearsal of a few gospel facts in the hearing of a nonbeliever. Broadly defined, it is whatever we do as Christians before the watching world. Neither of these definitions is satisfactory. The first narrows witness to only our lips; the second broadens it to just being nice. Both our words and our ways are inextricably bound together in witness. It is easy to excuse ourselves by saying either “Well, I told her the gospel!” or “I just live my life before others.” These two extremes seem to have developed more in reaction to each other than on any biblical basis. What might be a more balanced view?

The main design for each man and woman is not “to be a super soul-winner night and day.” As the Westminster Catechism says, it is “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” This means that we, as whole people, are to enjoy God, starting now, and keep his honor in focus in all that we do. Clearly the way we live is a primary aspect of our witness. Yet our life is to be coupled with telling God’s truth. People need to be told who makes our lives different. Our lives, then, will illuminate the truth we express to nonbelievers. The airplane of Christian witness has two wings: our lives (conduct) and our lips (conversation).

To remain silent and let others interpret our actions is wrong; God himself did not do this. The pivotal points of God’s redemptive action in history are accompanied with verbal revelation. God wants us to understand the meaning of his actions. Likewise, we must speak—and speak of Christ—even if we sense our own inconsistency of life. We must speak even when
we do not know much about the Bible. We must speak even when it is inconvenient. God is bigger than our sins, our ignorance, our pride. He will honor his word in our mouths.

Nevertheless, at times our actions do speak louder than our words. When John describes our commission to witness, he says that as the Father sent the Son, so we are sent to others (Jn 20:21). God didn’t send a tract; he prepared a body. Likewise, God has prepared your life and personality to demonstrate him. We need to be creative and selfless in our love to others. We need to learn how to be friends as well as perceive the needs of others and do something for them. Much of Jesus’ witness was in response to a question following an act of kindness or a miracle. But we need to make sure that we are not condescending. We should allow others to help us, let them minister to us. Jesus asked the Samaritan woman to give him some water. We need to learn to be human and treat others as God’s image-bearers. If we are friendly only as long as someone is interested in discussing the gospel, we don’t know much about friendship. We need to listen and seek to serve, not just talk.

How does the Bible define witnessing? In the Great Commission as expressed by Luke, we have central truths to which we are witnesses (Lk 24:48). At the ascension, Christ’s last words command the disciples to witness about him, a person (Acts 1:8). In the Gospels we see the writers selecting incidents from the life of Christ to convey the gospel. The background for the word witness is the law court. To witness is to testify that Christ is who he said he is. Such testimony is a means to an end—to give an eyewitness account of the truth (1 Jn 1:1-3).

Studying in the Swiss Alps at L’Abri in the 1960s with Francis and Edith Schaeffer, my wife and I had little idea that God would use us to help someone find God’s grace. A young man, Chris, arrived one afternoon when our community was working in the gardens and carpentry shop, cleaning and cooking. He was a student of religion at the University of Pennsylvania, touring Europe to learn about life. He eagerly joined in with those of us from every continent who had come to search for truth. He liked the intellectual stimulation, friendliness and high morals, and seemed confident in himself. In this man’s eyes, Jesus was intriguing but unnecessary to living the good life. One day I asked him to read Paul’s account of why he had transferred his confidence from self-righteousness to a gift-righteousness. Pondering this question, Chris began to spend time alone, reading Scripture and asking God to make Christ real to him. Later that summer we parted with a
promise to see each other back in Philadelphia.

At the same time that I was getting to know Chris, a young woman named Franny, whom I knew from Philadelphia, was also studying at L’Abri. Franny had been raised in a reputable New England family and had moved to Philadelphia two years previously. Following her religious upbringing was important to her, so she sought out a church with the refined atmosphere and high liturgy to which she was accustomed. It wasn’t long before her cousin, who had become a Christian, contacted her and introduced her to his Christian friends. Providentially, one of them belonged to a group of students at Westminster Theological Seminary who had a burden for evangelism. Each Sunday these students would invite friends to church and then to the pastor’s home that night for a discussion. Franny protested that if anyone was a Christian, she certainly was.

Slowly, however, realization of her unbelief began to dawn on her. In her own words, “I found myself confronted with my self-delusion at each church service as I said the Apostles’ Creed. I got to a point where, after I began ‘I believe in God the Father Almighty,’ I became silent for the rest of the recitation. I admitted I didn’t believe anything else in that creed. I had come to realize that my supposed faith was nothing more than a cultural tradition—a warm nostalgia.”

She began to search in earnest. Again in God’s providence, he brought a speaker and author to the city—and he was from her religious tradition! His name was J. I. Packer. Eagerly she attended his lectures on the epistle to the Ephesians. She was dumbfounded by the depth and richness of Scripture and by the fact that her own church (Episcopal) had once been united in teaching the importance of new birth. At the meetings she was introduced to a Baptist business executive who mailed her a copy of Anglican bishop J. C. Ryle’s book on the confessional statement of her church (the Thirty-Nine Articles), which she began to read. Several weeks later, Franny called me. “Could you come to my apartment as soon as possible? This is all making sense. I believe! I want to talk to you.” This is the background that later led to her visit to L’Abri with two of her Christian girlfriends.

While at L’Abri, Franny caught Chris’s eye, and they agreed to see each other back in Philadelphia. Since I was serving the students at the University of Pennsylvania through InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Chris joined the group and started going to church. He and Franny, both new Christians, began to date and soon were married. As the years have passed,
our friendship has continued. In a unique twist to this story of evangelism, Chris joined the staff of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and is now my supervisor! How I long for those reading this book to be used by God in bringing others to Christ. Aside from worshiping God, there is nothing else in this world that is more deeply fulfilling.

**The Difference Between the Gospel and Our Testimony**

The content of our message is Christ and God, not our journey to faith. Our personal testimony may be included, but witnessing is more than reciting our spiritual autobiography. Specific truths about a specific person are the subject of our proclamation. A message has been committed to us—a word of reconciliation to the world (2 Cor 5:19).

Good evaluation questions to keep in mind after hearing a testimony are “How much did I learn about Christ? How much about the speaker? Which was more prominent?” When people are very much in love, you find them extolling many things about their loved one and not always focusing on themselves. I still remember the change that came over an especially shy girl every time she got the chance to talk about her boyfriend. You couldn’t keep her quiet! It is the same with a healthy testimony about our lover Christ (see appendix 1.B).

Why is it important to distinguish between gospel truths and testimony? In an age of religious pluralism, we find many who are testifying. I’ll never forget the time when I had been speaking to a young man about the change Christ had made in my life. His sincere response was, “Listening to New Age music does the same for me.” What would you have said in reply? Some people recommend faith in a guru or in a technique of meditation or in self or in relationships. Many cite experiences of a change in life. If our witness has no truth content, we can expect the typical response: “That’s interesting. I’m glad for you, but what you have isn’t for me.” Can you imagine the apostle Paul saying, “I just have this warm feeling in my heart”?

Faith is not to be looked on as a separate entity (“I wish I had your faith”) but as an ability given by God that is valid only because it connects us with Jesus Christ.

It is worth noting that the New Testament Christians never attempted to establish the truth of Christianity on their inward experiences. . . .

