

Evangelism Dilemma

by William MacDonald in Help and Food

There is a curious problem today in the evangelical world one that poses sobering questions for the church and for the individual believer. The problem is brief is this: A great army of personal soulwinners has been mobilized to reach the populace for Christ. They are earnest, zealous, enthusiastic, and persuasive. To their credit it must be said that they are on the job. And it is one of the phenomena of our times that they rack up an astounding number of conversions. Everything so far seems to be on the plus side.

But the problem is this. The conversions do not stick. The fruit does not remain. Six months later there is nothing to be seen for all the aggressive evangelism. The capsule technique of soul winning has produced stillbirths.

What lies at the back of all this malpractice in bringing souls to the birth? Strangely enough it begins with the valid determination to preach the pure Gospel of the grace of God. We want to keep the message simple uncluttered by any suggestion that man can ever earn or deserve eternal life. Justification is by faith alone, apart from the deeds of the law. Therefore, the message is "only believe".

From there we reduce the message to a concise formula. For instance, the evangelistic process is cut down to a few basic questions and answers, as follows:

"Do you believe you are a sinner?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe Christ died for sinners?"

"Yes."

"Will you receive Him as your Savior?"

"Yes."

"Then you are saved!"

"I am?"

"Yes, the Bible says you are saved."

At first blush the method and the message might seem above criticism. But on closer study we are forced to have second thoughts and to conclude that we have oversimplified the Gospel.

The first fatal flaw is the missing emphasis on repentance. There can be no true conversion without conviction of sin. It is one thing to agree that I am a sinner; it is quite another thing to experience the conviction of sin. It is one thing to agree that I am a sinner; it is quite another thing to experience the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit in my life. Unless I have a Spirit wrought consciousness of my utterly lost condition, I can never exercise saving faith. It is useless to tell unconvicted sinners to believe on Jesus that message is only for those who know they are lost. We sugarcoat the Gospel when we deemphasize man's fallen condition.

With that kind of a watered down message, people receive the word with joy instead of with deep contrition. They do not have deep roots, and though they might endure for a while, they soon give up all profession when persecution or trouble comes (Matthew 13.21). We have forgotten that the message is repentance toward God, as well as faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

A second serious omission is a missing emphasis on the Lordship of Christ. A light, jovial mental assent that Jesus is Savior misses the point. Jesus is first Lord, then Savior. The New Testament always places His Lordship before His Saviorhood. Do we present the full implications of His Lordship to people? He always did.

A third defect in our message is our tendency to keep the terms of discipleship hidden until a decision has been made for Jesus. Our Lord never did this. The message He preached included the cross as well as the crown. He never hid His scars to win disciples. He revealed the worst along with the best, then told His listeners to count the cost. We popularize the message and promise fun.

The result of all this is that we have people believing without knowing what they believe. In many cases they have no doctrinal basis for their decision. They do not know the implications of commitment to Christ. They have never experienced the mysterious, miraculous work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration.

And of course we have others who are talked into a profession because of the slick salesmanship techniques of the soulwinner. Or some who want to please the affable, personable young man with the winning smile. And some who only want to get rid of this religious interloper who has intruded on their privacy. Satan laughs when these conversions are triumphantly announced on earth.

I would like to raise several questions that might lead us to some changes in our strategy of evangelism.

First of all, can we generally expect people to make an intelligent commitment to Christ the first time they hear the Gospel? Certainly there is the exceptional case where a person has already been prepared by the Holy Spirit. But generally speaking, the process involves sowing the seed, watering it, then sometime later reaping the harvest. In our mania for instant conversion, we have forgotten that conception, gestation, and birth do not occur on the same day.

A second question: Can a capsule presentation of the Gospel really do justice to so great a message? As one who has written several Gospel tracts, I confess to a certain sense of misgiving in even attempting to condense the Good News into four small pages. Would we not be wiser to give people the full presentation as it is found in the Gospels, or in the New Testament.

Thirdly, is all this pressure for decisions really scriptural? Where in the New Testament were people ever pressured into making a profession? We might justify our practice by saying that if only one out of ten is genuine, it is worth it. But what about the other nine disillusioned, bitter, perhaps deceived enroute to Hell by a false profession.

And I must ask this: Is all this boasting about conversions really accurate? You've met the man who solemnly tells you of ten people he contacted that day and all of them were saved. A young doctor testified that every time he goes to a new city, he looks in the phone book for people with his last name. Then he calls them one by one and leads them through the four steps to salvation. Amazingly enough, every one of them opens the door of his heart to Jesus. I don't want to doubt the honesty of people like this, but am I wrong in thinking that they are extremely naive? Where are all those people who are saved? They cannot be found.

What it all means is that we should seriously reexamine our streamlined, capsule evangelism. We should be willing to spend time teaching the Gospel, laying a solid doctrinal foundation for faith to rest on. We should stress the necessity for repentance a complete aboutface with regard to sin. We should stress the full implications of the Lordship of Christ and the conditions of discipleship. We should explain what belief really involves. We should be willing to wait for the Holy Spirit to produce genuine conviction of sin. Then we should be ready to lead the person to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

If we do this, we'll have less astronomical figures of so called conversions, but more genuine cases of spiritual rebirth.

circa 1970's