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EXPOSITOR

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When I was a young man in my early twenties, I sensed God's call upon my life to preach the Word. I was full of enthusiasm and excitement as I headed off to seminary. There I committed myself to studying the Scripture that I would preach for the rest of my life.

I came from a strongly evangelistic church. The man who stood in the pulpit was the greatest preacher of the gospel that I have ever heard. He was a powerhouse proclaimer of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. It was with this passion to reach souls burning within me that I was propelled to school to pursue my theological education.

But once in seminary, I was confronted with something that left me stunned. It was the truth of the sovereignty of God in salvation, which was something I had never before heard. The doctrines of sovereign election and predestination were entirely foreign to me. Like many when they first hear these truths, I immediately rejected them. These cannot be true, I reasoned.

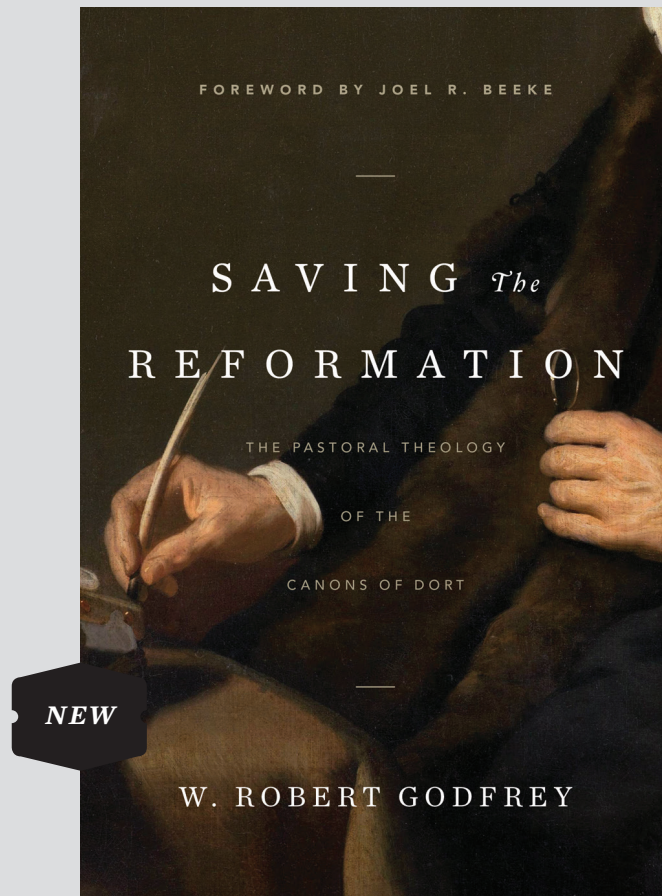
As I studied the Bible daily, I eventually came to the realization that these truths are not only in Scripture, but are found all throughout its pages. This, then, left me with an

even greater turmoil. If God is sovereign, why preach the gospel to the lost? Why pray for their conversions?

Through further reflection, I came to better understand that the doctrines of grace do not hinder my evangelistic preaching, but actually guarantee the success of it. Rather than demotivate me, God-centered truths give me a far greater confidence to preach the gospel to the lost.

Maybe this is a dilemma with which you have wrestled in your preaching ministry. Perhaps this is a matter to which you are giving serious thought, or perhaps you counsel others with respect to this doctrine.

In this issue of *Expositor*, we will give careful attention to this healthy tension between the evangelistic preaching of saving grace and the doctrinal preaching of sovereign grace. May each article in this edition illumine your mind and ignite your soul in your own faithful exposition of Scripture. ♦



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EXPOSITOR

ONEPASSION



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**JESUS CHRIST:
PREACHER OF SAVING GRACE
AND SOVEREIGN GRACE**

STEVEN J. LAWSON

One of the greatest challenges facing any expositor is maintaining the proper balance between the evangelistic preaching of the gospel *and* proclaiming the sovereignty of God in salvation. How does the preacher hold the gospel of grace in one hand *and*, at the same time, hold the doctrines of grace firmly in the other? How does he bring these two critical doctrines together? Both of these truths are clearly taught throughout Scripture. Saving grace *and* sovereign grace are visibly found from cover to cover in the Bible. No preacher can jettison one of these truths in favor of the other. Such a tradeoff would compromise the Word of God and result in a dangerous imbalance for any pulpit.

Unfortunately, this lopsided view of the truth is too often present in many pulpits. The vast majority of preachers swing the pendulum to one of two extremes. Rarely do they maintain the balance needed to remain true to the full counsel of God as they preach the Bible. Far too often, the preacher will cling to one side of this theological spectrum to the neglect of the other.

THE TWO EXTREMES

On one side of this extreme, the preacher avoids the subject of the sovereignty of God in salvation altogether. He acts as if this truth is not to be found anywhere in the Bible. This minister reads the Scripture with one eye closed. He avoids this foundational truth like the plague. Or, if he believes the doctrines of grace, he demotes them to an obscure place in his pulpit ministry. He presumes that the truths of divine sovereignty are not fit for public consumption. Predestination, he concludes, is too divisive and controversial for his church. So, he censors these many verses completely. If he mentions this strategic doctrine at all, it will be only in an innocuous manner that few will catch.

The other extreme is equally bad, if not more so. The ultimate pendulum swing belongs to those who preach the doctrines of sovereign grace, but without proclaiming the gospel with evangelistic passion and persuasion. Such a so-called “preacher” is really nothing more than a classroom lecturer standing in the pulpit. He comes across like one of the “frozen chosen,” with little if any zeal to win souls to Christ. This glaring imbalance has been called hyper-Calvinism, which teaches the deep truths of predestination, but without the needed warmth to reach the lost for Christ. This kind of a cold, academic address is devoid of any urgent appeals to the unconverted. Tragically, this type of pulpit presentation is all head, but no heart, and rarely penetrates the hearts of men.

How will we strike the balance needed between these two lines of truth that appear to lie on the opposite ends of

the theological spectrum? Where shall we look to find the needed equilibrium in our preaching between these two realms of doctrine?

THE GREATEST EXAMPLE

There is no better place to observe the proper balance needed than in the preaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was, unquestionably, the greatest preacher who ever lived. Those who heard Him preach were absolutely astonished at His preaching. After He delivered the Sermon on the Mount, we read, “The crowds were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt 7:28–29). When the multitudes heard Him preach, this means that they were, quite literally, stunned. We would say, they were beside themselves. In the vernacular, His preaching blew their minds. Others who heard Him said, “Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks” (John 7:46). People had never heard such profound and powerful preaching.

If we are to walk as Jesus walked, we must surely preach as He preached. The Lord is our model in all things. Nowhere is His example more needed than in our own pulpit ministries. We can learn from the preaching of the Lord Jesus how to extend the offer of the gospel *and*, at the same time, preach the sovereignty of God in salvation. No man ever handled preaching the gospel *and* the doctrines of grace with greater skill than He. By examining His proclamations, we discover how He preached both saving grace *and* sovereign grace.

Below, we will consider the two sides of this coin that were found in His ministry. First, we will examine the evangelistic preaching with which Jesus proclaimed the gospel of grace. We will note how He called sinners to Himself. Then, we will observe His unwavering commitment to proclaim the sovereign grace of God in salvation. These two sides of the truth were brought together masterfully by Jesus. Often this occurred in the same flow of thought in back-to-back verses (Matthew 11:25–30; Luke 4:18, 25–27; John 5:24–25). Sometimes, He joined both sides of these truths into the same verse (Matthew 22:14; John 6:37). We will begin with noting His gospel preaching to the lost multitudes that were perishing in their sins.

JESUS CHRIST: THE GREATEST EVANGELIST

Without question, Jesus was *the* greatest evangelist who ever proclaimed the gospel. No preacher ever exerted a more effective effort to win souls than Jesus. Jesus was, in reality, an itinerate evangelist. He traveled from city to city in order to preach the gospel of the kingdom. At the beginning of His public ministry, we read, “Jesus was

THE PREACHING OF JESUS ADDRESSED THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM CONFRONTING EVERY PERSON, NAMELY, THEIR SIN PROBLEM.

going throughout all Galilee teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom” (Matt 4:23). Constantly on the move, Jesus proclaimed the message of salvation wherever He traveled, urging the masses to enter into the kingdom of God. He was the ultimate fisher of men and the consummate harvester of souls.

Swelling numbers came from all around to hear Jesus preach the gospel. “Large crowds followed Him from Galilee and Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan” (Matt 4:25). It was not just one crowd, singular, that heard Him, but many “crowds,” plural. And they were not just mere “crowds,” but “large” crowds. There was no shortage of people to whom He preached. “Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom” (Matt 9:35). He was regularly followed by “large crowds” (Luke 14:25). To them, He preached the gospel “in their cities” (Matt 11:1). He declared, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 4:17). This kingdom was the saving reign of God in the subdued hearts of sinful men and women. This proclamation of the reign of grace was uniquely present in the preaching of Jesus Christ.

Throughout the four Gospels, we find condensed versions of Jesus’ evangelistic sermons that contain select excerpts of what He said. Our limited space does not allow us a comprehensive presentation of His gospel preaching. Nevertheless, we will note that He stressed the following truths in His preaching as He sought to draw sinners into the kingdom. These distinguishing marks are as follows:

HUMAN SINFULNESS

The preaching of Jesus addressed the fundamental problem confronting every person, namely, their sin problem. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus began His famous sermon with, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the

kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:3). By this, He explicitly stated a person must first confess the spiritual poverty of their inner being in order to become a citizen of His kingdom. Christ maintained that all people must declare their spiritual bankruptcy in order to find acceptance with God. He announced that no person has any spiritual capital of their own to gain entrance into the kingdom. In fact, their sins have caused them to incur an insurmountable debt that they can never repay.