To put it another way, we never find Paul trying to prove the truth of Christianity to others “because of the difference it has made in my life.”
**Distinguishing Our Role from God’s Is Crucial**

The crucial thing to remember in evangelism is the distinction between our responsibility and God’s. Our task is to faithfully present the gospel message by our lives and our lips. Any definition of our task that includes results is confusing our responsibility with God’s prerogative, which is regeneration. Picture a fragile, thin-stemmed wine glass. Now think of a rock the size of a basketball. Imagine lifting that rock and dropping it into that delicately constructed glass. Shattered. We too will be broken if we try to carry something that only God can carry. We plant and water; God gives the increase (1 Cor 3:5-9). We may reap—but only when God has brought the grain to maturity.

The question of whether or not we are evangelizing cannot be settled by counting the number of converts. In that case, many faithful missionaries who have seen no converts from years of labor would have to be rebuked for lack of witnessing. To define evangelism in terms of results is too broad. Then its essence becomes a quantitative measurement: if there are no results, then no evangelism has been done. I do not mean to suggest we should not evaluate both our results and nonresults, building a holy dissatisfaction with nonresults. We are not content with never catching any fish when fishing (Lk 5:4-11) or having empty seats at God’s kingdom banquet (Lk 14:15-24). Have you ever pleaded for lost people with deep sorrow as did Jesus and Paul? Have you wept?

It is just as misleading to narrow our definition of evangelism to the type of meeting, literature, appeal or Bible passage used. If we did this, then we would be embarrassed to find little evangelism done in the New Testament times. Can you find a biblical example of the methods employed in today’s typical evangelistic rally and appeal? Rather, we need to evaluate all supposed evangelism by the question “What truth was taught?” If we think wrongly about our definition of evangelism, we are likely to act wrongly in our methods of evangelism (see appendix 1.M).

In the Bible we have many examples of witnessing from which we can draw numerous principles. Studying the way Jesus interacted with people and the way the apostles witnessed in the Spirit can help in our own witness. From these models of witnessing, however, I will mention only one. The passage is an account of Paul’s witness before Agrippa (Acts 26:16-29), and it highlights the characteristic of bold, conscience-directed speech.

Paul describes himself as appointed by God as a servant and a witness (a good combination to keep in mind). In a series of striking contrasts, the goal
of the mission is summarized as nothing less than conversion. Repentance and evidence of it are his major concerns. Paul centers on fulfillment of Scripture and Christ’s death and resurrection. He speaks to Agrippa’s conscience—an element often neglected in witnessing. Genuine witnessing involves persuading people to convert but stops short of evaluating the success only in terms of results.

There are two main ways that we can study the presentation of the gospel. First, we can study the Bible itself, especially the book of Acts, the Epistles and the life of Christ. Second, we can study the history of the Christian church. That is, we can look at the revivals and, in particular, the people whose preaching has been honored in the conversion of others. From such study, Martyn Lloyd-Jones has drawn the following foundational principles for evangelism:

1. The supreme object of the work of evangelism is to glorify God, not to save souls.
2. The only power that can do this work is the Holy Spirit, not our own strength.
3. The one and only medium through which the Spirit works is the Scriptures; therefore, we “reason out of the Scriptures” like Paul did.
4. These preceding principles give us the true motivation for evangelism—a zeal for God and a love for others.
5. There is a constant danger of heresy through a false zeal and employment of unscriptural methods.4

Understanding that God, not us, is the evangelizer (the one who brings results) is wonderfully liberating. This makes witnessing an adventure in which we merely ride along with God as he moves out. We don’t force open any doors, just walk through the ones he opens! In The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, C. S. Lewis allegorically describes the sensation of riding on Christ (symbolized as the lion Aslan) over the wall into the enemy’s territory, as he confronts the power of sin to bring rebirth.

“And now,” said Aslan presently . . . “we have a long journey to go. You must ride on me.” . . . And with a great heave he rose underneath [the children] and then shot off, faster than any horse could go, down hill and into the thick of the forest.

That ride was perhaps the most wonderful thing that happened to them in Narnia. Have you ever had a gallop on a horse? Think of that; and then take
away the heavy noise of the hoofs and the jingle of the bits and imagine instead the almost noiseless padding of the great paws. Then imagine instead of the black or grey or chestnut back of the horse the soft roughness of golden fur, and the mane flying back in the wind. And then imagine you are going about twice as fast as the fastest racehorse. But this is a mount that doesn't need to be guided and never grows tired. He rushes on and on.

It was nearly midday when they found themselves looking down a steep hillside at a castle. . . . No face looked over the battlements and the gates were fast shut. And Aslan, not at all slacking his pace, rushed straight as a bullet towards it.

Next moment the whole world seemed to turn upside down, and the children felt as if they had left their insides behind them; for the Lion had gathered himself together for a greater leap than any he had yet made and jumped—or you may call it flying rather than jumping—right over the castle wall.

Here's a story of how I rode on God's back (and the prayers of a Christian family). It all began with a father who was concerned about a college student who wanted to date his daughter. Since the young man was not a believer, the father and daughter agreed that the only “date” would be on Sunday mornings at church. They told him to come talk to me about the Lord—and he did!

I was skeptical as a lanky Colombian with a ponytail settled on the sofa in my office. One hour and forty minutes later, I had become hopeful and encouraged by his interest in spiritual things and the Bible. He had already been attending a good church for three months; God's Spirit was definitely working. As I told him the story of the conversion of two “religious” men—Paul and the rich, moral young man—a light seemed to come on. He too considered himself religious and moral, but now he saw his pride, hypocrisy and guilt before a holy and loving God. I repeatedly warned him not to play with God in order to win favor with this Christian young woman.

Two weeks later Pablo came to tell me his story. When he left my office after the first visit, he went to a park for several hours and read his Bible, thought, prayed and reviewed the Scriptures we had gone over, and eventually repented of his sin. He said:

The next day I was changed. I felt joy, peace, forgiveness. Before, I only saw religion as mental acceptance of certain historical facts: Jesus lived in the Middle East, Jesus rose from the dead, etc. Now I feel the meaning of those facts.

That night my friends were drinking and had rented a porno video. As
soon as I realized what it was, I couldn’t stay in the house. I got up and left. Jesus would not want me to watch this. They were shocked and worried about me. I didn’t know how to explain to them. But they know I’m into God now and are suspicious, yet curious.

Later, I wrote a letter to a friend, who has a good job and money but is depressed and lonely, telling her what I had found: “Jesus is the Savior for our sins.” She thinks I’m just young and have a Christian girlfriend, and I’ll grow up someday.

Every day now I’m God-conscious. When I read the Bible, it’s like I’m listening; it seems to be speaking to me and taking me somewhere. I am much more aware of my sin now, but also of my sorrow for sinning before God (Psalm 51), and have experienced release from guilt. As I face temptations daily, I’m surprised at how I can now resist some of them. I feel strangely stronger. God has become more important than my career plans and the girl that I like. I could never meet all her needs and vice versa. Each of us needs God to be number one. It seems that God has even arranged our summer so that we will see very little of each other for two months. This is good. I have a lot of reading and evaluating to do.

I love to ask new babes in Christ, “What’s it like?” and just listen. Of course, I’m comparing it with Scripture—especially 1 John, which was written to give the marks of true salvation and assurance. I avoid telling them they are saved. The Holy Spirit gives assurances as they see the fruits of a changing life. How thankful I am for the prayers and wisdom of the Christian family who took Pablo to church and for a church that gives the gospel “straight.” Wow! Will you pray and speak to someone today? Invite them to church?

I have begun this examination of evangelism by describing the idea of witness. Now let’s shift to a scriptural study of what constitutes the “whole gospel.” We’ll do this both negatively (by way of contrast with a partial gospel) and positively (by way of presenting an outline and commentary on the central elements of the gospel).

