

The Meaning of Evangelism

All around us are people trying to make us followers. We have big companies trying to make us followers of their products or services through advertising. They try to change our minds, entice us, attract us and draw us into being their followers. We have well-meaning friends who are trying to make us buyers of Amway or some kind of special soap. We meet acquaintances who try to get us to follow a certain way of positive thinking, or a kind of lifestyle. We watch TV and see people trying to convert us to their positive mind-control, or their New Age technique for knowing or controlling your future. You might meet devotees of a particular religion or sect, who insist that your belief is wrong, and that you ought to change to believe what they believe. Almost everywhere you go, someone is giving you a message, on a billboard, a shop window, a song, a TV or radio ad, an email, which says, follow me. Follow my way of life. Change your ways to embrace this product or service or belief.

In a world of millions of messages, is asking people to convert to this or that what evangelism is? Is Christian evangelism just one more noise in the cacophony of millions of noisy calls to change? Is Christian evangelism just a religious sales pitch? Is it nothing more than marketing our belief system? What exactly is the meaning of evangelism? What is it that evangelism seeks to do?

We know that evangelism consists primarily in the call to make disciples of all the nations. So that then raises three questions. What is a disciple? How do you make a disciple out of a non-disciple? What does God do and what do you do?

1. What is a disciple?

The word disciple in the original language simply means a pupil, a learner, a student. It refers to a person who follows a master. A disciple of Jesus Christ, at the simplest level is a lifelong follower of Jesus Christ.

But what does that mean exactly? You see, a follower of Marilyn Manson is a very different person from a follower of Mahatma Gandhi. A follower of Osama bin Laden is very different from a follower of the Dalai Lama. What makes the difference? The kind of person they are following.

So what does it mean to follow Jesus Christ?

Matthew 10:24-25 A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. ²⁵ "It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household!"

The basics of being a disciple are to become like Jesus Christ. You follow Him in attitudes, actions, thoughts, words, deeds, priorities, desires, ambitions, goals. You follow Him in every area of your life – family, work, finances, leisure, health, friendships, entertainment, and interests.

When you evangelise someone, you desire that the person you speak to would become a lifelong, committed follower of Jesus Christ.

But notice what that is going to mean.

Matthew 10:37 He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.

Jesus takes the closest relationships you have in your life – family – and says, if you love family more than Me, you fail to make the grade. You are not a follower. In other words, being a disciple means loving God supremely. This is quite extravagant. How many leaders call on their followers to be absolutely devoted to them? This is a clear example that Jesus is claiming to be God. He is claiming to be the source of life, the One who ought to be loved with all your heart, all your soul, all your might.

When you evangelise, you are aiming to end up with a worshipper of Jesus Christ. You are not aiming to sell heavenly real estate, or to just populate heaven with faces. You are aiming to see this person end up loving nothing more than Jesus Christ.

Not only does a disciple love Jesus Christ supremely, but a disciple of Jesus Christ has completely surrendered his or her life.

Matthew 10:38-39 And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. ³⁹ "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.

A person carrying a cross was not just wandering around the city. A person carrying a cross was walking a path of humiliation and shame to the place of their execution. In that space of time between walking with the cross to the place of execution, how much of that time do you think would have been spent on selfish pursuits? Well, none, because no such choice existed. The criminal had only a few minutes or hours to walk with part of his cross to the place of death. You wouldn't expect such a man to be saying to friends, Hey, we should do lunch, some time!" or "We need to get together, soon." If you were carrying a cross, all other ambitions, goals, desires had evaporated. You had only one thing left: death. Your last hour would be spent very soberly.

Now, why does Jesus say this about being his disciple? Not because he expects us to execute ourselves. Not because he is against us living life as people who still have some time left. His disciples have given up treating their lives as their own. It is as if his disciples have accepted the death of a selfish life. The only life lived is a life where nothing else is left except loving Christ and loving people for His sake. When you become a disciple, your life becomes like the march to the cross. Not that your life is morbid or depressing. Your life has only one thing left: Christ. You no longer live as if you are your own. You no longer live like a free man walking the streets. You live as if you only have a short stretch of time between now and death, and that time belongs to Christ.

Galatians 2:20 "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Once again, this is an extraordinary demand. It is staggering. Jesus is saying that His disciples are people who love nothing more than God by faith, and who live for nothing else except the God they cannot see.

