



## A BIBLICAL SUMMARY OF EVANGELISM

### INTRODUCTION

To speak of “evangelism” is to refer, in short, to the bringing of the good news of salvation to the lost in gratitude to God for what we have received from Christ. To unpack this, we turn to the Holy Scriptures. From them we glean ten aspects of evangelism—

#### I. THE ORIGIN OF EVANGELISM

Evangelism begins with God and not with man. It was he who, in his first revelation of the gospel, proclaimed the good news of Christ to man. Recall the *protevangelium* (first gospel) in Genesis 3:15. The serpent, God promised, would bruise the seed of the woman, but the seed would crush the head of the serpent.

Thereafter, there ran parallel with the subsequent unfolding of the history of redemption a progression in God’s revelation of his grace in the gospel. That progression occurred by means of significant revelatory moments, such as we find in Genesis 22 and the command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac; the promise of the scepter not departing from Judah (Gen. 49:10), the ceremonial law (Exodus and Leviticus), the promise of a King and an eternal kingdom (2 Sam. 7:12-13); and the high point of Old Testament revelation, namely the servant song of Isaiah 53. We could go on. Jesus did so! Note the Bible study he held with Cleopas and his fellow traveler following his resurrection (Lk. 24:25-27, 44-46).

#### II. THE HISTORY OF EVANGELISM

In Old Testament times, God did not require Israel to go to the nations with the gospel. His focus was rather on the faith and obedience of Israel. The more Israel believed God and obeyed his law, the brighter the gospel of the coming Messiah shone through Israel to the surrounding nations. During the exile, however, Israel took their hope of the Messiah with them, thereby influencing the nations with the gospel. This affords us some understanding of the arrival of the Wise Men (Magi) in Jerusalem to worship the newborn King (Matt. 2:1-11; cf. 2 Kgs 17:6 and Dan. 2:2). God

promised his people that having chastened them sorely he would restore them and would make them a light to the nations (Is. 49:6). Israel, however, was not ultimately the light of the nations, but the servant of the Lord who was to be born in Israel.

This history sheds light on related comments in the New Testament. In his address to the Athenians, Paul remarked that “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). In Romans 3:25b the apostle writes that God, “in his divine forbearance . . . passed over former sins.” In other words, God factored into his response to the nations in the old covenant era the measure of the light that they had. They had some light from their creation in God’s image and through the checkered testimony of Israel, but they did not have the access to the light of Christ which we have, now that God has set forth Christ as a propitiation by his blood (Rom. 3:25a).

#### III. THE MEANING OF EVANGELISM

History, it is clear, revolves around the coming of the Christ. It is “His story.” The extent to which he was the great hope of God’s people under old covenant times is apparent from Joseph’s and Mary’s presentation of Jesus at the Temple (Luke 2:29-32). Christ was not only the consolation of Israel but “a light for revelation to the Gentiles.”

It is unsurprising, then, that the New Testament uses a family of terms conveying the bringing of good news (notably the verb *euaggelizō* [to bring good news]; and the nouns *euaggelion* [the good news or gospel] and *euaggelistēs* [evangelist or the one who bring good news]). The essence of evangelism as the bringing of good news doesn’t, though, always come through in our English Bible translations. In Acts 8, for instance, the evangelism of the people spread abroad through the persecution in Jerusalem is described in the ESV as “preaching the word [*euaggelizomenoi*]” (v. 4). Similarly, that of the apostles in verse 25 is described as “preaching the gospel” (*euaggelizonto*).

Whether, then, we speak of the ministry of the laity in, as we say, “gossiping the gospel” or of the apostles in proclaiming it, the message was the same—the good news of Jesus Christ. The Bible translator



William Tyndale (1494-1536) understood this. When he came to translate *euangelion* he described the gospel as that “which makes a man’s heart leap and dance for joy.” Now that is the spirit which underlies evangelism. Initially, the gospel was good news for Israel, but the majority rejected it (Jn 1:11). Thus, under the overruling providence of God, the gospel went out to the nations. First to Samaria, and then to the end of the world (Acts 1:8).