In this same sermon, Jesus declared even the external morality of supposedly good people conceals their own sinful hearts. He proclaimed, “Everyone who is angry with his brother... shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell” (Matt 5:22). Here, Jesus announced that the pollution of sin begins in the heart. Even the sinful attitude of anger is a capital offense against the law of God. Just one sin against God is so serious that it is sufficient to condemn a person to hell forever. Again, Jesus pronounced, “Everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt 5:28). By this penetrating exposition of the Ten Commandments, He exposed and condemned the sin that lurks in human hearts. Jesus then set the divine standard by which every person is to be judged when He said, “Therefore, you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). When measured by this mark of the perfect holiness of God, Jesus revealed that all people are sinners who fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23).

RADICAL REPENTANCE

In His evangelistic preaching, Jesus also called for real repentance. He began His public ministry with this strong appeal, “Repent” (Mark 1:15). The repentance He required was a comprehensive change of the entire person. He demanded the complete turning around of an individual’s

mind, heart, and will that, in turn, produces a change of life. Genuine repentance begins with a change of mind regarding how a person sees God, self, and sin. Then, there must be a changed heart with deep sorrow over personal sin against God. Finally, repentance involves a change of will in which one turns away from a life pursuit of sin and turns to God through Jesus Christ. This is the radical repentance that Jesus commanded in His preaching.

This strong emphasis on repentance continued throughout the entirety of Jesus' ministry. Sparing no individual in any place, He "denounced the cities" that "did not repent" (Matt 11:20). When He sent out the twelve disciples to preach, they did so exactly as they had heard Jesus preach. "They went out and preached that men should repent" (Mark 6:12). On another occasion, Jesus warned, "I tell you...unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). He made it unmistakably clear that if anyone was to enter the kingdom, they must repent of their sins and turn to God. So emphatic was Jesus about the necessity of repentance that He repeated this admonition, "I tell you... unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5). He maintained that no one would escape the destruction of fiery hell without true repentance (Luke 16:30).

The preaching of repentance was so necessary that when Jesus issued the Great Commission, He charged His disciples that "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" must be "proclaimed in His name to all the nations" (Luke 24:47). He told them that genuine repentance is required for the forgiveness of sins. So important was repentance to Jesus that He insisted it was an indispensable component of authentic gospel preaching. If there is to be any pardon from God, there must be repentance. As a result, repentance became a dominant part of the preaching of the apostles (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 11:81; 20:21; 26:20).

DECISIVE FAITH

In Jesus' preaching, He connected saving faith *and* repentance. At the outset of His public ministry, He proclaimed, "Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Both repentance and faith were necessary to receive the good news of salvation. They are like Siamese twins, inseparably joined together. In reality, this called for a believing repentance or a repentant faith. To "believe in the gospel" meant that an unconverted sinner must entrust his entire life to Jesus Christ for salvation. The preaching of Jesus required a lost person to commit their whole being to Him as Savior and Lord. Those who truly believe in Him must trust Him completely for their eternal destiny.

Throughout the Gospel of John, the preaching of Jesus repeatedly called for saving faith. He made it clear that ev-

ery person must take the decisive step to leave behind the world and believe in Him in order to receive eternal life. In a major discourse delivered by Jesus, He proclaimed, "He who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24). By these words, Jesus declared it is not enough for His listeners to merely hear and entertain the words that He preached. Instead, a person must respond by wholeheartedly believing in Him. He made it clear that saving faith is absolutely necessary to escape divine judgment.

To thousands of people, Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life . . . he who believes in Me will never thirst" (John 6:35). The soul-sustaining life Jesus offers can only be experienced by believing in Him. In that same sermon, Jesus announced, "Everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life" (John 6:40). This non-negotiable requirement to believe in Him was a recurring mandate in His gospel preaching. Jesus claimed that trusting in Him was not an option to be considered. Rather, it was a divine command to be obeyed. In His preaching, Jesus demanded that unconverted sinners believe the gospel with an immediate step of faith. His evangelistic appeals came with this sense of authority that elicited the personal commitment of every individual.

UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER

Jesus repeatedly called those who would follow Him to the unconditional surrender of self. When addressing the crowds, He would not allow for an easy believism from the crowd. He asserted, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). By this firm appeal, Jesus proclaimed that those who follow Him must love Him "more than" they do their closest loved ones (Matt 10:38). In other words, Jesus Christ must be their supreme affection, and He must receive their greatest loyalty if they are to enter the kingdom.

In this same message, Jesus added, "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27). A cross was an instrument of death in the first century. It was the electric chair of the day. By these shocking words, Jesus required the utter self-denial of all who would come to Him. This demand required that they must die to themselves. They must be crucified to their old way of life. His followers must come to the end of themselves before they can live for Him. Jesus called for His followers to be walking dead men, but alive to Him.

In this very sermon, Jesus demanded the unconditional

surrender of the listeners to His sovereign lordship. Jesus issued this parable, “Or what king when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still far way, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace” (Luke 14:31–32). This states that those who would be His genuine followers must accept His terms of peace. Otherwise, they will suffer eternal destruction. This mandates the complete surrender of their life to Him. There may not be counter negotiations for any less demanding terms of peace.

EMPASSIONED APPEALS

Jesus preached the gospel with a strong intensity arising from the depths of His soul. He pleaded with those who heard Him to respond to His open invitations. There was a fervency in His voice that reflected His deep feelings to win lost souls. He did not proclaim the gospel with an indifferent tone that was nonchalant or blasé. He was not a stoic preacher devoid of emotions or feelings. He was not cold or clinical in His delivery. Instead, Jesus conveyed the extreme importance of His message by the blood-earnest manner with which He preached. He did not preach the living gospel in a dead fashion.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus implored the crowd, “Enter by the narrow gate” (Matt 7:13). With this gospel appeal, He passionately urged those who were outside the kingdom to enter it by faith. He pleaded with them to respond to the offer of salvation that He issued. They must take the decisive step of faith to enter into the kingdom of God. They must do so *now*. As an evangelistic preacher, Jesus knew that He must do far more than merely teach the truth. He must convincingly compel those who heard the message to act upon it. To be a fisher of men, He must do more than cast the net. He must actually *draw* the net.

On the last day of the Feast of the Tabernacles, “Jesus cried out in the temple, teaching” (John 7:28). This long-ing in His voice arose from the fire within His soul as He called sinners to Himself. Later, “Jesus stood and cried out, saying, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink’” (John 7:37). This invitation expresses the burning zeal with which He preached. On yet another occasion, Jesus cried out to the crowd, “Come unto Me all who are weary and heavy laden” (Matt 11:28). He fervently appealed to them to come as He issued the free offer of the gospel. Another time, Jesus cried out, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, . . . [h]ow often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were un-

willing” (Matt 23:37). This pleading reveals the enflamed passion within Him that summoned them to come.

FULL SALVATION

Jesus’ evangelistic preaching offered full salvation to those who would repent and believe. Jesus declared, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24). To those who were spiritually dead, Jesus offered the eternal life that only God can give. “Eternal life” means, literally, “the life of the ages to come.” This heavenly life is unlike anything this world can offer. This quality of life has come down from God above. In fact, this life is the very life of God Himself in the dead human soul. Eternal life is knowing God and His Son, Jesus Christ, in a vital, personal relationship (John 17:3) that shall endure forever.

Moreover, Jesus preached that the one who humbles himself before God and believes the gospel will be “justified” (Luke 18:14). That is, the one who repents will be declared righteous before God and his sins will be forgiven (Mark 2:5). This person will be delivered from divine condemnation. Jesus proclaimed, “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). Those who believe in Him will enter into His rest (Matt 11:29–30). They will be made sons of God (Matt 5:9) and be brought into the family of God with many brothers and sisters (Mark 3:35). Those who repent will be inwardly comforted and completely satisfied (Matt 5:4, 6; John 6:35). They will be made joint heirs with Christ and share in His vast inheritance (Matt 5:4; 19:28–29). Jesus proclaimed they will one day see God (Matt 5:8). This is the full salvation He offered.

FINAL JUDGMENT

In His gospel preaching, Jesus was a judgment preacher. He repeatedly warned His listeners that there was coming a final day of divine accounting. Every sin will be exposed on the last day (Matt 7:21–23). The true state of every soul will be made known. Jesus said, “I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it on the day of judgment” (Matt 12:36). Every sinful deed of darkness will be exposed by the divine Light (John 3:20). Even the smallest sin will be exposed on that day before the divine court. The full weight of divine justice will be served as Jesus will execute perfect righteousness (John 5:22).

Jesus preached that the greater a person’s exposure to the truth, the greater his accountability in the final judgment. Jesus declared, “Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city” (Matt 10:15; cf. 11:24). It will

be far stricter and less tolerable for some than for others in the final judgment. Jesus pronounced, “And that slave who knew his master’s will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of flogging, will receive but few” (Luke 12:47–48). The greater their knowledge of the truth, the greater will be their accountability before God and the stricter will be the judgment if that truth is rejected.

Again, Jesus admonished the unrepentant cities where He had preached. “Woe to you Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you” (Matt 11:21–22). Jesus clearly taught that there will be a severer punishment for some than for others if they refuse to believe the truth and enter the kingdom.