That leads us to the second question.

2. What is biblical conversion?

Do you realise that no advertiser on earth would attempt such ambitious things. No company in the world would dream of saying to people, come follow us and make us your absolute all, to the exclusion of other loves, and live as if there is nothing else except us and our product to live for. Be utterly and totally devoted to us! No one would attempt that. Whether its products, services, ideas, belief systems, almost no one tells you that embracing this will mean a complete re-ordering of your loves and a complete change in what you live for.

And if the demands weren't radical enough, consider what the Bible says about people's desire for this change:

Romans 8:7 Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.

1 Corinthians 2:14 ¶ But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

John 6:44 "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.

John 6:64-65 "But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him. ⁶⁵ And He said, "Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father."

The Bible is very clear that not only do people not want to come, but in their current state, they cannot come.

So you have the hardest demands in the word: love God supremely and live for Him only, and you have hard, selfish human hearts with no interest in the truth, no desire for God, and no ability to come.

What do you think the success rate is going to be?

Evangelism is nothing like the sales pitches of the world, because in all of those situations, there is a chance, humanly speaking, that someone will be persuaded and change his mind. In evangelism, there is no chance, on the human level. You may as well try to convince people to flap their arms and jump off high buildings.

Evangelism is not simply an attempt to get a mental agreement about certain facts about God. Someone is not converted to be a true disciple just because he or she believes that God or Jesus exists.

James 2:19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe -- and tremble!

Evangelism is not simply an attempt to get someone to perform a certain action like pray a sinner's prayer, sign a card, raise a hand, walk forward during an invitation. That confuses people as to what it means to be saved, and can even give people false assurance.

Evangelism is not an attempt to get people to live a more moral life. Certainly, truly converted people live lives more pleasing to God than they did before conversion, but that is not what we aim for.

Do you understand that evangelism is either an exercise in total futility, or it is an element of a miracle? You see, the conversion of a human soul is not simply a person who begins to think differently. It is not a person who turns over a new leaf. Conversion is when God the Spirit comes to a human heart that is a deadly, decaying, rotting corpse and says, "Live."

Ephesians 2:1-10 And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who

now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Biblical conversion is the act whereby God imparts His life into our dead souls, forgives us of our sins, grants us Christ's righteousness, and gives us a heart to love Him.

Ezekiel 36:26-27 "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.

Conversion is such a mighty work of God, that evangelism is nothing less than calling on people to be raised from the dead. Evangelism is saying to corpses, live. Evangelism is saying to blind people, see. Evangelism is saying to rebels, worship.

iii. What is God's part and what is my part?

Because of this strange paradox, many people become confused. They say, "If evangelism is one big work of God, then what possible use could evangelism be?" From there, they come to two equally wrong conclusions. One wrong conclusion is to say, "If it is really a work of God, then I don't need to evangelise. God's going to do it. I don't have any responsibility." They have overemphasised, to a fault, the sovereignty of God in salvation. Or to put it better, they have underemphasised man's responsibility. But we know that is false because Jesus has instructed us to preach the gospel. People are commanded to respond to the gospel.

The other wrong conclusion is to say, God wouldn't have told us to evangelise if salvation is just a work of God. It must actually be a 50/50 partnership. It must be mainly about persuading the other person. And so, from there, they launch into all kinds of techniques and gimmicks and sales pitches to try to make the gospel seem more attractive to the person.

In fact, an entire branch of Christianity has developed that believes the key to evangelism is to attract the unbeliever with things they like. If salvation is about changing your mind, then I can change your mind using the same techniques that advertisers, marketers and corporates use. I can scare you. I can threaten you. I can sugar up the deal. I can promise you stuff. I can make it all about you. I can amuse you. I can make you laugh or cry or get zealous. I can titillate you. So you have churches themed after entertainment, amusement, with the idea that if the unbeliever enjoys this, they will associate their enjoyment with the gospel, and they are more likely to be saved.

Let me tell you something. You can go to a graveyard, and organise the biggest, loudest, most raucous party this city has ever seen. You can put R200 notes in a big wind machine and blow them over the graves. You can get models with teasing smiles to walk up and down that yard. It doesn't matter what you think you can do to get dead people to come alive: they're not coming back. No amount of attraction will make the gospel better looking to people who are spiritually dead. But both of those are equally wrong.

