

What is Evangelism?



Basics of
the Faith

S E R I E S

George W. Robertson

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Sean Michael Lucas, Series Editor

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P U B L I S H I N G

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PROCLAMATION, PERSUASION, PRAYER

What is evangelism? How could a term so basic to the Christian faith be the subject of such divergent opinions? Opinions range between two extremes: those who think that evangelism is any church activity and those who consider someone evangelized only when he or she becomes a disciple of Jesus Christ and a responsible member of a local church.¹ Rather than defining evangelism, the Bible describes it. Our English word is a transliteration of the Greek word *euangelizo*, which means “to proclaim good news.” And that is what is being described when the word is used in Scripture—someone’s declaring the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ (Luke 9:6; 20:1; Acts 8:25, 40; 16:10; Rom. 1:9, 15; 15:20; 1 Cor. 1:17; 9:14, 16, 18; 2 Cor. 11:7; Gal. 1:11; 2:2, 7; 4:13; 1 Thess. 2:9; 1 Peter 1:12; 4:6). While those occurrences are typically translated “preach the gospel,” there are only a few occasions when the gospel is said explicitly to be “preached” (*kerux*) (Matt. 24:14; 26:13; Mark 13:10; 14:9). Ordinarily, the action of one person or a group taking the gospel to unbelievers is just described as “good-news telling.” The most basic thing then that can be said about evangelism is that it is any manner of *proclaiming* the good news of Jesus Christ.

Though they did not know all the details of Jesus' incarnation and sacrifice, Old Testament believers were not bereft of the good news. The message of redemption proclaimed to the people of God from the time of Abraham to Moses is also called "the gospel" (Gal. 3:8; Heb. 4:2, 6). Additionally, Paul desired to "preach the gospel" to the "saints" in Rome (1:7, 15). So the argument could be made that the whole Bible is the gospel and to preach any of it therefore is to preach good news. However, the focus of this booklet is on proclaiming the salvific work of Jesus Christ in such a manner that those who have never done so will receive him by faith and prove their regeneration with discipleship.²

Jesus' parables and the example of the apostles lead us to conclude that the good news is so great that it must be proclaimed with a desire to *persuade* (Luke 14:23; Acts 18:4; 2 Cor. 5:11). The Bible never hints that the herald is the converter. Persuasion or conversion is possible only when the Spirit removes a "heart of stone" and replaces it with a "heart of flesh" (Ezek. 36:26) and "opens" it to receive the free offer of grace (Acts 16:40). That means that the believer's responsibility is not just to proclaim the gospel but also to *pray* for its effectiveness as the Holy Spirit applies it to the heart. Interestingly, the Bible never commands or even describes believers praying for people to be converted; rather they pray for "more laborers" (Matt. 9:37), "open doors" (Col. 4:3), and "boldness" (Acts 4:29). The implication seems to be that praying for someone's heart to change would give the impression that somehow the power to convert lies within the person. Praying for multiplication of witnesses, opportunities to speak, and courage to persist against opposition emphasizes that all the gospel's power comes from God. It comes from the Holy Spirit who empowers its ambassadors (Acts 1:8), who in turn through the "foolishness" of proclamation (1 Cor. 1:21) have the privilege of unleashing a message that conquers unbelief.

One final preliminary remark is important. Since evangelism is the message of Jesus Christ who incarnated all God's promises, the gospel contains good news for every human need. It is like an expensive diamond containing so many facets by means of the master cutter's hand that it sparkles with light no matter how it is turned. A couple of scholars put the point this way: "[Evangelism] is the communication of the whole gospel in simple form, along with a concern to address intellectual hindrances to faith or those deriving from experience."³

In 1974 the first Lausanne Congress for world evangelization immediately felt the need to express the enterprise of evangelism in holistic terms. Convener René Padilla said the Lausanne Covenant showed that "biblical evangelism is inseparable from social responsibility, Christian discipleship, and church renewal."⁴ In an era in which the evangelical church seeks to incarnate the gospel in practical service while preserving an emphasis on conversion, the clear delineation of these two concerns in paragraph five of the covenant is worth quoting: "When people receive Christ they are born again into his kingdom and must seek not only to exhibit but also to spread its righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world. The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead."⁵

Notwithstanding this effort to define evangelism, I must say, as a pastor, that when people ask me what evangelism is, they are only slightly helped by the preacher's three Ps: proclamation, persuasion, and prayer. Usually, what they are really asking is, "What does evangelism look like in my life?" Here they need five points rather than three. I claim no originality for these five points. Those who take the Scriptures seriously have long observed these five ways in which the gospel is communicated in such a manner that someone converts to

Christianity. However, I want to distance myself a bit from those who in recent years have given the impression that these are five different *options* for doing evangelism. Some have even linked these various approaches to individual personality types, leaving the impression that effective evangelism begins with understanding yourself and then proclaiming the gospel in a way that is comfortable. I share the pastoral desire of these good thinkers to liberate those who live in the defeated idea that they cannot be evangelists because they cannot give their faith away just like someone else they admire. However, it would be less than Christlike to begin with yourself in the evangelistic task. Jesus humbled himself as a servant because we were in need (Phil. 2:1–11). Likewise, we must first ask what someone without Christ needs: What communicates to him? What physical needs does she have? What relational challenges does he face? What word does the gospel speak into her distress? Then we must find a way to apply the good news to that need. This is the attitude of a servant-evangelist like Christ. While an individual may identify with some of these categories or styles or methodologies more readily than others, all must be studied out of love for the lost and gratitude for the grace of Christ.

TESTIMONIAL

That said, the most logical starting point is with what every Christian has—a testimony of grace. Testimonial evangelism is telling others what Christ has done for you. While there may be some who are especially gifted at giving their testimony, everyone who has been saved has a story to tell. Psalm 126 describes testimonial evangelism as well as any text of Scripture. In it the psalmist calls each believer to recall God's grace from the past and take confidence in the same for the future. Specifically, he exhorts believers

“Robertson combines Scripture, history, present experience, pastoral insight, and—most of all—a compassionate heart to give us a compelling vision of what the good news of Jesus Christ is and how it can be shared with love, wisdom, and integrity.”

■ **Bryan Chapell**, Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, Illinois

What is evangelism? Although the term is basic to the Christian faith, evangelism can take many forms in practice. Is there a “correct” way to evangelize?

George W. Robertson shows how God gives us different opportunities and ways to spread the good news creatively and effectively. He unpacks five different approaches to evangelism—testimonial, invitational, intentional, compassionate, and intellectual—explaining their biblical precedent and practical implications.

The gospel has many facets. So do you. So do the people around you. You don’t have to stick to one formula to shine the light of God’s truth into unbelievers’ lives.

Basics of the Faith booklets introduce readers to basic Reformed doctrine and practice. On issues of church government and practice they reflect that framework—otherwise they are suitable for all church situations.

George W. Robertson is senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia.

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