FIERY HELL

A significant part of the gospel message that Jesus preached was the truth of eternal punishment. He warned His listeners that if they remained in their unbelief, they would be consigned to the fiery hell. He cautioned them that if they go to hell, they will never escape the agony of this torment. He alerted them to the awful reality that awaits the unrepentant in the smoldering fires below. It would have been unloving if He had not done so. Jesus had more to say about hell than any other preacher in the Bible. He had more to say about hell than He did about heaven.

Faithful to His calling as a preacher, Jesus described hell as a *real* place. It is not a figment of fallen man’s imagination. It is a place created by God for those who remain in the kingdom of darkness (Matt 25:41). He emphatically spoke of hell as “that place” (Matt 8:12) and “the place of torment” (Luke 16:28). In other words, it is an *actual* place on God’s map. He said “many” will be assigned to this place, compared with “the few who will not” be there (Matt 7:13–14). Jesus warned that hell will be filled with morally good people—who falsely assumed that they knew Him when they did not (Matt 7:21–23).

Jesus openly preached about hell to all who heard Him. He never apologized for doing so. He solemnly warned that a “great chasm” (Luke 16:26) will separate believers from unbelievers. Jesus referred to hell as “the fiery furnace” (Matt 13:42), where impenitent sinners are entrapped in a towering inferno of flames. He referred to hell as being ignited with “unquenchable fire” (Matt 3:12; 9:43). It is that dreadful place where the fire of God’s wrath will never be extinguished. It is where “the worm never dies” (Mark 9:48). He referred to hell as an “eternal fire” (Matt 25:41), where the burning anger of His wrath will never be quenched.

Jesus preached that hell is a place of incomprehensible suffering with “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 13:42, 50). He announced that it is a horrific place of grueling “torment” (Luke 16:23, 28) and unbearable “agony” (Luke 16:24). Jesus described it as a place of “outer darkness” (Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30), where those who enter will never again see the light of day. He pronounced it as a place where damned souls will “remember” (Luke 16:25). They



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will remember the countless opportunities that they had to believe in the gospel, but squandered them. These haunting memories will torture them forever. Jesus warned that this “fiery hell” (Matt 5:22, 28) must be avoided at all costs.

A SOULWINNING PREACHER

The evangelistic preaching of Jesus Christ reveals that it came with mind-enlightening truth, heart-tugging persuasion, and will-challenging appeal. His gospel summons were issued with an urgency that demanded the immediate response of His listeners. As Jesus stood before the vast throngs, He proclaimed the saving message so that men and women would enter the kingdom of God while there was yet time.

If we are to preach like Jesus, we must proclaim the gospel with urgency, imploring our listeners to come to faith in Him. In order to do so, we must use the Law to expose sin in the hearts of our listeners. We must compel our listeners to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. We must demand submission to His lordship. We must extend the free offer of eternal life. We must warn of the final judgment to come. And we must bear witness to the hope of heaven and the horrors of hell.

JESUS: THE GREATEST THEOLOGIAN

While being the master evangelist, Jesus was also the greatest theologian to ever teach the truth. By His preaching, He demonstrates that being a strong evangelist *and* being a sound theologian are mutually inclusive, never mutually exclusive. In order to be an effective soulwinner, Jesus had to be a skilled teacher of sound doctrine. These two aspects of preaching must be joined together. A passion for the gospel *and* the profundity of the doctrines of grace must come together. This necessitated that Jesus also proclaim the sovereignty of God in salvation. In the four Gospels, He preached these transcendent truths to both believers and unbelievers alike.

These doctrines of sovereign grace can be grouped into five theological categories. The first truth is total depravity, which focuses upon the moral corruption and inability of man. The middle three truths set forth the saving grace of each Person of the Trinity. Jesus taught the Father’s sovereign election, His own definite atonement, and the Spirit’s effectual calling. The fifth truth concludes with the perseverance of the believer in the grace of God throughout time

and eternity. Jesus Christ announced each of these doctrinal distinctives throughout His preaching ministry.

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

In His many sermons, Jesus repeatedly proclaimed the radical corruption of human hearts. He regularly preached on the multi-faceted aspects of the total depravity of man. He announced that every part of man’s faculties was completely marred by sin. He proclaimed that the mind, affections, and will of all unconverted men and women were poisoned by the deadly plague of sin. Therefore, all people are born



spiritually blind, morally defiled, and volitionally bound as it relates to God. Each of these categories within man was specifically addressed by Jesus in His preaching.

Jesus pronounced that all men are born in intellectual darkness regarding the gospel. Being spiritually blind, they enter this world with a total inability to see the truths of the kingdom of God. He said, “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). He knew that even His own preaching was spiritually incomprehensible to the unregenerate mind (John 8:43). Those who are perishing have eyes to see, He claimed, but they cannot perceive the truth (Matt 13:14). He called the Pharisees “blind leaders of the blind” (Matt 15:14). That is to say, both the religious leaders *and* their followers were spiritually blind (Matt 23:16, 17, 19, 24). Jesus knew that, though the light of the truth was before their eyes, they had no spiritual capacity to see it.

Moreover, Jesus preached that the heart affections are of the unregenerate defiled by sin. Their depraved desires cause them to hate what they should love and love what they should hate. He said, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt 12:34), meaning that the problem of man is his heart. Jesus diagnosed the heart as the polluted fountain from which their sinful lives flowed. He attested to this when he stated, “The evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil” (Matt 12:35). This means that the human heart is a storehouse of all manner of evil.

Jesus said, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Matt 15:19). The heart is the contaminated well from which all these foul sins come gushing forth like a broken sewer.

Further, Jesus pronounced the bondage of the will of every unregenerate person. Addressing this moral inability, Jesus emphatically stated, “No one can come to Me” (John 6:44, 65). This is an all-inclusive statement that describes every unbeliever. Jesus preached that to “come” to Him means to believe in Him (John 6:35). Though they

were commanded to come to Christ, this is the very thing the unregenerate cannot do. Again, He said, “No one can come to Me” (John 6:65). By this pronouncement, He reiterated that it is impossible for spiritually dead sinners to exercise saving faith. A spiritual corpse cannot take the step of faith to come to Jesus Christ. Unbelievers have no positive free will to believe in Jesus

Christ. Jesus further said to a crowd of unbelievers, “You are of your father the devil and you want to do your father’s desires” (John 8:44). Thus, unregenerate people are slaves of sin (John 8:34) who desire to do the will of the devil.

SOVEREIGN ELECTION

Given the bondage of the human will, Jesus preached that God must exercise His sovereign will in selecting certain individual sinners for salvation. Otherwise, no one will ever choose to believe the gospel. The biblical doctrine of sovereign election teaches that before the beginning of time, God chose specific sinners whom He purposed to save. Jesus referred to them as “His elect” (Luke 18:7). These chosen ones deserve God’s wrath as much as those whom He purposed not to choose. However, it pleased God to select a specific people for Himself, each one individually named (John 10:3). This divine choice was not because of anything good foreseen in the one chosen, but simply because it pleased Him to show His mercy upon the elect.

In declaring this truth, Jesus stated that at the end of this age, God “will send His angels to gather together His elect from the four winds” (Matt 24:31). These elect ones are selected out of every tribe, tongue, people, and nation from around the world. Jesus added, “For the sake of the elect those days will be cut short” (Matt 24:22). By this, He affirmed that before the climax of human history, all the elect

will be brought to faith in Him. At the same time, Jesus stated that not every person in the human race is chosen for salvation. He taught that “few are chosen” (Matt 22:14). Making this distinction, Jesus said, “I am not speaking of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen” (John 13:18). By these words, Jesus clarified that not all people were chosen for eternal life, even from among the twelve disciples.

When standing before thousands of unsaved people, Jesus preached that the Father had chosen His elect before time began, and He gave them to Him as a love gift. This transaction occurred before each one of these individuals came to Him by faith. Jesus took pleasure in referring to these chosen ones collectively as “all that the Father gives Me” (John 6:37, 39). This vast group are those whom “My Father . . . has given to Me” (John 10:29). They are identified as “the men whom You gave Me out of the world” (John 15:19). In addressing the Father, Jesus recognized these chosen ones were “Yours,” meaning they initially belonged to the Father by His sovereign choice. The Father then gave them to the Son. Jesus acknowledged, “You gave them to Me” (John 17:6). By this divine act, they would also belong to Him.

Jesus made a clear distinction between those who were of “the world” and “those whom You have given to Me” (John 17:9). He differentiated between the non-elect in the evil world system and the elect who were chosen “out of the world” (John 15:19). All “whom You have given Me” (John 17:24) will one day be with Jesus in heaven. Though Jesus preached and called individuals to believe in Him, He knew that only those “given” to Him would believe. Thus, He was confident they would be drawn to Him at the divinely appointed time.

DEFINITE ATONEMENT

As Jesus preached about His own death, He specified that it would be exclusively for those chosen by the Father, who were given to Him in eternity past. It would be for these that He would die a sin-bearing, substitutionary death to secure their salvation. Jesus proclaimed that in His death, He was not merely making salvation possible for all people. Rather, He asserted that His death upon the cross would actually save a definite group of people known as His “sheep” (John 10:1–18). Jesus preached that His death accomplished a *real* redemption for this designated group of sinners. He taught that not one drop of His blood would be shed in vain.

In the discourse of the Good Shepherd, Jesus articulated the extent of His own saving death in great detail. Addressing the unbelieving Pharisees, Jesus announced, “The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep” (John 10:11).

