

Philosophy of Evangelism

© Copyright 1996 Eddie Rasnake—Associate Pastor/Woodland Park Baptist Church

You may reproduce this at no charge as long as proper credit is given and no changes are made to the document.

Predestination vs. Free Will

It is impossible to address the subject of evangelism properly without addressing the controversy of predestination versus free will, for this poses a great problem in establishing a working philosophy. In the truest sense however, it is not the two separate doctrines that pose a problem, but rather, that men continue to debate how to reconcile the two. By establishing debate and drawing battle lines, the inevitable result is one group that lays hold of the truths of predestination and sovereignty while attempting to explain away texts that teach man's responsibility. Another group is produced which clings tightly to free will and either ignores or attempts to explain away the Biblical doctrine of sovereignty in evangelism. Neither group is correct. Clearly the Bible teaches both God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. While it is a mystery *how* God accomplishes both of these doctrines, the truth of them must be accepted as reality. In Romans 11, using the analogy of the olive tree, Paul gives a clear teaching of sovereignty. In chapter 10 he defines man's responsibility as he states, "*Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.*" In Chapter 9 he acknowledges the question of how both can be true. But instead of answering the question, he questions the question: "*On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?*" The two doctrines are an antinomy. They are not ours to reconcile. Only an all-powerful God is able to accomplish one without sacrificing the integrity of the other. That finite man cannot reconcile the two doctrines should serve to elevate our view of and appreciation for God's sovereignty.

We must recognize that holding onto one doctrine while dismissing the other is wrong theology. Doing this inevitably leads to wrong application in evangelism. Sovereignty that excludes responsibility presents the temptation to lose sight of our God-given responsibility as ambassadors for Christ. This leads to apathy instead of empathy for the unconverted. On the other hand, responsibility that excludes sovereignty presents the temptation to take upon ourselves the job, not only of proclaiming salvation, but also of producing converts. Success or failure thus becomes defined not by faithfulness but by results. If results are not forthcoming then man's technique is faulted, re-examined and revised until results are produced (even if they are only short-term results). Only holding both the doctrines of God's sovereignty and of man's responsibility can produce a balanced understanding of our role (and God's) in the evangelization of the world. Charles Spurgeon was once asked if he could reconcile the two doctrines to each other. "I wouldn't try," he replied. "I never reconcile friends." These truths, being Biblically affirmed, are not enemies, nor uneasy neighbors; they are friends, and they work together.

What is the Gospel?

GOD

It is first **a message about God**. The gospel tells us who He is, what He is like, what His standards are, and what He expects of us, His creation. This is the first step in the gospel process. Nothing can be accomplished in talking about sin, its consequence and its forgiveness until one understands God's affection for and sovereignty over man. There is a potential for error here in that we may find ourselves giving an incomplete picture of God. We err if we only present the love of God. This produces a message of sloppy benevolence having no regard for the standards and expectations of a holy God. We also err if we only present the holiness of God. This produces a harsh accountability to God without relationship. We must present a full view of God.

SIN

Second, the gospel is **a message about sin**. It reveals man's deficiency and rebellion; that we fall short of God's standards and expectations. Man chooses to go his own way in disregard of God's way. As such, we are deserving of God's wrath. The message also reveals that we sin because we are by nature

PHILOSOPHY OF EVANGELISM (CONTINUED)

sinners. One will not respond rightly to the message of Christ, nor will he see the need for it, until he understands and accepts the message of sin. There is a potential for error here as well, in that every life has something to be ashamed of in action or attitude but this is only one facet of sin. It must also be recognized that part of our sin is not just that we have violated God's standards, but that we have failed to relate rightly with Him, our Creator.

CHRIST

Third, the gospel is **a message about Christ**. This message is two-fold: who He is, and what He has done. Who is Christ?

- **Incarnation**: First, we must look at His incarnation—*He is God* incarnate. He is not, nor ever claimed to be, simply a teacher or an example.
- **Atonement**: Second, we must look at His atonement—*He is Savior*. Saving faith does not simply trust the atonement. It trusts the Christ who atoned.
- **Ascension**: Third, we must look at His ascension—*He is Lord*. There is no partial atonement. We cannot confess our specific sinful actions while failing to acknowledge our failure to give God His rightful place in our life.
- **Resurrection**: Weaving through all of these is His resurrection—the Father's proof that Jesus is *God, Savior and Lord*, and that His righteous death provided full forgiveness of sin and justification before God.