#### IV. THE MESSAGE OF EVANGELISM

The good news of the gospel is not that we may earn our salvation but that Christ has already earned it for us. In communicating this wonderful truth we focus on four realities—

*A. The knowledge of man:* Each member of the human race not only knows of God (Rom. 1:18-23; cf., Pss. 14:1 and 53:1; Ps. 19:1-4), but we have his law written on our hearts (Rom. 2:12-16). Thus, we discern right from wrong, we have consciences, and know that we are deserving of death (Rom. 1:32). Those who have the Scriptures are, however, doubly culpable, because they not only have the law written on their hearts, they have it visibly inscribed before their eyes. Not now on tablets of stone, but inscribed in Scripture, and not once but twice (Ex. 20:1-17 and Deut. 5:1-21).

*B. The sin of man:* Whether we be religious or not, we have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory (Rom. 3:9-20, 23). This sin we must go into if the good news is to look as good as it is. So long as man does not know his need, he is not going to apply to Christ for the grace of God. Yet, whereas the law of God comes to the willfully rebellious as a hammer to crack open their hard hearts, it comes to the brokenhearted tenderly, knowing that Jesus does not break the bruised reed nor snuff out the smoking flax (Is. 42:3 and Matt. 12:20).

*C. The hope of man:* We have a Mediator! Being divine Christ represents God before man and, being human, is able to suffer and to die in our place. Christ, then, is God’s gift to us! While we go too far, when, as the aberrant

or the poorly informed do, we assure the unconverted that Christ has died for them, it is entirely consistent with our Reformed view of biblical teaching to assure sinners that Christ was dead for them. By that we mean, that nothing further need be done for their salvation than has been accomplished by Christ. A full and a free salvation is available to them, if they rest entirely upon Christ for the salvation he has procured by his perfectly righteous life and atoning death on the cross. Note, however, that their faith and repentance are not the causes for which they are forgiven. Their initial turning unto God and resting in Christ nevertheless become the occasion on which they are aware that they are forgiven

*D. The responsibility of man:* We are divinely commanded to turn from our sins unto God for we have broken God’s law. We are lovingly commanded to rest in Christ for our forgiveness. Note, though, that the invitation to believe also takes the form of a command (e.g., Matt. 11:28-30). Yet, Jesus would have us count the cost of turning to him, for when we embrace him we do so as both our Savior and our Lord. All attempts to own Christ as one but not the other are spurious. Note the poignant saying of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), “When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die.” In other words, when sharing the gospel we do so, contrary to shady salesmen, without hiding important details in small print. That said, we fail our Lord when we so belabor the cost of discipleship as to imply that the news of salvation is not so good after all and that following Christ is not worth the cost.

#### V. THE IMPORTANCE OF EVANGELISM

Evangelism is not an optional extra, either for the Christian or for the local church. It is commanded by none other than the head of the church (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). Accordingly, we resist attempts by the world to outlaw evangelism, as did the early church. In Acts 4 and 5 the apostles were threatened by the Sanhedrin to deter them from speaking anymore in the name of Jesus. Recall Peter’s words, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29; cf., 4:19-20). For sure, we need to bring the good news to the world with grace as well as with truth, but since Christ is sole



Lord of our consciences we must resist or at least ignore attempts to forbid evangelism or to demean it.

The command of our Lord to make disciples causes us, then, to reflect on the marks of the true church (the pure preaching of the Word, the administration of the (two) sacraments, and the appropriate exercise of biblical discipline). Either we must include evangelism as a fourth mark of the true, or certainly the purer, church, or, we must make clearer that evangelism is subsumed under the first mark of the church. I favor the former option on three grounds: (i) We are less likely to lose sight of evangelism if it stands out distinctly as a mark of the true church; (ii) Paul could be said to distinguish preaching and evangelism in 2 Tim. 4:1-5; (iii) Evangelism is not simply the work of the minister, it is part and parcel of the equipping of the entire people of God. That equipping occurs through the ministry of the Word (Eph. 4:12).

#### VI. THE EMPOWERMENT OF EVANGELISM

Since God gives to us what he commands of us, we should not be surprised to possess the enabling we need to reach out with the gospel. This enabling is threefold—

*A. The power of the gospel:* The gospel contains an inherent power. Recall Paul's words in Romans 1:16: "... I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power [literally, the dynamism or even the dynamite] of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Such is the gospel's power it can shatter the chains of the most enslaved sinner, whether the respectable sins of the religious or the scandalous sins of the irreligious.