That is, He would give His life exclusively for those who hear His voice and follow Him (John 10:3–4). In this same sermon, He reaffirmed, “I lay down My life for the sheep” (John 10:15). The specific intent of Jesus’ death was that He would rescue His own sheep from perishing. He stated that He had been directly commanded by the Father to lay down His life for His flock (John 10:16, 18). He then explained that not all people are His sheep (John 10:26). Therefore, He died exclusively for those who are His sheep.

The question of John 3:16 is often raised; it reads, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.” Interpreting the word “world” (*cosmos*) requires recognizing that it has ten different meanings in the Gospel of John. “World” can refer to the entire universe, physical earth, world system, humanity minus believers, a large group, the general public, both Jews and Gentiles, the human realm, the non-elect only, or the elect only. For example, the Bible says that “the whole world went after Jesus” (John 12:19). In this instance, “world” simply means a large group of people. It could not possibly mean every person who ever lived. In John 17:9, “world” is a reference to those for whom Jesus did *not* make intercession with the Father. Consequently, it can be concluded that “the world” in John 3:16 is a reference to the general realm of mankind to whom the gospel is preached and offered.

EFFECTUAL CALLING

Jesus also preached that the Holy Spirit will irresistibly call each one of the elect to saving faith. Those chosen by the Father and redeemed by the Son will be apprehended by the Spirit and brought to believe in Christ. To a large multitude of unbelievers, Jesus proclaimed that God will overcome the stubborn resistance of every elect sinner and irresistibly draw them to receive the gospel into their hearts. He maintained, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me” (John 6:37). None of those given to Him by the Father will be left in their unbelief. To those who had not yet

believed, Jesus declared that all the elect among them will come to faith in Him.

To this same crowd, Jesus preached, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44). This word “draw” (*helkuo*) means to drag an object. It was used by Luke in Acts to describe Paul being “dragged” into the marketplace by the authorities (Acts 16:19). The same word was used when he was “taken hold of” and “dragged” out of the Temple by the crowd (Acts 21:30). This indicates how powerfully God “draws” the elect to faith in Christ. Again, Jesus preached, “No one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father” (John 6:65). The only way any of the elect comes to faith in Christ is that they are powerfully brought by the Spirit to the Son.

In His discourse on the Good Shepherd, Jesus preached, “The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.... The sheep follow him because they know his voice” (John 10:3–4). By these words, He declared all those chosen by the Father will recognize His voice and follow Him. When Jesus calls them by name, they will respond and come to Him by faith. To another crowd, Jesus reasserted, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (John 10:27). In the day God calls them, they will be made to come in repentance and faith. This is the glorious truth that Jesus consistently preached, even to unbelievers.

PRESERVING GRACE

Finally, Jesus preached that those who believe in Him will be kept eternally secure in His saving grace. In the discourse on the Bread of Life, He maintained, “Of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day” (John 6:39). By this remarkable statement, Jesus announced the safe preservation of the elect throughout time and eternity. He proclaimed that no repentant believer will ever perish. Even their bodies will be resurrected at the end of the age. In this same sermon, Jesus announced, “I am the

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living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever” (John 6:51). This promise applies only to believers, those who will live forever with God. Jesus added, “He who eats my flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:54). By this, Jesus promised that every believer is kept in the safety of His care, both in this world and in the world to come.

At the Feast of the Dedication, Jesus again did not hesitate to preach the safeguarding of His sheep. He claimed, “They will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (John 10:28–29). In this bold pronouncement, Jesus taught that all believers are held tightly in His omnipotent hands, never to be released. Further, they are kept in the all-powerful grip of God the Father, never to perish. These sheep are jointly upheld by the Father and the Son, never to fall away.

In the Mount of Olivet Discourse, Jesus preached, “Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many” (Matt 24:11). Innumerable religious people will claim to have a relationship with God, but they will be self-deceived. He added, “For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matt 24:24). Here, Jesus was clear that while the world is deceived, none of the elect will be misled by the deception of these false teachers. In the midst of such trickery, those chosen by God will never fall away from their faith in Christ. Though rejected by the world, they will be held tightly by God.

A SOVEREIGN GRACE PREACHER

Jesus clearly preached the doctrines of sovereign grace as He expounded the gospel of God. These cardinal truths of the sovereignty of God in salvation were proclaimed by Jesus to believers and unbelievers alike. These God-exalting sermons were an essential part of His preaching ministry, even in His evangelistic appeal to the unconverted. These transcendent doctrines were not withheld from the unbelievers whom He addressed, but openly declared to them.

Jesus wanted unbelievers to know that, ultimately, they were not in control of their own conversion. Neither were they the master of their own destinies. This is why preaching the sovereignty of God in salvation was not a truth that Jesus kept back from the unconverted. The doctrines of grace were an integral part of His evangelistic preaching that often prepared the way for the gospel into unregenerated hearts.

An unbeliever does not have to believe the doctrines

of grace in order to be saved. But these important truths are powerfully effective in evangelistic preaching. The proclamation of sovereign grace has the power to plow up the hardened soil of the unconverted heart. These truths humble the proud and cause them to look away from themselves toward God. This was certainly the case with Nicodemus (John 3:8). The preaching of the sovereignty of God in salvation causes the gospel of grace to triumph in unrepentant souls. When preachers declare these monumental truths, many unbelievers are made ready to believe in Jesus Christ. Further, the doctrines of grace deepen the faith of true believers when they hear them preached (John 6:65, 68–69).

HOW SHALL WE PREACH?

How shall we proclaim the gospel of saving grace *and*, at the same time, expound the doctrines of sovereign grace? What follows are ten practical steps for being faithful to God in this endeavor.

One, *practice the exposition of books*. There is wisdom for every expositor in preaching through entire books of the Bible. With this systematic approach, he expounds the truths addressed in the next verses. As he approaches verses that teach the sovereignty of God in salvation, he must explain them in the already established flow of the book. By this verse-by-verse approach, no one can accuse him of going out of his way to impose the doctrines of grace upon his congregation. Anyone can clearly see that this truth is taught in the unfolding sequence of the book itself.

Two, *proclaim the gospel of grace*. As an expositor preaches through books in the Bible, he should focus upon doing the work of an evangelist. He must take every opportunity to preach the power of the cross and its ability to save sinners. He must be regularly extending the free offer of the gospel for the forgiveness of sins. He must teach the great doctrines of regeneration, propitiation, justification, reconciliation, and redemption. While the gospel *per se* is not in every verse, the preacher must know how to get to the gospel from any particular passage in the Bible.

Three, *persuade the response of sinners*. In preaching the gospel, it is not enough that the expositor merely explain its truths. Teaching is not the same as preaching. The preacher must actually call men and women to respond to the gospel. He must urge them to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Authentic preaching requires exhorting and pleading for the response of the listener. It involves inviting, summoning, and commanding those to whom he speaks. He must call for the verdict in the heart of the listener. He must challenge their will. True gospel preaching never adopts a “take it or leave it” attitude. The preacher

THE PREACHER SHOULD NEVER AVOID ANY TRUTH THAT GOD HAS PLACED IN HIS WORD.

must earnestly compel the unbeliever to believe.

Four, *preach the doctrines of grace*. The preacher should never avoid any truth that God has placed in His Word. Neither should he apologize for any biblical teaching. This includes the doctrines of sovereign grace. He must be a faithful messenger of Scripture, but never its censor or editor. Whatever theology God teaches in the Bible, the expositor must expound it without hesitation or apology. Consequently, he is duty bound to teach the sovereignty of God in salvation. This towering truth is found throughout the Bible. To fail to preach the doctrines of grace is to depart from the very practice of Jesus Christ Himself.

Five, *prioritize the person of Christ*. The preacher must not become so preoccupied with the smaller nuances of theology that he loses sight of the big picture, namely, Jesus Christ. To be sure, the preaching of the gospel requires the teaching of sound doctrine. But the expositor must also remember that he is called to proclaim the glorious person and work of Jesus Himself. In reality, he does not merely preach the forgiveness of sins. Rather, he offers *Jesus*, who forgives sin. He does not preach the reconciliation of sinners to God. Instead, he offers *Jesus*, who reconciles sinners to God. Paul said, “We preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1:23; cf. 2:2) and “We proclaim Him” (Col 1:28). Simply put, the gospel *is* Jesus Christ.

Six, *prevent the abuse of sovereignty*. The truth of the sovereignty of God must not be forced into every sermon. These glorious doctrines are not found in every verse in the Bible. Neither are they required to be inserted into every message. If the expositor feels compelled to mention the doctrines of grace in every message, he will soon cause his listeners to grow weary of hearing this incessant drumbeat. Imposing these truths into every exposition will likely do more harm than good.

Seven, *point out the purity of grace*. The expositor should anticipate the objections that some people will have with sovereign election. Many will say it is not fair. They will exclaim that it is unjust that some are chosen and others are not. The preacher should remind his listeners that no

one deserves to be chosen. Everyone deserves to be passed over. That anyone would be chosen for salvation is pure grace. That a vast number is elected by God is amazing grace. Sovereign grace is the purest grace.

Eight, *petition the Lord to save*. Even the best preacher cannot save anyone. The only one who can convict, call, and regenerate a lost soul is God. Every preacher must petition Him to do what only He can do. In reality, all prayer is a recognition of and dependence upon the sovereignty of God. Otherwise, prayer would be a useless activity. Every preacher must pray, preach, and then leave the results with God. We are called to be faithful messengers of the truth, not successful with the results. We plant and sow, but only God can cause the growth. Prayer is a divinely appointed means by which God works to accomplish the salvation of His elect.

