

Introduction

The Whole Gospel to the Whole Person Wholly by Grace by Whole People: Our Task in Evangelism

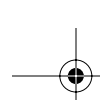
Have you ever been stymied by evangelism? Do you feel you are tossed between two unacceptable alternatives and can't find your niche? On the one side you see Christians who have great rapport with others but don't say much about Jesus Christ. On the other side are those who are always "giving out the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

This book is designed to help you "show and tell" the gospel in a way honoring to God, helpful to others and liberating for you. It is neither a plan for buttonholing people nor a plea for being just a nice person who lets others come to you if and when they want to talk religion. Rather, its goal is to help you recover the theological content of the gospel because *only as your view of God's active grace in salvation is changed can you find the confidence, joy and gratitude to undergird a new evangelistic lifestyle.*

WHAT IS THE BIBLICAL MODEL?

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 above. 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 non-believers to Christ was handicapped.

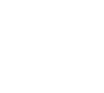
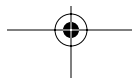
I was soon beset by a barrage of advice. I was told I should witness by showing others a good time, bringing my high school acquaintances to fun gatherings at church or in the inoffensive setting of a home. The evening would end with a challenging talk. That sounded easy. Others would articulate the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

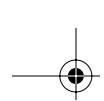
In college I met Christians who emphasized a more direct approach: I should invite anyone and everyone to a small group Bible study or a talk by a layperson in a "neutral" setting. Nonbelievers should be confronted directly with the Scriptures. *Well*, I said to myself, *that sounds reasonable. Perhaps 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 appropriate-





ness 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.

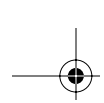
Uncertainties whirled in my mind. Could a person be motivated to witness, yet actually dishonor God and misrepresent his message through ignorance or manipulation? Was I motivated by guilt or the expectations of others? Was I trying to make excuses for my lack of enthusiasm and success? How could I limit 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 Christ as Savior or also as Lord to the unbeliever? 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?

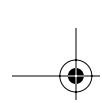
In spite of the unhelpfulness of the advice initially given to me about personal evangelism, I have to admit that the resurgent interest in this topic in evangelical circles is healthy. Who can deny that there has been an increased participation in evangelism? Who could find fault with the new evangelistic 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?

METHODOLOGY FLOWS FROM THEOLOGY

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): It is just because we are committed to evangelism that 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.

In part one of this book I will pose pertinent questions concerning the theology underlying the methodology in 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





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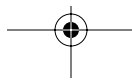
lead to constructive dialogue and modification for all of us. Should any tradition, technique or person be beyond our evaluation by scriptural standards? I think not.

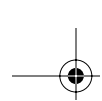
If it is true that there are serious differences among evangelicals on the message and methods of evangelism, then we must ask, to what extent are these differences justified? If the differences are simply due to the different audience we are reaching or the variety of gifts God has given us, these differences 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 methodology, 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 to do 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 with each other, allowing unbelievers to be misled and frustrating those who wish to learn to witness. We could condemn our children and the church to untold problems. We could be dishonoring the God of the gospel. We must take a thorough look at current evangelistic practice to see if we who witness to Christ have a balanced and whole gospel.

In part two, then, I consider what the total effect of the gospel should be on our lives and on the lives of those we evangelize. 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.

Part three 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 non-believer's main problem. This results in passionate worship, which is the goal of evangelism—not just decisions but fervent disciples.

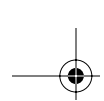
But our responsibility does not end with correct understanding of the new birth. We must put that gospel into action. We are called to obedience in telling the truth to others. Therefore, part four is devoted to the practice of witnessing, plus some practical ideas on how to get started. We are to be whole (complete and real) people. Finally, in the appendixes are numerous worksheets that can be duplicated for training yourself and others, a God-centered diagram of the gospel, and a comment on healthy controversy.

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.¹ 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.”²

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).





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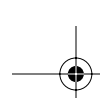
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The body of believers, united out of various economic and ethnic backgrounds while retaining individual personalities and interests, should be like a flashing neon sign to the world. The amazing unity in the diversity of Christ's body can convince unbelievers that Jesus Christ was sent by God. A dynamic group 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 or an unnecessary 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 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. Open your mouth. God will fill it with his words.





In conclusion, let me add a word of encouragement to those struggling with being faithful in evangelism. Nothing has the potential for producing more guilt among Christians than this subject (unless it's sex!). I can guarantee the reaction I will get when I speak on this topic: eyes lower, feet shuffle, hands fidget. There is usually some tension-releasing laughter. But all these reactions are unnecessary. There is hope, encouragement and liberation to be found when evangelism is built on a God-centered gospel. The doorway into a hopeful and joyful witness is found by focusing on God as Creator and Redeemer.

Throughout this book I will lay a theological foundation: The whole gospel . . . wholly by grace. The platform on which we can build a life of evangelism will be God's sovereignty. We shall see the skillful interweaving of each person of the Trinity working in harmony in salvation. The Father has planned salvation. Christ has accomplished it. The Spirit will inevitably apply it. Therefore, no seat will be empty at the banquet table in the kingdom. All are assigned, with name cards in place, for they heard the inner call of compelling love and came to feast. God always goes before us as we witness. As we learn and tell the truth, may we find our theology turning into doxology!