While I was revising this book, my phone rang. What follows is a paraphrase of what a frustrated woman said to me. She identified her affiliation for thirty-five years with a local church and denomination that are considered to be theologically sound and evangelistically zealous. In its creed the "doctrines of grace" are explicit. Its evangelism training has been widely used. Its school has educated thousands. In addition to teaching at the church school for twenty years, this woman has engaged in an evangelistic ministry to children for twenty years. Why was she upset and asking my advice? "There is so little evidence of deep change in the lives of many of those who have professed faith in Christ, especially the young people I teach."

This is a woman who has been trained in what many consider to be the best evangelism program. She has observed for two decades or more the "results." What she describes is widespread throughout the evangelical sub-culture. It is a global problem: "saved" Christian young people who are merely adapting externally to the patterns of their church culture. Churches who are operating on the principle of "presumptive regeneration," a term used among the Puritans in early America who faced the same dilemma, presuming children of Christian parents are born again as long as they conform outwardly and have a head knowledge of Scripture. Young people who show no outward evidence of moral deviance at the age of twelve (or there about) are enrolled in the church membership class for about six weeks. At completion, a church leader listens passively to their testimony. If they use the right phrases they are formally received into the local church the next Sunday. In Baptist churches, the procedure is immersion in water.
based on a credible profession of faith. But are any searching questions asked? How can we guard against cheap grace and mere intellectual assent with little evidence of a changed life? How can we discern any idols still lurking in the heart?

We begin to notice the prevalence of the “two-stages” testimony, typically summarized in words like these: “I received Jesus as my Savior when I was six and prayed with my Sunday school teacher, but I made him Lord when I really started living like a Christian at twenty-two in my first year of graduate school.” Complacency in doctrinally orthodox churches regarding both the content of evangelism training and confusion on how to evaluate professions of faith lead to “Christians” who are self-deceived and to a God who is dishonored. There are helpful resources discussing whether Christ can be your Savior but not your Lord.¹

**MERE PROFESSION OR REAL POSSESSION?**

What can we do to avoid misleading people, resulting in a profession of faith in Christ without actually possessing Christ? It is sad to realize that false professions of faith are frequent in the church. Most of us know people who seemed to be drawn toward the gospel and yet didn’t step over the line of faith. Can this be the explanation for the conflict between statistics that show a large number of professing born-again Christians and the continuing moral tailspin in the world? What I wish to do in this section is set forth the biblical view of conversion, a conversion of the whole personality in all its faculties, and contrast it with types of synthetic conversions.

Our desire must be nothing less than to see the whole individual converted. We are looking to God for changed persons, not just a response from one segment of a personality. God’s regenerative work is a thorough renewing that involves all the faculties of mind, emotions and will. Scriptural language calls this a “new creation,” a “new birth.” People are either saved or lost. To weaken this radical but scriptural cleavage of mankind by suggesting a third category for people is an attack on the biblical doctrine of regeneration. There is no such thing as being a half Christian—for instance, being a “Christian” but not a Spirit-baptized Christian; being a “Christian” but not accepting Christ as Lord; being a “Christian” but living a life continually characterized by being carnal (spiritual adultery).

A Christian has the Holy Spirit, being baptized, indwelt, sealed and sanctified by him (Acts 2:38-39; Rom 8:9, 11, 13-15; 1 Cor 3:16; 12:12-13; Eph
1:13). A Christian has acknowledged the lordship of Christ (Acts 22:10; Rom 10:9-10; 1 Jn 5:1-5). All Christians turn away from sin (Rom 6:1-14; 1 Jn 3:3-10). The low level of spirituality among us has caused the term Christian to become so insipid that we propose various adjectives to restore its flavor. I have no argument with any movement to raise the norm of our spiritual life. I suggest, though, that the best way to raise it is to deepen our understanding of regeneration, not tack on new dimensions. If God has already given us the greatest present in the world, will he withhold the ribbon? Nevertheless, we find our joy in the gift not decorations (Rom 8:32).

Regeneration and conversion are words to describe two different ways of viewing salvation. Regeneration is viewing salvation from God’s side; it is an instantaneous impartation of new life to the soul. We may or may not be conscious of the exact moment this happened to us. Conversion, on the other hand, is viewing salvation from our perspective. It is a process of the entire work of God’s grace from the first dawning of understanding and seeking to the final closing with Christ in new birth. For some, this is a period of years; for others merely an hour. We respond in time to God’s action in eternity.²

Lack of understanding of the normal stages of conversion has led to confused counseling on the part of well-meaning evangelists. To dispel this confusion, a closer look at the phases is helpful. But be advised, the Spirit does not always work according to our timetable. God does not limit himself to a specific design. There is a pattern, however, even amidst the unique circumstances surrounding a conversion like Paul’s.³ It helps to realize people are not always regenerated the first time they begin to call on the name of the Lord. To confuse the first workings of response in the conversion process with the final is extremely dangerous, for non-Christians can be deluded into thinking they are saved before they really are. Our forefathers made some helpful distinctions in these areas. They called an unbeliever, apparently untouched by any saving operations of God’s Spirit, a “sleeping sinner.” An “awakened” or “seeking sinner” was one who had begun to respond to God’s prior working of his Spirit. A positive response would manifest itself in a conviction of sin and an active call on Christ for salvation, which would result in the sinner willingly exercising faith and repentance. Each of these stages emphasizes a different relationship with God. Today, however, the tendency is to rush a person into the kingdom at the slightest indication of an interest in spiritual things. Jesus was cautious at times (e.g., Nicodemus,
the moral young man) and tested the spiritual conviction of his would-be disciples.

What a joy it is to meet people prepared by God’s Spirit to receive the gospel! We pray that the convicting power of the Holy Spirit will come on these seeking and awakened sinners. We don’t require them to stand outside the kingdom for months, but say, in the words of a hymn,

Come, ye needy, come, and welcome;
God’s free bounty glorify;
True belief and true repentance,
Every grace that brings us nigh;
Without money . . .
Come to Jesus Christ and buy . . .
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pity joined with power:
He is able . . .
He is willing; doubt no more.

We are anxious, in a good sense, to see such people move beyond a general sensitivity to the gospel, so we point them and urge them toward Christ, the door. What can we do when we find someone who seems to be coming under conviction? Sometimes these people get stuck at the brink of decision. Here are some principles in guiding them.

First, counsel them in a way that focuses on action, not talk. In other words, resist counseling at length without giving them imperatives on which to act.

Second, urge them to cast themselves on the mercy of the Lord. We are not to hear their confessions and become their priest, for this may be a way they relieve their guilt.

Third, use the Bible in an effort to impress them with God’s counsel, not your wisdom.

Finally, we must be genuine. Our entire emotional concern is to represent the Lord and to help the seeker. Specifically we should:

1. Encourage them. God is bringing them to a crisis.
2. Warn the hesitant and stubborn—not that they can’t be saved but that they are not choosing to be saved. Tell them to ask God for faith.
3. Emphasize the sin there is in relapse—greater judgment accrues from greater knowledge (Heb 6:4-6; 2 Pet 2:21).
4. Encourage them not to neglect Christian meetings—“faith comes from hearing” (Rom 10:17).

5. Point them to a personal Savior—not just to meaning in life, peace of heart or the like—because the root of our rebellion is personal sin against God (Jer 29:13).