Nine, *persevere in the pulpit*. No matter what opposition the expositor may receive for preaching the sovereignty of God, he must remain steadfast in expounding these truths. If people resist the doctrines of grace, the preacher must still persevere in proclaiming them. He must know that God is sovereign over who believes His sovereignty. Though he may not see the response that he desires from his preaching, he still must endure in expounding these truths. Even Jesus was rejected for preaching the doctrines of grace (John 6:65). Nevertheless, He persevered in expounding these profound truths (John 10:1–30).

Ten, *pastor the flock of God*. Preaching the doctrines of sovereign grace is an important means by which the preacher shepherds the flock of God. These truths are not put in the Bible to win debates, but to glorify God, win the lost, and edify the saints. The truths of sovereign grace instill a healthy fear of God in the hearts of the unconverted. Likewise, they are used to mature the lives of believers. The meat of the Word in these truths builds strong believers. These truths of the doctrines of grace provide much comfort for hurting hearts. Likewise, they elevate worship, crush pride, establish faith, launch evangelism, and motivate missions. This is the nature of true pastoral care.

MAINTAINING THE BALANCE

Every expositor must be both an evangelist *and* a theologian. This comprehensive approach is required if he is to follow the example set by Jesus Christ. The Lord was a passionate soulwinner *and*, at the same time, expounded the profound truths of sovereign grace. This dual nature was often true in the very same sermon that He preached. Throughout His earthly ministry, Christ exhibited this balance between extending the gospel *and* expounding the sovereignty of God. He carried out this all-encompassing ministry with both believers and the unconverted. This included preaching both the purity of the gospel of grace *and* the profundity of the doctrines of grace.

In like manner, this broad-scoped approach should be

the practice of every expositor in his pulpit ministry. He should preach both saving grace *and* sovereign grace. He should hold tightly to both truths, one in each hand, and bring the two together. As he stands in the pulpit, he must unite both realms of truth into one powerful message from God.

Preaching the full counsel of God is the task of every expositor. He must preach the whole Bible to the whole person. One truth cannot be sacrificed at the expense of another truth. All that God has revealed in the Scripture must be shouted from the housetops with the same conviction and equal passion. This all-encompassing ministry of the Word must describe your preaching for the glory of God and for the good of His people. ✦



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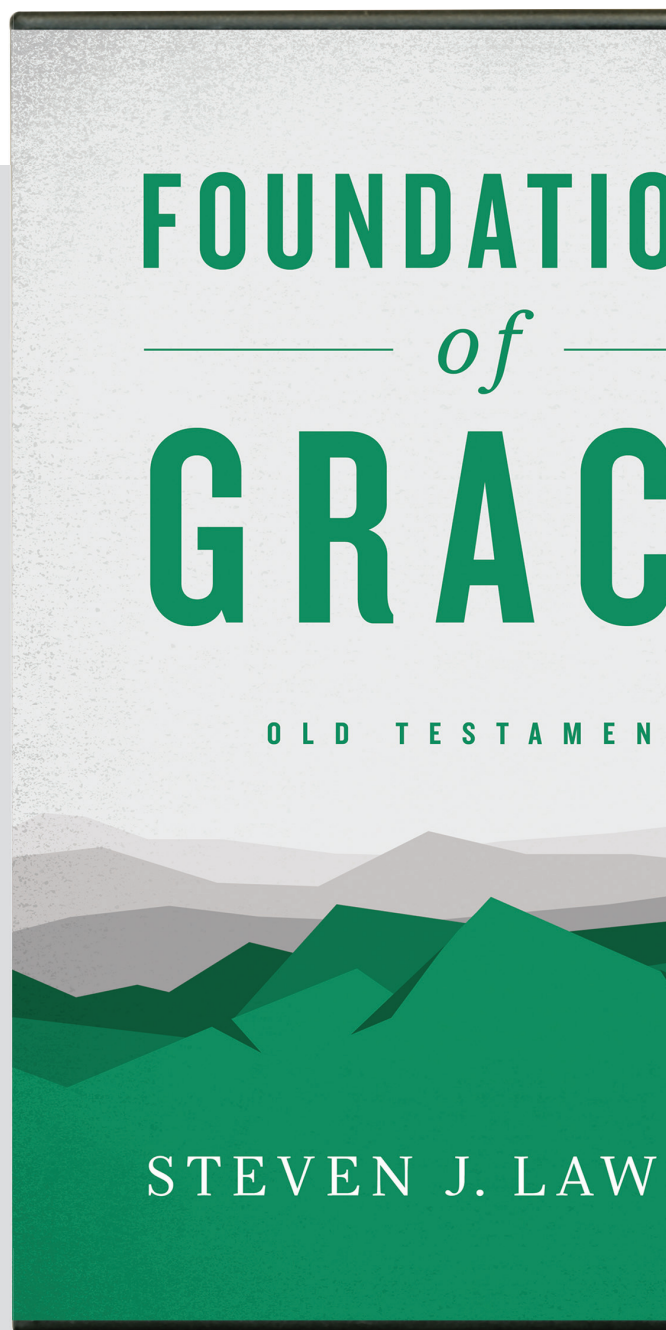
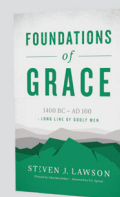
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THEOLOGY OF SLEEP: EVANGELISM ACCORDING TO JESUS

JOHN MACARTHUR

The Scripture's longest and most detailed instructions concerning evangelism are found in Mark 4. This series of parables is our Lord's Magna Carta on evangelism, and the foundation of His teaching is the parable of the soils. The point of this illustration runs contrary to much of today's evangelistic thinking as it demonstrates that neither the style of the evangelist nor his adaptation of the message ultimately has an impact on the results of his efforts. Jesus' understanding of evangelism is a resounding rebuke to those who suppose that a pastor's dress, style, or music helps him reach a particular culture or crowd, or that diluting the gospel to make it more acceptable produces true conversions. The reality is that God's power comes through the message, not the messenger.

The disciples were confused. They had left their homes, lands, extended families, and friends (Mark 10:28). They turned their backs on their former lives to follow Jesus, whom they believed to be the long-awaited Messiah, and they expected to see other Israelites make similar sacrifices and believe in Jesus as well. Rather than national conversion, the disciples found much animosity. Jewish leaders hated Jesus and His teachings, while many of the masses were only interested in signs and wonders. Few were repenting, and doubt was beginning to grip the Twelve.

The problem was not Jesus' ability to attract an audience. As He traveled around Galilee teaching, the crowds were huge, often numbering in the tens of thousands. The disciples were often pressed tightly together. Occasionally, Jesus would have to get into a boat and push offshore into the lake to teach, merely to escape the crushing weight of the desperate miracle seekers.

But as fascinating and impressive as the scene was, it was not producing true believers. People were not genuinely repenting and embracing Jesus as Savior. Even the disciples' own expectations were not being realized. The prophecies of Isaiah 9 and 45 spoke of a day when the Messiah's kingdom would be global and without end. By the time the events of Mark 4 occurred, the Lord's ministry had been public for two years, and the notion that Jesus was establishing that kind of kingdom seemed far from reality. Consequently, few people were sincerely following Him. The Old Testament described the Messiah as bringing to Israel both national salvation and international supremacy. Thus, the massive crowds were only interested in miracles, healings, and food—not salvation from sin.

So, it was not surprising for the disciples to have questions. If Jesus was truly the Messiah, why were many of His followers so obviously superficial? How could the long-awaited Messiah come to Israel, only to be rejected

by the nation's religious leaders? And why did He not exact power and authority to establish the promised kingdom with the fulfillment of all that was pledged in the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants?

The issue was this: Jesus was preaching a hard message that required radical sacrifice from His followers. On the one hand, following Christ was very appealing. It offered freedom from the labyrinth of oppressive man-made regulations imposed by the Pharisees (Matt 11:29–30; cf. 17:25–27). On the other hand, following Christ was daunting, because it required finding the narrow gate, denying oneself, and obeying Him even to the point of death (Matt 7:13–14; Mark 8:34). To follow Jesus required recognizing that He was divine, and that apart from Him there is no salvation and no other means to reconciliation with God (John 14:6). It also meant completely abandoning Judaism that focused on religious practice instead of a penitent heart turned to God.

Many Jews expected the Messiah to liberate them from Roman occupation, but Jesus refused to do so. Instead, He preached a message of repentance, submission, sacrifice, radical devotion, and exclusivity. The crowds were drawn to Him because of the miracles He performed and the power He possessed; the disciples, however, recognized that His approach, as powerful and truthful as it was, was not turning the curious into converts. When the disciples asked, "Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?" it was an honest question born from the reality of what they experienced (Luke 13:23, NASB). One can even imagine the disciples entertaining the idea that perhaps Jesus' message should be altered, even if just slightly, to manipulate the people's response.

THE MESSENGER IS NOT THE MEANS

In many ways, current evangelicalism is similarly confused. I have often noted that the dominant myth in evangelicalism is that the success of Christianity depends on how popular it is. The perceived mandate is that, if the gospel is to remain relevant, Christianity must somehow adapt and appeal to the latest cultural trends.

That kind of thinking used to be limited to the seeker-sensitive crowd, but it has recently made the leap into more Reformed circles. There are entire movements that would agree to the truths of predestination, election, and total depravity, but then also, inexplicably, demand that pastors act more like rock stars than humble shepherds. Influenced by the emotional rhetoric of bad theology, people tolerate the idea that the cultural shrewdness of a pastor determines how successful his message is and how influential his church will be. Current church growth methodology claims that if

an evangelist wants to “reach the culture” (whatever that means), he must emulate the culture in some way. But such an approach runs contrary to the biblical paradigm. The power of the Spirit in the gospel is not found in the messenger, but in the message. Thus, the motivation behind the seeker-driven mindset might be noble, but it is seriously misguided.