What is the right approach?

God grants people the power to repent and believe, when they have heard a clear gospel.

Acts 11:18 When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."

2 Timothy 2:24-25 And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, ²⁵ in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth,

What does 'grant' mean? It means give. It means God must give a person the ability, and better yet, the desire to hate sin and love Christ. God must come to that heart, and open its blind eyes and reveal the beauty of God and the ugliness of sin, causing the sinner to want to turn from sin and believe on Christ.

But how does He do this?

*Romans 10:13-14 For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved." ¹⁴ ¶ How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?
Romans 10:17 So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*

Conversion is a work of God. It is nothing short of a modern-day miracle. But God has chosen to include means to achieve that miracle. That is, God does not choose to just zap people with salvation, so they wake up converted. No, he chooses to use the things that will bring Him the most glory. Those things are the gospel message, declared by saved sinners filled with compassion to other sinners. With those means in place, God can choose to work His miracle of conversion on whomever He chooses.

You say, "I don't understand why God would use us if He is going to do a miracle." Well, think back to Christ's miracles. When Jesus turned the water into wine, what did He have the servants do? He had them fill the water-pots with water. Did the servants turn the water into wine? No. But were they necessary instruments in His miracle? They were.

When Jesus fed the 5000, what did He use? He used a young boy's lunch – five loaves and two small fishes. Could Jesus have done it another way? Yes. But he chose to use the boy's lunch. Did the boy do the miracle? No. But was his lunch the chosen means that Jesus used to feed 5000? yes.

When Jesus healed the paralysed man, his friends broke open the ceiling. Would anyone say that his friends healed him? No. But would he have been healed had his friends not brought him to Jesus? We don't know. The point is they were means, instruments by which God did the miracle.

When Jesus caused Peter to catch so many fish that the nets broke, was it Peter that did the miracle? No. However, was it necessary that Peter cast the net into the water? Yes.

You see, Jesus used very human means and instruments to do His miracles. No one would think for a moment that the power to part the Red Sea came from Moses' stick. But yet God instructed Him to raise his stick. But what did God say to Moses,

"Exodus 14:16 "But lift up your rod, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it. "

This is the sense in which Jesus says, “Go and make disciples.” He is saying to us, Go and raise the spiritually dead. Go and make the spiritually blind see.” Can we do that? No. But we must fill the water-pots, and put down the nets and carry people to Jesus. He will do it, but we are the means.

The language of the Bible keeps telling us that God does the work, but we are necessary instruments.

1 Corinthians 3:6-7 planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. ⁷ So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.

A farmer doesn't make crops grow. He just obeys the process of sowing, watering and harvesting. The life is up to God. But God wants us involved. That's why in verse 9 Paul says:
“*For we are God's fellow workers;*”

In Acts 1:8, Jesus says, “*But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*”

What does a witness do? A witness simply reports what he or she has seen or heard. You do not have to be the lawyer or the judge. You just witness. You explain and testify.

2 Corinthians 5:20 Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

Ambassadors – simply represent. They do not try to conquer the nation they live in. They do not make people in that country citizens of their home country. They simply represent.

In short: you have to make God-loving, self-sacrificing disciples of Jesus Christ out of people who love themselves and want to save themselves. That's impossible. God has to do the work of granting a new heart and new life. But He only does that when the means of the Word of God and the gospel message is shared by God's people.

My son has one or two toy trains that run on penlight batteries. Because he loves his trains to go, the batteries are often going flat. So our house has a lot of batteries lying around. So every now and then, his train stops going and he brings it to me. And I open it up, and start trying batteries. I find one on the shelf, I put it in, and if nothing happens, I know it's flat. I try another battery. When the train starts going, I know I have found a battery with some life in it. That's a little like witnessing. You take that same gospel message, and give it to people, like putting in a different battery. Sometimes, nothing happens. That's not your part. It's God's part. Other times, the lights go on, and the wheels start turning, and the person hates sin and wants Christ and fears hell and longs for forgiveness. And then you know that God has done the miracle.

That is enormously exciting - to be the person who fills water-pots all day, knowing that one of them might be miraculously changed, is an incredible privilege. He involves us. So get out there and start plugging people into the gospel message and see what happens.