7. Challenge them to admit what sin they are clinging to.

8. Show them how to pray; suggest Psalm 51.

Is it possible for a person sincerely to profess faith in Christ but not possess the real thing? Yes, certainly. A friend told me how he awakened to the fact that something was amiss in the body of Christ. He had been striving to incite love and obedience among some church young people and had been invited to speak to these “Christians.” The weekend retreat was fast approaching, but he had no peace about the message he should bring. He began to wonder why it was that the faith of these young people always needed “jacking up.” He began to wonder if they had any real faith in the first place. He was afraid of being thought of as fanatical or supercritical, but he decided to begin by asking the group some basic questions.

The first night of the retreat arrived, and he opened up with two questions: “How many of you, if you died tonight, would know you’d go to heaven?” All raised their hands. “How many of you really want to do the will of God—allowing that you can’t obey perfectly—but you truly purpose in your heart to do it?” Only one-fifth raised their hands. How could he square the responses to these questions with clear biblical teaching that says that true salvation not only secures the forgiveness of rebels but their obedience as well (Heb 5:9)? He decided to preach evangelistically that entire conference and saw many come to faith in Christ.

At a women’s college I was having lunch in the dining hall with a student who had regularly attended the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Bible studies. She seemed to have high morals and was kind to others. She had very little to say when it came to how the Scriptures were part of her life; she also failed to express any specific biblical content in her witness to non-Christians. She was friendly and outgoing. Many assumed that she was a Christian. I asked her to what she attributed her confidence that she was converted.

“When I was thirteen,” she replied, “I remained in my church sanctuary after the morning service. It was a lovely day, and the sun was shining...
through the stained glass windows, creating vivid patterns. I felt all warm, good and peaceful.”

I sat there waiting for her to say more, but that was it! Many people have a good hope but with absolutely no foundation for it.

Another girl at a state university came to me full of frustration. For a year she had been quite active in various Christian activities. She prayed, read the Bible and sang heartily. Her peers assumed she was a Christian, but these were her words: “I need the friendship and acceptance of others. This school is so big. It's a lonely place. I didn't fit in with the wilder girls. The Christian group is so friendly. I fit in easily, but I can't face it any longer. I'm not really one of you. I've come to admit I'm not a Christian.”

Without a thorough understanding of the holistic approach to evangelism, such people who have never been converted may continue being deceived about their true state and thus become a hindrance to the church, or they will drop out, joining the ranks of the disillusioned and become either numb or hostile to religion. Hardened by years of no response to the Word of God, relatively few of these people seem to convert. We must help them and not mislead them.

God's Word is not silent on this issue either.

**Parable of the four soils (Mt 13:1-23).** Two of the seeds sown by the sower begin to grow but do not mature because the soil is bad. There is an initial response of joy, hearing, growth, but that response does not continue because of a lack of roots and shade. The thorns showed that the soil of the heart was not good.

**Simon the sorcerer (Acts 8:9-24).** This man is described as believing and desiring more spiritual power in his life. He was also baptized. Yet he is not truly converted for he offers money for spiritual power (simony). Peter says he should perish and that Simon has “no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God... You are full of bitterness and captive to sin.”

**Herod (Mt 2:1-18).** Because we are so familiar with the outcome of Herod's inquiry for Christ, we forget that he impressed many with his “Christian” zeal at first. He took an interest in the Bible; he sought out wise men to help him with prophecy; he went to the trouble of finding Christ. He did not ask Christ to be brought to him but, in apparent humility, wanted to go to him. Not only that, he professed a correct view of Christ, for he said he wanted to worship him.
CONVERSION
(seen from the human viewpoint)
A process of preliminary inward change towards genuine repentance and faith in Christ (converted)

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<td>by faith alone in Christ alone</td>
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<td>Gospel truths</td>
<td>God, hopes</td>
<td>releases control</td>
<td>for a changed life until glorified</td>
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Timeline: A person’s process varies in time and intensity, and may stop before conversion.

REGENERATION
(seen from the divine viewpoint)
A point in God’s plan when a person is spiritually reborn (regenerated)

See Rom 8:29-30; Eph 1:3-7, 11-14, 2:4-5, 8-10

The activity of God underlies what is happening spiritually to a person if they progress to culmination in conversion.

The Holy Spirit begins to arouse a person whom God has called; convincing, convicting, creating a desire to turn from self-efforts, trusting in Christ for salvation.

There is a point at which regeneration (new birth) occurs. We pass from spiritual death to a new creature in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). The time of a person’s profession of faith may or may not coincide with the divine Spirit’s justification/regeneration. The validity of our redemption/salvation is evidenced by the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) and identifying marks (1 John).

Figure 1.
The Passover crowd (Jn 2:23-25). Here are personal witnesses of Jesus' miracles who even “believed in his name.” Yet their lack of saving trust is clear, for it says that Jesus did not entrust himself to them. He knew all men; he knew what was in a man. In John 8:31-59 we see again a group of people described as believers yet who do not hold to Christ's teaching; they end up trying to stone him!

The enlightened Jews (Heb 6:4-9). These people experienced the influence of God's Spirit but not his saving influence. What is said of them (that “they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace,” and that it is impossible for them “to be brought back to repentance”) cannot be said of a true Christian. In verse 9 the writer shifts his address to those who are Christians: “Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation.”

The lordship people (Mt 7:21-23). These professors seem to have it all. Not only do they confess the lordship of Christ, but they do so fervently. Their theology and piety seem sound. They manifest spiritual power by prophecy, driving out demons and performing miracles. But their wills have not been converted. Their lack of true regeneration is evident because Christ consigns them to hell as evildoers.

Clearly, we have sufficient warning from both our experiences with others and in Scripture that a partial response to the gospel is not only dangerous but prevalent. We should be cautious in identifying outwardly favorable reactions with regeneration. Inquirer or seeker is a more lucid and helpful way to denote people who indicate an interest in the gospel. Initially, it's better to say a person professed faith, rather than “became a Christian” last week.

What an awful thought that many will come before Christ thinking they are included and yet find they are excluded. We cannot shirk our responsibility to encourage people to “examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves” (2 Cor 13:5). They need a confrontation in love, not a spiritual quick fix designed to make them feel at ease with disobedience. They need salvation. We can turn them to the Beatitudes, the first letter of John and Psalm 51, urging them to read these and ask God to show them where they stand with him. This is biblical self-examination—using that aspect of God's law that gives the evidences for new life. It differs from morbid introspection in that it uses an objective criterion and avoids wallowing in subjective analysis.
What then are we trusting God to do? What do we mean when we say the whole gospel is for the whole personality? To respond adequately to these questions we need to examine the faculties comprising our personality. We also need to see how a false conversion can result when any one of these faculties is not touched by the Spirit of God.

**Misleading Partial Responses by the Mind, Emotions, Will**

*The mind.* I made a courtesy call to the chaplain’s office while visiting a small private college. I was greeted by a big smile and warm handshake. We talked amiably about our concern for ministering to students and the needs of the campus. The Bible, Christ and witness were all words falling naturally from his lips. I was excited to meet a Christian with this calling. All the right bells seemed to be ringing as he said the words I wanted to hear.

*All head knowledge.* Later that day, I investigated the programs he was offering. I talked with students who knew him. Some questions were raised in my mind, so I returned to ask the chaplain about his own beliefs. Although somewhat taken aback by my boldness, he agreed in a condescending way to respond. Having grown up in an evangelical Christian home, he had always wanted to help people. He felt the role of a campus minister would give him the most freedom from supervision and stereotypes to influence others in developing their potential.