Any effort to manipulate the outcome of evangelism by changing the message or stylizing the messenger is a mistake. The idea that more people will repent if only the preacher were cooler or funnier invariably causes the church to suffer through a ridiculous parade of entrepreneurial types who act as though their personal charm can draw people to Christ.

This error leads to the harmful notion that a pastor’s conduct and speech should be determined by the culture in which he ministers. If he is trying to reach an “unchurched” culture, some would argue, he should speak and act like the unchurched, even when their behavior is unholy. There are many problems with that kind of logic, but foremost is the false assumption that a pastor can manufacture true conversions by looking or acting a certain way. The bottom line is that only God is in control of whether or not sinners are saved as a result of any preaching.

In reality, the hard truths of the gospel are not conducive to gaining popularity and influence within secular society. Sadly, however, many preachers crave cultural acceptance so much that they are actually willing to alter God’s message of salvation and His standard of holiness in order to achieve it. The result, of course, is another gospel that is not the gospel at all.

Such compromises do nothing to increase the church’s witness within the culture. In fact, they have the opposite effect. By creating a synthetic gospel, they facilitate filling churches with people who have not repented of their sins. Instead of making the world like the church, such efforts

succeed only in making the church more like the world. This is precisely what Jesus’ teaching in Mark 4 was designed to avoid.


THE PARABLE OF THE SOILS

The disciples, having a genuine burden that others would believe, were astounded that the masses were not repenting. There must have been times when they questioned the indicting, hard, demanding message Jesus preached.

The Lord responded to this rising tide of doubt by telling the disciples a series of parables and proverbs about evangelism. A year before He would give the Great Commission, He used this series of parables as His basis for instruction concerning evangelism (Mark 4:1–34). Mark devotes more space to it than to any other teaching in his Gospel, and the focal point is the initial parable, a story about a farmer sowing seed:

Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away. And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred. (Mark 4:3–8)

This illustration is a paradigmatic explanation of what evangelism should look like. It is designed to answer a basic question that all evangelists eventually ask: why do some people respond to the gospel while others do not?



**THE HARD TRUTHS OF THE GOSPEL ARE NOT
CONDUCTIVE TO GAINING POPULARITY AND
INFLUENCE WITHIN SECULAR SOCIETY.**

The answer to this question clarifies the essence of evangelism.

The Missing Sower

The parable of the soils begins with a farmer. What is surprising about him is how little control he actually has in the growing of the crops. There are no adjectives used to describe his style or skill, and in a subsequent parable our Lord depicts a sower as one who plants, returns home, and goes to sleep:

And He was saying, “The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows—how, he himself does not know.

The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.” (Mark 4:26–29, NASB)

Jesus states that the farmer is ignorant of how the seed transforms itself into a mature plant. After sowing the seed, the farmer “goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts up and grows—how, he himself does not know.”

This ignorance is not unique to this particular farmer, but rather is true of everyone who sows. The growth of the seed is a mystery that even the most advanced farmer cannot explain. And this reality is the key to the entire parable. Jesus explains that the seed represents the gospel, and the farmer represents the evangelist (v. 26). The evangelist scatters the seed—that is, explains the gospel to people—and some of those people believe and receive life. How this happens is a divine mystery to the evangelist. One thing is clear, however: though he is the human means, it does not ultimately depend on him. The power of the gospel is in the working of the Spirit, not in the style of the sower (Rom 1:16; 1 Thess 1:5; 1 Pet 1:23). It is the Spirit of God who raises souls from death to life, not the methods or techniques of the messenger.

The Apostle Paul understood this principle. When he brought the gospel to Corinth, he planted the church and left it in the care of Apollos. Later he described the experience this way: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase” (1 Cor 3:6). God was the one who actually drew sinners to Himself, changed their hearts, and caused them to be sanctified. Paul and Apollos were both faithful, but they most certainly were not the explanation for the supernatural life and growth. This truth caused Paul to say,

“So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase” (1 Cor 3:7).

Jesus intentionally highlights the farmer’s lack of influence over the growth of the seed. In fact, Jesus stresses that the farmer, after planting, simply went home and fell asleep. This is directly analogous to evangelism. For a person to be saved, the Spirit of God has to draw him, and regenerate his soul (John 6:44; Titus 3:5). This runs counter to the notion that the results of evangelism can be influenced by the wardrobe of the pastor or the kind of music that is played before the message. A farmer could have a burlap or a cashmere seed bag, and neither would have any effect whatsoever on the growth of the seed. The pastor who thinks designer jeans will make his message more palatable is akin to a farmer investing in a designer seed bag so that the soil will be more receptive to his seeds.

Do not mistake this as an apologetic for wearing blue suits. The point Jesus makes is not that the evangelist should wear a tie and sing hymns. The entire parable is making the statement that as far as evangelism goes, it simply does not matter what the evangelist wears, or how he does his hair. Such externals are not what makes the seed grow. When people argue that a pastor who behaves like a particular segment of a culture is better able to reach that culture, they fail to understand Jesus’ point.

All the farmer can do is sow, and all the evangelist can do is proclaim. As a preacher, if I thought someone’s salvation was contingent upon my adherence to some subtle aspect of the culture, I could never sleep. But instead I know that “the Lord knows those who are His” (2 Tim 2:19). It is not coincidental that the New Testament never calls evangelists to bear the responsibility for another person’s salvation. Rather, having proclaimed the message faithfully, we are called to rest in the sovereignty of God.

Of course, the fact that the farmer went to sleep is not an excuse for laziness. It is wrong to think that the style of the evangelist determines who and how many will be saved. But there is the equally serious error of using God’s sovereignty as an excuse not to evangelize. Often called hyper-Calvinism, this view incorrectly assumes that since evangelists are not capable of regenerating someone, then evangelism itself is not necessary.

But that perspective likewise misses the point of Jesus’ teaching. The farmer did sleep, but only after he diligently sowed his seed. A farmer who thinks, “I can’t cause the seed to grow, so why bother even planting?” will not be a farmer for long.

The truth is, Jesus’ description of the farmer provides the model for evangelism. The evangelist must plant the gospel seed, without which no one can be saved (Rom

10:14–17). Then he must trust God with the results, since only the Spirit can give life (John 3:5–8).

WASTED SEED

Not only is the farmer's style irrelevant to the success of his crops, but Jesus also does not suggest that the sower should alter his seed to facilitate growth. The parable of the soils portrays six results from the sowing process, but at no point do those results depend on the skill of the sower.

The absence of discussion about the seed likewise corresponds to evangelism. Jesus assumes that Christians will evangelize, using the true seed—the gospel. Altering the message is not an option. Believers are warned against tampering with the message at all (Gal 1:6–9; 2 John 9–11). The only variable in this parable is the soil. If a frustrated evangelist looks at how difficult his task is, or how closed his culture seems to be to the gospel, the problem is not with the faithful messenger or the true gospel. Rather, it lies in the nature of the soil into which the true seed falls.

Jesus describes different kinds of soil where seeds are sown—some do not produce salvation's fruit, but others do. All six of these soils paint a picture of inevitable responses to evangelism, as the soils represent various conditions of the human heart.

Sowing on the road

The first kind of soil is not receptive at all. Matthew 13:4 describes some of the seed as falling “by the wayside.” Fields in Israel were not fenced or walled in. Instead of fences, there were paths that crisscrossed the fields, making borders. These paths were purposely uncultivated. Since the climate in Israel is arid and hot, the paths were roads, beaten as hard as pavement by the feet of those who traversed them. If seed fell on these paths, birds following the sower would swoop down and snatch it.

Jesus relates this seed snatching to the activity of Satan. The compacted soil of the road represented the hard heart that the gospel seed does not penetrate, setting instead on the surface like food for the birds. It is a picture of those who, being held in bondage to Satan, have no interest in the truth. Having rejected the gospel, their hard hearts only grow more and more calloused. The more the farmer treads the path, though he frequently sows seed, the harder the ground becomes.

You might think that this soil describes the hearts of the worst, most outrageous, and irreligious sinners imaginable. But in reality, Jesus is referring to the religious leaders of Israel who were intensely and devotedly committed to external morality, religious ceremony, and traditional forms of worship. But, having rejected the Messiah, they were also

utterly lost. They were proof that being “religious” is no indication of a soft heart. Rather, the deeper one's heart is entrenched in man-made religion, the more impenetrable it becomes. The only hope in such cases is to forcefully break up the hard soil—like the smashing of stone fortresses referred to by Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:3–5:

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

Sowing on the rocky ground

The second type of soil is compared to “stony ground, where it did not have much earth” (Mark 4:5; see also 4:16). Before farmers sowed their fields, they would remove all of the discoverable rocks, which was no small effort. In fact, some rabbis used to say that when God placed rocks on the earth, He dumped most of them in Israel. But below the reach of the plow there was often limestone bedrock. This is what Jesus was referring to here.

When seed fell onto this kind of ground, it would settle in the rich, soft soil tilled by the plow. As it found water, the seed would develop and burrow, beginning to spread roots and grow upward. But the young roots would not be able to anchor the plant because they would soon hit that bedrock. Whatever nutrients were in the soil, the plant would process immediately, and shoot up. As it sprouted up into the sunlight, it would require more moisture. But because the roots could not penetrate the bedrock to get more nutrients, the fragile plant would dry up in the sun.