*B. The promise of Christ:* In bringing the good news to those outside of Christ we are buoyed not only by the power of the gospel but by the commission of Christ. He would not have granted this commission to make disciples and to baptize in the name of the triune God if, in fact, the gospel were not to impact the human race. Two truths to which Christ alludes in the Great Commission mean that the gospel cannot possibly fail.

First, there is the fact that, by dint of his resurrection, all authority has been given unto Christ in heaven and on earth. Second, there is Christ's promise that he is with his people, literally, "all days even unto the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

*C. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit:* Not only is Christ present with us, but he resides in us by the Holy Spirit. Recall the apostle John's words in 1 John 4:4: "Greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world." If we were to appropriate this truth and those preceding, how fearless we would become in the case of the gospel. Wrote Paul to his more timid apostolic representative Timothy: "God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control" (2 Tim. 1:7).

#### VII. THE MEDIUM OF EVANGELISM

Since, in the Great Commission Jesus directs us to teach all things he has commanded, it follows that the Word of God is the medium we use in evangelism. Paul corroborates this in Romans 10:17 with his famous statement that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ". In evangelism, as in preaching, the general call of the gospel goes out, and through the word preached or shared the call of the Father is made effectual in the lives of his elect.

Note, however, that we may use preevangelism efforts to bridge the gap between the two worlds of the church and the world. Note that when Paul addressed the Jews he quoted directly from the (Hebrew) Scriptures (chapter and verse if you like [e.g., Acts 13:33]). After all, they were in possession of the Scriptures then written. Yet, when addressing the pagan Athenians on Mars Hill Paul used as his text the altar to the unknown god (Acts 17:23). The altar became the common ground between his and their widely divergent worldviews. Upon it he erected the building blocks of the gospel. Only once these were in place could the sharing of the gospel gradually move onto the territory of the Scriptures.

Yet, two important points must be made in regard to the use of efforts in preevangelism. First, there must be nothing in the preparation of the ground for the explicit proclamation of the gospel that is contrary to the gospel. Second, that the whole purpose of preevangelism is to prepare the



way for the communication of the gospel through the medium of the Word. Preevangelism has, then, no intrinsic authority other than to pave the way for the preaching of the Word to those who are, at least initially, without the Word.

#### VIII. THE MEANS OF EVANGELISM

As clear as is Christ's Great Commission that we should "Go" with the gospel (Matt. 19:18-20; Acts 1:8; 8:4), it is astonishing to observe how often we offload the responsibility of gaining access to the gospel onto the world. We do so, when we state or imply that the onus is on the world to come to the church rather than on the church to go to the world.

Such an inversion of the Great Commission is regrettable for a number of reasons. First, because it is a contradiction of Christ who came to earth to seek and to save the lost (Lk. 19:10). Second, because it is disobedience to the nature of our Lord's commission. Third, because it denies the fact that without hearing the gospel man admits of no need to come to Christ. Fourth, because it also denies the blessing with which God has, over history, attended the ministries of those who have left their comfort zones to bring the gospel to the lost. Fifth, because the inversion of the Great Commission reveals a wholly inadequate understanding of the dire plight of those yet under condemnation—a callous disregard even. Where is the spirit today of Robert Murray McChesney (1813-1843), who, wandering one day through the fields of his parish was struck by the thought that one day soon all his parishioners would either be in heaven or in hell. We may critique the way different Christians go into the world with the gospel—whether by open air meetings, house-to-house visitation, tract distribution, or small group studies—but unless we ourselves are committed to heeding Christ's command to "Go" we would be better not airing our criticisms of the endeavors of others.