At one of the leading liberal seminaries he had “come of age” and repudiated the naiveté of his evangelical roots. The Bible was a source book of the “faith of the early church,” and the Judeo-Christian tradition was one of many valid expressions of the human search for the ultimate. Jesus? Well, he was an enlightened man, but you had to peel away the myths and legends that had grown up around him to find the “real” Jesus.

I walked away from that chaplain’s office saddened to know the truth about a man with religious knowledge but no personalizing or proclaiming of the truths of the gospel. I had poured my interpretation into the words he used as mere symbols.

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated example. Often Christians think they have led someone to Christ but, in fact, the person was only giving the answers the Christian wanted to hear.

The opposite extreme, however, is equally dangerous.

*Little head knowledge.* In my ministry to college students, I have the opportunity to welcome new students into the world of the college campus. I
remember one fellow who seemed happy to meet other “Jesus people,” as he called us. His enthusiasm was contagious. Later I found that his previous encounters with Christ and Christian fellowship were in a milieu that distrusted and despised the mind. Spontaneity, authenticity, joy and openness in relationships were the hallmarks of the group in which he was nurtured. But there was not much Bible teaching.

In hardly a month he was missing from our fellowship and was not in any other Christian group. He didn’t have time to study the Scriptures, and when he did, he had the habit of opening the Bible anywhere, looking for a “blessing.”

He had enthroned vivid, firsthand, emotional experiences as the criteria and content of faith. Now at college he met others with a variety of experiences and opinions that were not even close to Christianity. But their experiences were just as intense. Why was his “religious trip” any more valid? they asked. Before long he was openly denying the faith and continues to do so to this day. He had never really been converted, for he did not make truth the criterion of experience. There was no submission of his rebellious mind to the authority of Scripture or his thoughts to the review of higher thoughts.

If the content of the gospel is Jesus Christ, the intention of the gospel is to bind the mind of the unbeliever to the authority of the New Testament and to the lordship of Jesus Christ. These are not two separate entities. The New Testament is the Word of our Lord, and therefore, one of the signs of saving faith is a willingness to keep his teachings (1 Jn 2:3-5).

The balance: Thinking God’s thoughts, not judging God’s ways. Briefly, the biblical teaching on the mind is that our mind is not to be bypassed in our Christian faith, nor is it to be ultimately trusted. Our mind is God-given. John Stott puts it this way:

Our rationality is part of the divine image. To deny our rationality is therefore to deny our humanity, to become less than human beings. Scripture forbids us to behave like horses or mules which are “without understanding” and commands us instead in our understanding to be “mature.” Many imagine that faith is entirely irrational. But Scripture never sets faith and reason over against each other as incompatible. On the contrary, faith can only arise and grow within us by the use of our minds. “Those who know thy name put their trust in thee”; their trust springs from their knowledge of the trustworthiness of God’s character. Again, “Thou dost keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusts in thee.” Here trusting in God and staying the mind on God are synonyms, and perfect peace is the result.
The Fall has infected our minds so that apart from the Spirit they cannot come to the right conclusions morally. They do not interpret “facts” (evidence) as God does. The proper function of the mind is to think God’s thoughts after him. The improper use is to sit in judgment on God and his ways. Our minds are not “neutral”; they will not naturally respond and follow the truth of the gospel though they may still operate on certain principles of rationality such as the law of contradiction. They suppress moral implications of the truth (Rom 1:18). They are at enmity with God (Rom 8:7). As fallen men and women, we must repent of the desire to be mentally autonomous. We must cast down our vain imaginings and proud thoughts of ourselves. None of us will be called who continues in his own wisdom.

A rather humorous story illustrates this truth. A man walked into a psychiatrist’s office one day, insisting he was dead. After several sessions with this “dead” man, the psychiatrist at last thought he had hit on a solution to his patient’s problem. He assigned him to go to the library and write an extensive paper on the characteristics of dead people. The doctor did not hear from him for several months. Then one day he received in the mail a large manuscript, the fruit of his patient’s labors on this topic. One of his main conclusions was the interesting fact that dead people do not bleed. Overjoyed, the psychiatrist called the man in for an appointment. As soon as the man arrived, he began once again to proclaim that he was dead. At that moment the doctor whipped out a large hatpin and pricked the man’s finger. Blood rushed out profusely. “There now, what conclusion do you draw from that?” asked the doctor. After a moment’s hesitation, yet without blinking, the patient looked the doctor straight in the eye and exclaimed, “Well, what do you know; dead people do bleed after all!”

Likewise, in spite of all the evidence, the minds of sinful men and women cling to twisted views like a child clutching a favorite toy. We change all evidence to fit our presuppositions.

We are not in any way, however, to encourage non-Christians to put their minds on the shelf in considering the claims of Christ. We invite them to use their minds. “‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the Lord” (Is 1:18). Paul disputed or argued. He used logic. He did everything possible to clarify and to help unbelievers understand. The apostles used educational evangelism. Indeed, the very vehicle by which God gave his revelation—words—assumes engagement with our minds.

In witnessing to the whole person we should use methods that commu-
nicate to the mind. Admittedly, our culture (and worse yet, some parts of the church) rely on another approach to influence people—distracting the mind so that it can be bypassed. (Francis Schaeffer uses the illustration of the burglar who uses meat to distract the dog while he goes about his real business of robbery.) Thus elections are won, products sold and converts produced by creating a pleasing image and obtaining an uncritical response—rather than by reasonably discussing issues or merits. We must forsake any kind of evangelism that either overly exalts the mind or unduly neglects it.

Not intellectualism, but using truth to inform and humble the mind.

Emotions. Jill sat next to me crying—and I never carry a handkerchief in church! I overheard someone say it had been a “powerful” service. It was over now, and I sat with my friend in the pew trying to recall the meeting. One of those testifying had choked up and was unable to finish. Then the preacher started in on the love of God. Why, you’d be a fool not to respond.

Only emotional reaction. My friend Jill then broke into my recollections. “How did he know how much I want to be loved? It seems he was speaking right to me. Everything I ever wanted he says Jesus will give me... Then that long song at the end. The music just did something to me, and he kept pleading with us. After a while it got to me—how I’d messed my life up. I wanted to do something. I didn’t want to disappoint the speaker so I raised my hand. Something, I’m not sure what, was making me feel sorry, hopeful and confused all at once. I was so shaken I couldn’t think straight about anything. I don’t know what’s happening to me.”

Was Jill converted? What do you think? Let’s look at the opposite end of the emotional spectrum.

No emotional reaction. “Well, that’s the truth and you can take it or leave it.” I’m not sure the preacher said exactly that, but that certainly was the impression he conveyed. His complacency and bored matter-of-factness permeated the entire sermon, and he ended it the same way—so abrupt, so cold. He spoke on Christ’s love for sinners, but he gave no indication that he wanted people to respond. He showed no interest in his audience. There was no pleading with them to come to Christ. It reminded me of the student who approached me on campus and wanted to show me a gospel booklet. He was halfway through his presentation before he looked up at my face and saw that I wanted to speak. It was all so mechanical. So impersonal. So unreal. He also talked of a God of love, but I felt he didn’t care at all about me.
The balance: Emotions led by truth. The particular evangelical subculture in which we have been converted will often set the pattern for much of our subsequent growth, attitudes and view of spirituality. One subculture will bring forth emotionally stunted converts who often wear masks. They sometimes seem stiff, unnatural and embarrassed when the talk goes beyond clichés and into “what does this mean to you?” Another subculture has many who effect an exuberance that is all the more hollow. Perhaps they are trying to cover over what is lacking in their faith; maybe it’s an unconscious mimic of what their group leaders convey as “spiritual.” What can we do to safeguard our evangelism so that it does not run to either extreme of stoicism or emotionalism?