MAN

Fourth, the gospel is **a message about man**. Will he walk in rebellion to God, his Creator, Savior and Lord, or will he walk in relationship with Him? The message of God and sin and Christ is a message to be believed, but it is not merely a message to be believed. The two components are *repentance* (a turning from our work and our way) and *faith* (trusting in His work). Faith alone is not saving faith, for if one is unwilling to accommodate his life to God, he doesn't really believe in the Biblical truth of God. It must also be said that repentance alone is not saving faith. Turning from our sins has no power in itself, otherwise we would have no need for a savior.

Why Do We Share the Gospel?

What is our motivation for sharing the gospel? Really, there are two reasons, expressed beautifully in the Great Commandment. First, we are to love God. Love of God constrains us to obey His command and commission. He has called us as ambassadors and committed to us the message of reconciliation. We cannot say that we love Him if we do not take seriously what He says and act on His revealed will. Further, we ascribe to Him the glory He is due every time we speak of His mighty works. The second motivation, also found in the Great Commandment, is that we are to love our neighbor. Our neighbor has no greater need than salvation. Love of my neighbor will prevent me from viewing evangelism as a task or a project. It also implies that evangelism should flow through relationship.

How Does the Church Share the Gospel?

How does the Church share the Gospel? First, it must be recognized that evangelism is not the only task the Lord has given to us, nor will we all participate in that task in the same way. Our gifts are sovereignly bestowed, as are our opportunities to minister and the results of those opportunities. But all of us are ambassadors. An inevitable result of following Him is that He makes us fishers of men. A second recognition we must make is that the role of church leadership is not to do all the work of service, but to equip the laity. It is they, the laity, who carry the load of the work of a local church. The only spectators in the Christian life are those who have finished the race (Hebrews 12:1-4). What should this equipping look like?

PHILOSOPHY OF EVANGELISM (CONTINUED)

What is Evangelism?

Louis Sperry Chafer in his “Systematic Theology” defines evangelism in this way: “...the act of presenting to the unsaved the evangel or good news of the gospel of God’s saving grace through Christ Jesus.” This working definition is a good place to start. First, it reminds us that evangelism is an “act of presenting.” It is an action, not a result. Evangelism takes place every time the good news is presented regardless of the response, the circumstances or the method. Bill Bright defined evangelistic success in this way: “successful witnessing is simply taking the initiative to share Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and leaving the results to God.” Results must be left in the hands of God’s sovereignty. Second, Chafer’s definition reminds us that evangelism is communicating a message, a message that is both good and news. There is an implication here, namely that with the message there is a specific application. This is the fulcrum upon which man’s role and God’s meet. Saved man has the God-given privilege and responsibility to communicate the message of the gospel to the unsaved mind. God alone, however, is able to convict the application of the message to the unsaved heart and will.

The believer errs when he attempts to take upon himself the role that is God’s alone. He also errs when he leaves to God a role that has been delegated to him in God’s revealed word.

- **Message vs. Method:** It is message focused, not method focused: Evangelism methods, no matter how effective they have been in the past or in other situations, are merely cultural packaging of the message about God, about sin, about Christ, and about man.
- **Lifestyle vs. Program:** It is lifestyle focused, not program focused. The most revealing component about the evangelistic impact of a church is not what happens in services or in organized activities, but what happens in the home, in the neighborhood, in the workplace, and in the day-to-day course of life. Programs may play a role, but they are never central.
- **Person vs. System:** It emphasizes trusting the person and work of Christ, not a system or plan of salvation. Our trust is not to be simply in the message of the cross, nor in the cross, but in Christ whose cross it is.
- **Process vs. Point:** Evangelism must be seen as a process, not a point. Evangelism begins with the truth about God and builds from there. The four component truths of the gospel message (God, sin, Christ, man) are built layer by layer. Although specific points punctuate this process, it is nonetheless a process. It includes cultivating the soil, sowing the seed of the Word, harvesting the fruit, and caring for those who believe. This process does not begin nor end at the point of initial justification. In a sense, evangelism is a component of the discipleship process and discipleship is a continuance of the evangelism process.
- **Conviction vs. Convincing:** It is the Conviction of the Holy Spirit, not the Convincing of man that saves. Man has no power to save himself, nor is he able to save anyone else. By God’s gracious choice He allows man to join Him in His work of bringing salvation. A response to man’s persuasion without responding to God’s conviction will not save. These conversions will not last, for “a sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.” Unless there is a change of nature, a change of behavior will not last.