Jesus compared this soil to a person who hears the gospel and immediately responds with joy (Matt 13:20). His quick response might fool the evangelist into thinking that the conversion was genuine. Initially, this “convert” shows dramatic change, as he or she absorbs and applies all the truth around him or her. But like the seed that is quickly scorched, the apparent life is superficial and temporary. Because there is no depth to the sinner's emotionally driven or self-centered response, no fruit can come from it.

The true nature of this false conversion is soon revealed in the heat of suffering, self-sacrifice, and persecution. Such hardships are too much for the shallow heart to endure.

Sowing among the thorns

The third kind of soil is filled with thorns (Mark 4:7, 18). This soil is deceptive. It has been plowed and appears fertile,

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but below the surface lurks a network of wild roots ready to produce an infestation of weeds. When good seed is forced to compete for life against these dormant thorns and thistles, the farmer's crops will be choked out. Eventually, the weeds steal the seed's moisture and veil its sunlight. As a result, the good seed dies.

The word Jesus uses for *thorns* is from the Greek word *akantha*, which refers to a particular kind of thorny weed common in the Middle East and frequently found in cultivated soil. In fact, it is the same word used in Matthew 27:29 to refer to the crown of thorns placed on our Lord's head. These unwanted plants were common and dangerous to crops.

Jesus compares this weedy soil to people who hear the gospel, but "the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful" (Mark 4:19). If the rocky soil stood for shallow emotion, and if the wayside represented religious deception driven by self-love and self-interest, then the thorny soil describes a double-minded person. When someone's heart is captive to the things of the world, his contrition over sin is not genuine. His heart is divided between earthly, temporal pleasures and heavenly, eternal realities. But those things are mutually exclusive.

The thorns correlate to the "cares of this world," and this phrase could be even better rendered "the distractions of the age" (Mark 4:19). The heart with thorns is occupied by whatever worldly things preoccupy the culture. This is the heart that loves the world and all the things that are in

the world, and therefore the love of God is not in it (see 1 John 2:15; James 4:4).

Those who try to evangelize by accommodating the culture cannot avoid cultivating this kind of soil. The seed may land well enough, but as it grows, the love of the world will expose the token profession of faith for what it really is: another temporary, superficial action from a heart that is still held captive to the world.

The seeds of the gospel fall on the roadside hearers, rocky-soil hearers, and thorny-ground hearers. But in each case, those seeds are rejected. In giving this powerful and clear analogy, the Lord never suggests that the negative response should be blamed on the farmer. The problem is not an evangelist who was not clever or popular enough. Rather, the problem is in the soil. Sinners reject the gospel because they hate the truth and love their sin. That's why the gospel, faithfully proclaimed, can be snatched by Satan, killed by self-love, or smothered by the world.

Sowing on good soil

There may be hearts that reject salvation, but Jesus also describes hearts that receive the gospel. Encouragement comes when Jesus says, "But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred" (Mark 4:8). Good soil is deep, soft, rich, and clean. Neither Satan, the flesh, nor the world can overpower the gospel when it is planted in this kind of heart.

Nearly all of Jesus' parables contain a shocking and unexpected element in them, and the parable of the soils is

no exception. So far, this agricultural analogy would have been familiar to the disciples, or for that matter, to any Israelite. They subsisted off of their farming, and their land was checkered with grain fields. They understood the danger of birds, rocks, and thorns. All of that was very common. But Jesus abandons the familiar by then describing a result no one would have ever expected—a crop of thirty-, sixty-, and even a hundredfold. An average crop could yield six-fold, and a crop that produced tenfold would be considered a once-in-a-lifetime harvest. So when Jesus said that just one of the farmer's seeds could produce as much as an hundredfold, that would have shocked the disciples.

If you are not from an agrarian society, you might miss the absurdity of Jesus describing a seed that can produce 10,000 percent. All illustrations break down at a certain point, and this is precisely the point where the farming analogy is no longer applicable to evangelism. By describing such a massive harvest, Jesus is making the point that the gospel can produce spiritual life in multiples that are impossible except by God's own power.

Heart preparation for the gospel is the work of the Holy Spirit. He alone convicts (John 16:8–15), regenerates (John 3:3–8), and justifies (Gal. 5:22–23). Heart work is God's domain:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.

Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe my ordinances. (Ezek. 36:25–27; cf. Jer. 31:31–33)

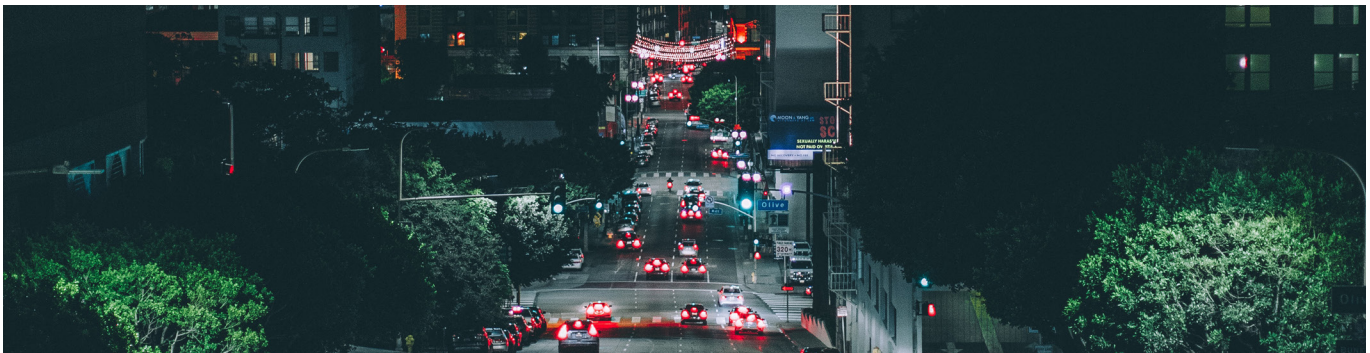
As Solomon asked rhetorically, “Who can say, ‘I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?’” (Prov. 20:9). The answer, of course, is no one.

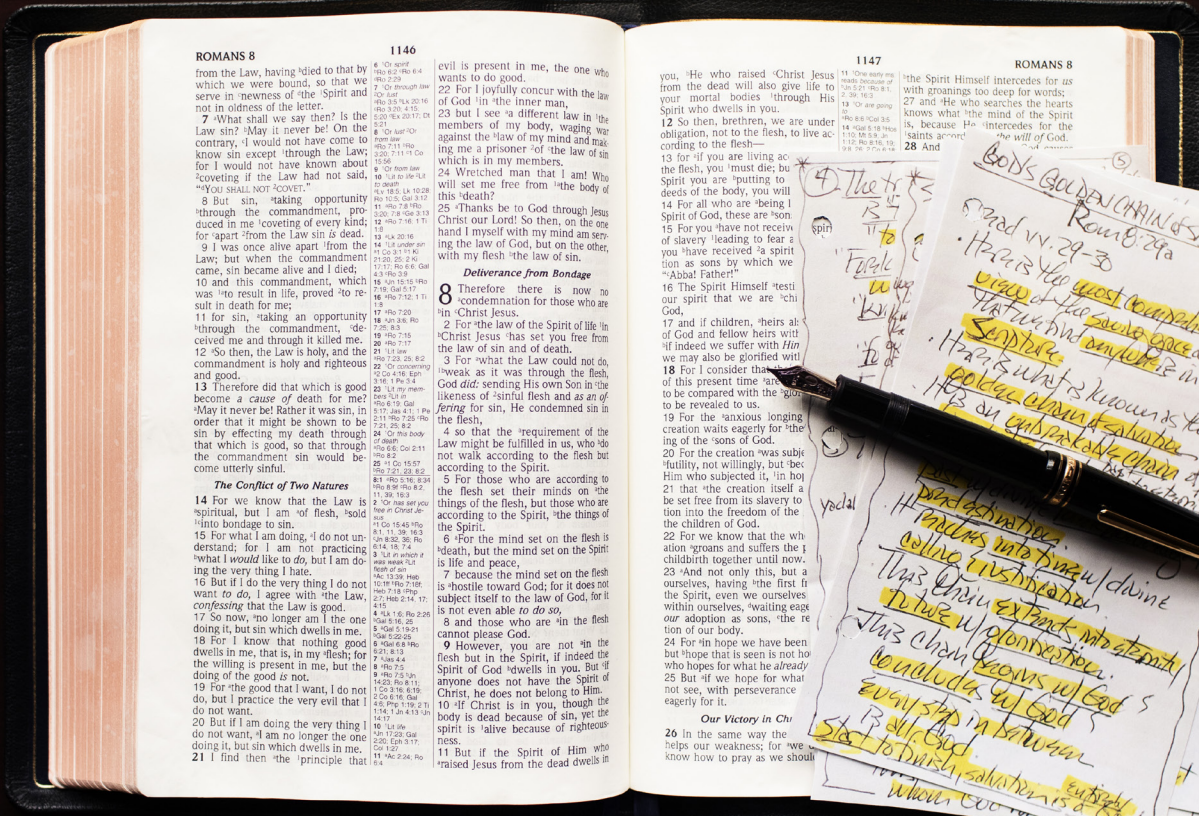
While there are explanations for why people reject the gospel—both satanic and human—true repentance is supernatural. Nowhere is this truth seen more clearly than in the conversion of the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39–43; cf. Matt 27:38–44). His conversion could not have been more unlikely, as it occurred at a time when Jesus appeared to be a colossal failure. The Lord seemed weak, defeated, victimized, and without power to save Himself, much less anyone else. Jesus was disgraced, His enemies triumphant, and His followers absent. The tide of public opinion was against Him, and sarcasm—provided by the first thief—was the fitting and understandable response.