On the subject of emotions, evangelicals are schizophrenic. Some have been so threatened by the accusation of emotionalism that they backpedal as hard as they can. They fall into an unloving smugness. A religious publisher lauds the academic credentials of his writers, or the Christian school president points to her large percentage of faculty with PhDs. Others have been so bored with the sterility of the lives of supposed believers that they rush forward, seeking experience after experience and follow anyone who exudes a warm glow. All evangelistic endeavors must be positive, peppy and have a leader who can “attract young people” (good looking, athletic and humorous). If you believe my analysis is extreme, I simply invite you to peruse some evangelical magazines and popular books, and visit churches and fellowship groups outside your normal circles.

Once again, we hold on to part of the truth while missing the beautiful balance of Scripture. Emotions are part of the image of God in us. If our feelings have been legitimately roused, they should be expressed, not suppressed. Emotions have a valid place in our lives, but they are not to lead, with emotions and will conforming. We must allow truth to grip us.

Nothing sets the heart on fire like truth. Truth is not cold and dry. On the contrary, it is warm and passionate. And whenever new vistas of God’s truth open up to us, we cannot just contemplate. We are stirred to respond, whether to penitence or to anger or to love or to worship. Think of the two disciples walking to Emmaus on the first Easter afternoon while the risen Lord spoke to them. When He vanished, they said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked to us on the road, while He opened to us the Scriptures?” . . . What was the cause of their spiritual heartburn? It was Christ’s opening the Scriptures to them! . . . As F. W. Faber once said, “Deep theology is the best fuel of devotion; it readily catches fire, and once kindled it burns long.”

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Paul burst into an exhilarating doxology over doctrine (Eph 1:6-10)! It is gratifying to see some new thinking by evangelicals on our emotions. God made us in his image. He has emotions. Let’s quit denying ours!

In witnessing we must be emotional. How can we not? We’re talking of the deepest love in the world. We’re pressing on the conscience the awful anger of God against personal sin and social injustice. We’re communicating the reconciling peace of God. Our theme is the liberating joy of no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, the Jesus who wept over Jerusalem’s unbelief. Have you? It is said that some of the Puritans stained the floor with their tears as they prayed. Is there pain and unceasing sorrow in our hearts for anyone who is yet unconverted? What if we do experience these emotions for sinners in private? Is it wholesome to expose them in public? Very.

One fall night my wife, Suzanne, and I were at home together. The phone had rung several times with calls of one sort or another. I was beginning to become a little protective about my privacy. Just then the phone rang again. I reluctantly answered and heard the rough voice of an older man say, “Is this the Willie Metzger that used to live in Baltimore?”

“Yes,” I replied with hesitation. When he called me “Willie,” I knew this must be a voice out of the distant past. I was hoping that he wasn’t going to keep me guessing. He didn’t.

“Do you remember being on a busload of students headed for the IVCF Urbana Missionary Convention in Illinois?”

My reply was, “Of course.” But I was not completely honest, for by now I had been to many of these triennial conventions, and they were becoming one blurred recollection. It was now seventeen years since that particular bus ride.

The gruff voice continued, “Well, I was the driver for that bus, and you stayed up during the overnight drive and talked with me about my family problems and about Jesus Christ. I was housed near the convention, and you even came by my room one night to ask me to come with you to a meeting. I refused and kept drinking my beer and watching TV. Then, on the long ride home you urged me to consider becoming a Christian. I was skeptical and cynical. How could a young kid like you know the solution to the hard problems of marriage and job and money that I was facing?”

At that point I broke in, “Al! Yes, yes, I do remember you now. Go on.” I listened intently as the bus driver told me how he had put the Bible and a note I had given him on his closet shelf together with a letter his dad had
written him urging him to get right with God. Then, five months ago he reached up to get his jacket from that closet shelf. There he found the Bible and the two letters. He took them down and began to read. His heart was softened. Later that summer he went to hear a gospel preacher at the invitation of his son.

“I really got converted,” he said. “Since we last met I’ve become a truck driver. You know, those big eighteen-wheelers on interstate hauls. I’ve miraculously survived two bad crashes. God kept after me all those years. I’ve been baptized and joined a little church here. My wife and others in my family are Christians too. I found your phone number in Baltimore written in that Bible. So I called up, and your dad gave me your new number. I often thought of you, and I just wanted to let you know what’s happened. I don’t remember much of what you said to me years ago, but I remember your concern and sincerity, and I still have your note and the Bible. Keep loving people to the Lord, Willie, no matter how long it takes.”

We need to let our non-Christian friends know how we feel. Many of us are unemotional, numbed by our culture. We need verbally to affirm others as we see God’s gifts to them. We should struggle to express to others that we love them. How well I remember the time when I knew I couldn’t say anything more in a conversation with a younger relative. It seemed right to hug her, and the words came out, “Oh, how I wish you’d become a Christian!” On another occasion I was unconscious of the deep tone of concern that was coming through during an intense talk with an uncle of mine. He remarked that he hoped I would not suffer frustration and depression as a result of his unwillingness to be converted. He could see that I cared.

John Piper says,

Minimizing the importance of transformed feelings makes Christian conversion less supernatural and less radical. It is humanly manageable to make good decisions of the will. No supernatural power is required to pray prayers, sign cards, walk aisles, or even stop sleeping around. Those decisions are good ones, but they don’t prove anything spiritual has happened. Christian conversion, on the other hand, is a supernatural, radical thing. The heart is changed. And the evidence of it is not just new decisions but new affections and new feelings.

Negatively, the Apostle Paul says that those who go on in the same old way of “enmity, jealousy, fits of anger,” and “envy . . . will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:20-21). These are all feelings. They must change. Positively, Christians are commanded to have God-honoring feelings. We are com-
manded to feel joy (Philippians 4:4), hope (Psalm 42:5), fear (Luke 12:5), peace (Colossians 3:15), zeal (Romans 12:11), grief (Romans 12:15), desire (1 Peter 2:2), tenderheartedness (Ephesians 4:32), brokenness and contrition (James 4:9).

Moreover, faith itself has in it something that most people would call feeling. Saving faith means “receiving Christ.” “To all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). But receive as what? We usually say, as “Lord and Savior.” That’s right. But something more needs to be said. Saving faith also receives Christ as our Treasure. A non-treasured Christ is a non-saving Christ. Faith has in it this element of valuing, embracing, prizing, relishing of Christ. It is like a man who found a treasure hidden in a field and “from joy” sells all his treasures to have that field (Matthew 13:44).

Would it surprise you that not only students are coming to Christ but people of all ages? The woman who cuts my hair found that Jesus’ words cut open her heart. The man who came to my office to sell me insurance became “sold” on Jesus and is now in the ministry. Who has God brought into your life?

In witnessing we endeavor to touch the hearts of unbelievers. We want them to fall in love with Jesus. Isn’t it the love of Christ that draws sinners? Let’s allow for differences in the emotional makeup of people. But let’s never forget to involve their emotions.

One word of caution. If you have an especially forceful personality and can talk people into most anything, beware of manipulating others. This is a grave danger in evangelism among children or with an emotionally unstable person. To treat children or anyone else as saved on the basis of emotional reactions without further evidence may actually hinder them from seeking God truly and may result in their becoming bored with the gospel. Enthusiasm is easier to generate than continued obedience.