#### IX. THE ASSURANCE OF EVANGELISM

We, as Calvinists, have greatest confidence in going forth with the gospel, for we believe God has an elect people he is going to bring to himself. It is just a matter of time and of place. The Father has elected them from eternity past (Eph. 1:3-5; 1 Pet. 1:1-2), the Son came to save them and did in fact do so (Matt. 1:21; Mk 10:45), and the Spirit makes them willing to come to Christ (Ps. 110:3). Hence the confidence of Christ in his high priestly prayer: "Father, I desire [or I will] that they also [all those yet to believe in Christ, v. 20], whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world" (Jn 17:24). Think also of the mission of the early church and the matter-of-fact remark of Luke concerning the triumph of the gospel at Antioch in Pisidia: "and as many as were appointed [or ordained] to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). He was not downplaying the wonder of election, but he was communicating the early church's anticipation that all those predestined to eternal life would each come in turn to salvation.

While we do not believe that Christ has died for every single person (all without exception) we do believe he has died for a great people, from every nation, tribe, people, and language (all without distinction), and that gathered around the throne of God and before the Lamb will be this great host which no man can number (Rev. 7:9). We have every reason, then, to pray with confidence that God will draw his elect out of the community surrounding our congregations, and that in the details of our living God is well able to use us in drawing his elect unto himself. It is not for us to try and figure out who belongs to the elect, but it has been given to us to faithfully sow the seed of God's Word.

#### X. THE REWARD OF EVANGELISM

We are witnesses to Christ whether we open our mouths for Christ or not (Is. 43:10; Acts 1:8). On any given day, we may be a poor witness or a good witness. Yet, given that the Scriptures tell us that it is those who profess with their mouths the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:10), we should be on the lookout for opportunities to gossip the gospel. There is a tremendous



reward for those learning the Godly habit of praying for, mingling with, and speaking to the lost.

A Christian who keeps their faith hidden and his or her testimony a closely guarded secret is either holding on to a significance evidence of spiritual immaturity, is altogether spiritually immature, or has yet to come to anything more than an intellectual assent to Christ. By contrast, a believer filled with the Spirit of the Son will inevitably come out of the shadows to own Christ verbally as well as practically (a parallel application of Ps. 39:3; also, Jn 7:37-39). Allowing for different levels of giftedness in speaking of Christ, those who pray for opportunities to witness and who step forward courageously to take them are the ones who receive the wonderful joy of not only standing publicly with Christ, but of figuring in the accounts of those coming to faith in Christ. Apart from rejoicing in Christ over one's own salvation, there is nothing quite like being used of God in the salvation of others. Wrote the apostle John, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 Jn 4).

One can only begin to imagine what it will be like to be in heaven with those who have shared the gospel with us, and with those with whom we have had the privilege of ministering Christ. What surprises heaven will uncover! There will be there those who never knew we came to faith. Either they were faithful in witnessing to us early in our spiritual journey but were as passing ships in the night; or, they died in faith, believing we would be saved but did not live long enough to see us come to Christ. The reverse will also be true. We shall find that conversations we had about the gospel, now long forgotten, were used of God to trigger curiosity, then investigation, conviction, and trust in Christ. There will also be those with us whose lives, under the good hand of God, we know we have touched in this life. There they will be, by then completed works of God's grace, who went on to impact the lives of others for Christ. We shall, says Paul, thank God constantly, because they received the word of God not as the word of man but as it really is, the word of God (2 Thess. 1:13). Yet, the apostle also speaks of his gratitude to those he influenced. "What thanksgiving," he

asks, "can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God" (1 Thess. 3:9).

## CONCLUSION

Let's shrug off then any remaining ambivalence toward evangelism, whether left over from days of spiritual immaturity, or from personal backsliding (the numbing of the spiritual senses by excessive conformity to the culture of the world); or that can be attributed to a minimalist vision of how God can use us as individuals and as churches to spread the kingdom of heaven. Let's embrace by contrast the spirit of the early church, as summarized by the first verses of the hymn of Joseph Griggs (1728-1768)—

Asham'd of Jesus! That dear friend  
On whom my hopes of heav'd depend,  
No! When I blush—be this my shame,

That I no more revere his name.

Asham'd of Jesus! Yes I may,  
When I've no guilt to wash away;  
No tear to wipe, no good to crave,

No fears to quell, no soul to save.

"Till then—nor is my boasting vain—  
"Till then, I boast a Savior slain!  
And O, may this my glory be,  
That Christ is not asham'd of me.



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