I realized the difficulty in refraining from pronouncing my sons “saved” when they were young because they said a spontaneous prayer, showed interest in Bible stories or sang loudly “Jesus Loves Me.” As their father, I was so excited to see them react emotionally to Christ. But were they converted? It is such a temptation to say yes, but were they acting out of conformity or from the heart? Only time and the tests of life would tell. It is only when we face a choice in which our will must be overridden in order to do the will of Christ that we have insight into the reality of our salvation. I rejoice in the fruit of grace that is now seen in their lives as men of God, radiating Christ in their family, church and workplace.
Not emotionalism but showing love and touching the heart.

**Will.** The desire for success and status is strong. Sometimes the church feeds it instead of calling it by its true name—pride. Here’s part of a letter written by a pastor to a young person going through a period of depression.

I’m writing to help you shake this feeling of uselessness that has overtaken you. Several times you have said that you don’t see how Christ can possibly use you—that you’re nobody special.

The church must bear part of the responsibility for making you feel as you do. I have in mind the success-story mentality of the church. Our church periodicals tell the story of John J. Moneybags who uses his influential position to witness for Christ. At the church youth banquet we have a testimony from all-American football star Ox Kickoffski, who commands the respect of his teammates when he witnesses for Christ. We’ve led you to think that if you don’t have the leverage of stardom or a big position in the business world, you might as well keep your mouth shut. . . . Nobody cares what Christ has done for you.

In addition, we make appeals stressing the “adventure of the Christian life,” or we say, “Try Jesus because things go better with him.” These are direct appeals to the will couched in terms of an exciting challenge. People get the impression that they can take up Jesus the same way they would take up jogging! These are attempts to trigger the will of a person by appeal to his or her human desires. It becomes a what's-in-it-for-me gospel.

For some, there is the fear of offending.

I had been putting off getting serious with God for quite a while. I enjoyed my Christian friends, and I knew I didn't have what they had. I just didn't want to face up to my need of forgiveness and to turn my life over to Christ as Lord. It was kind of easy just to slide along going to meetings. Nobody ever really put me on the spot about my salvation. Now that I am a Christian, I wish someone had confronted me earlier. I needed to hear that it was something I shouldn't put off.

Some are passive, unwilling to correct misconceptions and point to Christ's power.

I'm not ready yet to come to God. My motives are so selfish. Besides, I don't understand enough yet. I want all my questions answered first. I want to prepare myself more and come to God in just the right way. The pastor encouraged me to wait for God to move me. He didn't try to persuade me at all.
The balance: God moving sinners through persuasion. It is a mistake to appeal to the unbeliever’s will directly if we do not accompany such an appeal with biblical content. Why? Because such content is needed to instruct the mind in its choice and humble its sinful desires. It is possible to encourage unbelievers to arrive at decisions from false motives. They “become Christians” for what they can get out of it, such as coveting the speaker’s experience or happiness or success in life. The true reason for becoming a Christian is not that we may have a wonderful life but that we may be in a right relationship to God. Too many of our evangelistic methods are benefit-oriented. Phrases like “the adventure of the Christian life,” “the thrill and excitement,” and “Christ made me happy every day” are not balanced with the cost of discipleship. “The most serious of all dangers is that of seeking to produce decisions as a result of pressure brought to bear upon the listener’s will.” There is the danger of using our personality or stories to force listeners to respond to our appeal. Truth has neither convinced nor convicted them. Music can produce the same effect. People can sing a chorus repeatedly until they eventually become intoxicated. There is value in such things as music, fun, drama and videos to accompany evangelism, but they should not take the supreme and first position. They are aids and helps—not what actually produces the results. Connecting with people through their felt needs/desires is a start. Yet to mold the content of the gospel to satisfy such misleads people and produces me-centered “Christians.” Instead, confront the extreme narcissism (self-idolatry) of our culture, redirecting even legitimate human needs and humbling the sovereign self. Is your evangelism only relational? Take heed.

On the other hand, Scripture does appeal to the will. It is no laissez-faire approach. “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve” (Josh 24:15). “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters” (Is 55:1). “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened” (Mt 11:28). “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). True evangelists do pop the question. In fact, we are to plead, command, invite and beg! It is uncomfortable for us when we put people on the spot, yet we must not neglect to call for a response. I can recall times when I have struggled to do this.

I have found myself saying to someone, “This is really important; you ought to make up your mind. Perhaps you feel like I’m pressing you, but I only want to reflect the pressure of God’s Spirit who is calling you to respond. If you feel in your conscience the force of truth as contained in
Christ (not just because you don't want to disappoint me), then surrender your whole life to him." Our sobering words may bring spiritual conviction to people. We want them to face God now, for it is a matter of life or death. There is to be a tone of urgency and persuasion in our voice.

The sermons of great evangelists like Bunyan, Whitefield, Edwards and Spurgeon were all marked by direct questions and pleas put to unbelievers. So was their personal witnessing. We are told in the autobiography of Spurgeon of a woman who had come to him several times for counsel. She had seen her need of Christ after listening to his sermons and wanted further instruction on how to become a Christian. Spurgeon tediously went over the gospel with her on each occasion. She would always end the session with "Mr. Spurgeon, please pray for me." Spurgeon became exasperated and finally said, "Lady, pray for yourself, for I will not." This shocked her so much that she sought God directly and was soon converted.

There are astounding benefits that of course do come to believers (the assurance of heaven, forgiveness, joy, love and peace). Nonbelievers may only desire these things in a selfish way, so we should not convey to them the idea of waiting until they have only right motives for coming to Christ. They never will, simply because they cannot. Sinners are commanded to come now.

Not appealing to natural desires but inviting, persuading and commanding allegiance to a new leader.

**Summary: The Holy Spirit Touches the Whole Person**

To analyze human nature I have divided it into the three segments of mind, heart and will. But these are only aspects of a unified human personality; I do not mean to leave the impression that these are independent of each other.

People cannot give a unified response. Because sin has brought fragmentation we are not whole people. The way in which people come to Christ will vary depending on how sin has incapacitated them (it may have a stronger hold on one aspect than on another) and on their unique temperaments. Some will lead with their emotions, letting their minds catch up later. A cerebral person, on the other hand, may have difficulty responding emotionally. And people today seldom use their will in making decisions because our sensuous culture influences them to react according to their desires.

At the same time, I do not intend to say that people can make a proper response to Christ on one level without the others being involved. The
mind, heart and will are all involved to some extent in every action. Our evangelism must therefore affect the whole person, allowing that the response will be in accord with each unique personality and the way the Holy Spirit chooses to work.

May God grant that as we direct unbelievers to Christ we shall see more and more wholly converted people, people of whom we can say, “But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly [from the center of your being] obeyed [will] the form of teaching [mind] to which you were entrusted” (Rom 6:17). Directing people to trust in Christ alone can be hard work. It requires boldness and keeping our eye on pleasing God, not others.

Hundreds of years ago John Bunyan commended this ministry of “faithful dealing” with people who are merely talkers, having no true faith.

You [Faithful] did right to talk plainly to him. There is not enough of this faithful dealing with souls these days, and lack of that causes people to undervalue the Christian faith. Then when these talkative frauds, whose religion is only in word and who are debauched in their living and vain in their conversation, are admitted into the fellowship of Christians with the hope that they may be converted or contribute money, the people of the world are puzzled, the sincere are grieved, and Christianity is blemished. I wish that all Christians would deal with such as you have done. Then they would either be truly converted, or they would show their colors and leave the congregation of the saved.16

Theologically examining regeneration and saving faith has resulted in a change in the personal testimony of some, including me. I now understand my initial interest in Jesus Christ as the beginning of my awakening and not my conversion. I find myself dating my conversion much later, though I still don’t know the day. I now think of my conversion as closer to a time when I began to follow Jesus as my leader. As my life slowly took on a new direction, I had assurance of salvation. This new insight into what God was doing in my life seems to coincide with scriptural teaching. I would suggest we ask two questions of people who have made a profession of faith and have come to us for counsel.17

1. “What has Christ done for you?” (Is there an objective understanding of the main content of the gospel?)

2. “What has Christ done in you?” (Is there any objective evidence of new life, a changed heart, desires, attitudes, feelings?)
Often grace and the message of the cross mean little to people because they have no understanding of their peril. God is seen as a genial Santa Claus who has no wrath toward sin. They see themselves as basically good people who deserve heaven. To tell them “Jesus died for you” sounds nice and comforting, but they may wonder, why did he go to all that trouble? To get the idea straight, complete this story based on one in James Denney’s *The Death of Christ.*

A man is sitting on a pier fishing on a calm summer day. Suddenly another man comes running down the pier, dives into the water, and drowns. Having witnessed this, I explain to the fisherman, “This man died for you!” The fisherman, however, has great trouble understanding why the man needed to die for him. After all, he was in no danger that he could see.

Now, rewrite the story so that the fisherman can see that he is in peril and has a desperate need.

Denney says that the parable of the fisherman unaware of his peril reflects the way modern evangelists and pastors often present the gospel. They minimize human depravity, and so the preaching of the cross loses its power. Why is the human will considered an impregnable fortress that God can’t storm? He is in control over every part of the universe, yet to admit that doesn’t include the human will is foolish. This would not dehumanize or make us robots. It is necessary for our rescue from the slavery of the warped desires of our will. The human predicament is seen as more psychological than judicial before a holy God. With that in mind, we can see why such a mild evangelism is so popular today. I gently say, “Jesus died for sinners. Does that describe you?”

Take my heart and form it
Take my mind, transform it
Take my will, conform it

The labeling fallacy. This matter of the will and our need to call for a response is an especially sensitive area among evangelicals because of certain theological assumptions. There are those who are theologically self-conscious and concerned to define carefully every aspect of their evangelism. They remind me of the saying, “After all is said and done, there is more said than done!” They so fear doing anything unscriptural that they resist anything new and different. A desire to be scriptural is commendable; but if taken to an extreme, it is bondage to the letter and not the spirit of the law.
It is one thing to hold strongly to your principles; it is another thing to fall into an overly scrupulous application of a principle in mechanical fashion. As Thomas Jefferson wisely said, “Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle.” To be so unwavering could be bondage to tradition or to a pastor or to a principle—but not to the Lord. We must not be merely orthodox critics but Spirit-motivated doers.

Other evangelicals are theologically ignorant of why they do certain things in calling for a response to the gospel. These evangelicals should be gently challenged to examine their theology. Instead of blindly imbibing a certain approach to the will evolved from possible unbiblical assumptions, they should critically look for the biblical basis of their methods. Evangelists should be more self-conscious of their theology for the sake of God’s honor, their own ministry and for their followers. Too many organizations and churches “do evangelism” a certain way only because “that’s the way we’ve always done it.” As the years go by, there is less and less examination of the theological basis for a particular method. As a result, people are loyal to a certain approach and not to the Scriptures. This breeds snobbish Christians. I’ll never forget the reply given to me by a student when I asked about his style of evangelism. “I picked it up from my leader who told me this is the way our group has always done it on campus.” When pressed further he could give no scriptural reasons for his method of evangelism. This did not make him any less certain, though, that “the people in the other Christian groups were doing it all wrong.”

Labels are deadly in Christian circles. For example, when it comes to the topic of the will, immediately certain views are categorized as Reformed or Arminian. The discussion then ends because it is thought (wrongly) that as soon as you have given a name to something, you understand it. Instead, there should be continued dialogue in the Scriptures by all of us. Let’s fight this labeling fallacy. What exactly underlies these views on the will?

One view is that the Fall has only weakened the will of sinners and that we have the potential (or ability) to believe. This seems to provide a basis for appealing to unbelievers to respond, thus safeguarding the scriptural doctrine of human responsibility. In practice this view may lead to approving various questionable methods that evoke the latent potential to believe. This is the me-centered approach. The conclusion is reached: since in Scripture people are commanded to believe, they must have the ability (will power) or potential. The evangelist becomes demanding, creating pressure to obtain a response.
The other view sees clearly human responsibility, yet also that the will is dead in trespasses and sins, therefore impotent. Scripture teaches that none do good (Rom 3). Therefore these evangelists see the necessity of God's initiative in election to salvation originating in unconditional grace. The will is in bondage. Logically, a God-centered evangelist might recoil from including a command to respond or become passive in witnessing. Hopefully, instead he or she will follow Scripture and submit to the antinomy of two truths: the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of humans, incorporating both into their message and methods. They will make an appeal for all people to believe, knowing God has chosen many for salvation and will supply by empowering grace a new birth resulting in the gift of repentance and faith. At the same time they are urged to pray, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” Both views have at least this in common: as a result of trying to be faithful to Scripture, you might begin with either view and go beyond Scripture, not keeping the doctrines of divine sovereignty and human responsibility in balance.

The writers of the Bible are not embarrassed to put side by side teachings that do not fit our logic. For example, Peter charges his hearers on the day of Pentecost with wickedness in killing Christ yet admits it was all in God's plan (Acts 2:23). Jesus says, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (Jn 6:44). Yet “Whoever comes to me I will never drive away,” also is true (Jn 6:37). How can this be? To our finite minds such teachings seem to be at odds with each other. We try and try to reconcile them. Perhaps we should not consider these two doctrines of sovereignty and responsibility as enemies but rather see them the way the Bible does—as friends!

Me-centered theology is people pleasing (centering on the ability, potential, capacity of fallen man) and takes human responsibility to an extreme. Its historical basis is found in the work of Pelagius in the fifth century and later the writings of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), who reacted against a wrong emphasis he felt existed in the churches of the Netherlands. Arminius thought the creeds accepted in these churches denied that humans are responsible for their moral actions, and indeed the preaching in the churches may have neglected this aspect of Scripture. So his followers taught that divine sovereignty is not compatible with human freedom and that all humans must have some ability to believe, since faith is commanded.

Horrified by the implications of this teaching, these God-centered churches reemphasized God's sovereignty in salvation (sinners, being unable
to respond to the command to believe just as they were unable to keep God's law, do not save themselves or contribute to their salvation in any way), insisting it was a work of grace from beginning to end. Five statements were formulated in reaction to five articles proposed by the Arminians. We make a mistake, therefore, if we consider the five points of this Dutch church council to be a balanced creedal statement. The “five points of Calvinism,” as these later became known, may be orthodox theology but are in need of further filling out with the whole counsel of God because they are merely a reaction to a theological distortion. Think, study Scripture and decide which is true. My plea is for a scriptural emphasis on both divine sovereignty and human responsibility joined with a right view of the human will for a recovery of fervent evangelism today. In witnessing we trust in the inherent power of “the Word and the Spirit” to bring new life to the spiritually dead. We speak truth to and pray for sinners, and by this God-ordained means, the God-ordained end is accomplished. God has ordained both the means and the end. I deal with this extensively in part two.