God worked His supernatural saving ability on the second thief and, contrary to natural reason, he repented and believed. Why did this dying rebel embrace as Lord a bleeding and crucified man? The only answer is that it was a miracle of grace and the result of divine intervention. Before the supernatural earthquakes, darkness, and open graves, this man believed because the seed of the gospel landed in fertile soil, prepared by the hand of God. His conversion bears witness to the fact that it is not the style or strength of man that saves, but the power of God.

Because God produces that heart-change, the result will be evident in every transformed life, though different in extent—and far beyond what the disciples could ever have dreamed. The gospel would soon explode in a spiritual harvest, starting at Pentecost and continuing exponentially until the last day of Christ's earthly kingdom. The power for this multiplication is supernatural, but the means is the faithful witness of true believers.

The wonder of the gospel is that it is God's doing. We sow the seed by sharing the gospel; then we go to sleep, and the Spirit works through the gospel to give life. We do not control who is saved, because the Spirit goes wherever He wills (John 3:8). We do not even know how it happens, any more than a farmer knows how a seed in the ground becomes food. Our job is not to impart life, only to implant the seed. Once we have done that, we can rest in the sovereign power of God. ♦





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IF GOD IS SOVEREIGN, IS EVANGELISM MEANINGFUL?

CONRAD MBEWE

One of the questions often asked when the truth of God's sovereignty is taught is, "What is the point of evangelizing sinners if God has already chosen those who are to be saved?" This question is often asked by those who are enemies of the truth of God's absolute sovereignty in electing those who would be saved. To them, this is the unassailable trump card.

Sometimes, however, it is the gnawing question in the minds of those who have seen this truth in the Scriptures and simply want a biblical answer for it. Behind this question is the sick feeling of being cheated. It is like being asked to sit an exam when the examiner has already decided who will pass and who will fail. What is the point in studying hard for such an exam? After all, the end result has already been predetermined. People feel that, if God has already chosen those who are to be saved, then elect sinners will still get saved even if we do not do anything. So, why the bother?

In fact, those who do not make any distinction between Calvinism and Hyper-Calvinism have blamed the absence of evangelistic fervor in some apparently Calvinistic churches on this teaching. They see the logic to be as clear as daylight and wonder why anyone would contest this conclusion. Due to this deduction, they have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. They want to see evangelistic work done with real enthusiasm, but they see the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty as an enemy to this.

This problem is real. We must face it squarely if we are going to help our people be biblically balanced. The safe position is to maintain both God's absolute sovereignty and human responsibility at the same time. To choose one against the other is to fail to represent Scripture in all that it has revealed about God and us as creatures made in His image.

THIS IS TAUGHT IN SCRIPTURE

We must first face the fact that both God's sovereignty in salvation and our duty to evangelize are taught side-by-side in the Bible. One example is Acts 13:48–49. The Bible says, "And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region."

No one can read the book of Acts without coming away with the realization that the apostles were sold out to the work of evangelism and missions. They had turned Jerusalem upside down with their evangelistic work. They were going from town to town not only evangelizing but also starting new churches. Luke recorded that "the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region" (Luke 4:37, 7:17). Yet, Luke not only spoke about Paul and Barnabas laboring away in the arduous task of evangelism but also about the fact

that only the elect responded to the gospel. It must be clear that, to the first-century believers, these two realities were not self-contradictory. They could be spoken about in the same breath with no fear of confusion and inconsistency.

We also see this balance between God's absolute sovereignty and human responsibility in the events recorded for us in Acts 27:1–32. The key events are as follows: Paul was being conveyed as a prisoner on a ship to face judgment before Caesar. Paul warned his captors that the sea was unsafe, but they did not listen to him and continued the journey. They were hit by a violent storm, and the ship was badly battered. The sailors did everything they could to rescue the ship from sinking, but by the third day they gave up all hope of being saved. Paul stood up among the people on the ship and told them that an angel had informed him that none of the people on the ship would die; they would all get to safety.

This speaks of God's sovereign control of all affairs. However, when the sailors tried to run away by letting down the lifeboats, Paul said to the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved" (Acts 27:31). This speaks of human responsibility. It is clear again that to these early Christians, there was no inconsistency in speaking of God's sovereignty and human responsibility at the same time. The two were not incongruous. The Bible teaches both truths, and not one or the other. We must begin by admitting this, or else we will never arrive at the biblical balance in this matter.

THE ELECT ARE UNKNOWN

Let us apply this to the situation at hand. How could the Apostle Paul and Barnabas go about fervently evangelizing if God had already chosen those who would believe? The answer is that the elect are not known until after they respond positively to the gospel. This truth belongs to God's secret will. God has revealed the doctrine of election to us in order for us to better appreciate His grace in salvation.

This is how Paul spoke about it. To the Ephesians he wrote,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved (Eph 1:3–6).

Notice how the very atmosphere in which these words were written is one of praise to God. It begins with "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . ." and it

ends with "...to the praise of his glorious grace." To Paul, this was not a matter for debate but for doxology. God is good. Look at what He has done for us. What has He done? Paul begins before the creation of the world and says, "He chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world... He predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ." According to Paul, we cannot fully extol God and His grace if we refuse to acknowledge His acts of election and predestination. Those of us who are saved now are fruit of His electing grace. Those of us who will get to heaven will do so because of God's predestinating grace. It is all of grace! This is why God has revealed these truths to us. It enables us to give Him the glory that is due to His name.

The sovereignty of God in salvation is not meant to guide us as to whom we should evangelize. As stated earlier, we do not know those who were elected by God for salvation until they are saved. Remember Acts 13:48? "...and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed." That is when we get to know who they are, when they believe. Some of the people who are totally antagonistic to the gospel are actually God's elect. Think of the Apostle Paul before his conversion. He hated the Christian cause and persecuted the church. Yet, he was one of God's elect, and on God's appointed day Paul was brought to repentance and faith in Christ. What this means is that we evangelize everyone. We do not know God's elect among the unconverted.

THE MEANS ARE ORDAINED

We still have one more question that we have not answered. Why should we bother to evangelize at all, since those who are ordained to eternal life will get saved whether we get involved in evangelizing them or not? The answer is that God has not only ordained that the elect will be saved, but He has ordained that they will only be saved through the gospel. Notice that connection in Acts 13:48. "And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region." They heard [the gospel], they glorified the word of the Lord, and the word of the Lord was spreading. We must never divorce salvation from the ordained means—the hearing of the gospel.

We see the same in 1 Thessalonians 1:4–5. The Apostle Paul wrote, "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." Those whom God had sovereignly chosen for salvation before the world began came to be known by Paul and his team when they responded to the gospel. To the elect, the gospel came with irresistible converting power. The gospel is

the indispensable means by which God calls His elect into the kingdom.

James says the same when he writes, "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (James 1:18). James extols God's sovereignty when he writes, "Of his own will." He means that God was not persuaded to do this by any forces outside Himself. Rather, it is something He had elected to do freely or sovereignly. Notice that the means of bringing us forth, which is a reference to the giving of birth, was the word of truth. The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is the indispensable means of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is very consistent on this matter.

The responsibility is on our shoulders to preach the gospel to everyone so that the elect may hear and be saved. The apostle made this an impassioned plea when he wrote to the Romans, saying, "For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" (Rom 10:13–14). This is our duty. We must preach to all and sundry. The Lord will save His own.

In fact, if we understood the total depravity of the human heart correctly, we would evangelize *because* God has chosen some to eternal life! That would be our encouragement. The unregenerate are spiritually blind and dead in sin. Unless they are first given sight and life by God, they cannot see the sufficiency of the Savior and call upon Him to save them. Does God give sight and life to all and then only some decide to act on it? No, he chooses those to whom He comes in this saving way. That is why those of us who are saved give God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—all the glory for our salvation.

You will recall how the Lord encouraged the Apostle Paul when he faced a lot of opposition while he was evangelizing the city of Corinth. God said to him in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people" (Acts 18:9–10). The many who belonged to God in this city were the elect. God told Paul not to worry about the opposition. He was to keep on preaching because through his labors the many elect of God would come to salvation in Christ. Paul could courageously evangelize *because* God had chosen some to eternal life.

This is also the heartbeat of missions. God has chosen a people from every nation and given them to His Son. Jesus has died for those individuals. The Holy Spirit has now been sent by the Father and the Son to bring those individuals to repentance and faith in Christ. At the end of history, when Jesus returns, all the elect will have been

GOD'S REVEALED WILL IS CLEAR. HE COMMANDS US TO EVANGELIZE ALL MEN ... LET US DO OUR PART AND LEAVE THE REST TO GOD. HE WILL GIVE THE INCREASE.

reached with the gospel and will be in the kingdom of God. It is this knowledge that has fueled the great missionary movement from the days of William Carey onwards. They believed in God's sovereignty in election. They believed that with His blood Jesus had "ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9). This did not dampen their zeal. It was the very combustion chamber that propelled it!

WHAT SHALL WE SAY THEN?

God's revealed will is clear. He commands us to evangelize all men. Jesus gave the church its marching orders: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:18–19). God also commands all men everywhere to repent. This was the message of Paul to the men of Athens. He preached, "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). These are our human responsibilities—to preach the gospel and to repent and believe when we hear it. Let us all obey Him.

Let us do our part and leave the rest to God. He will give the increase. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (1 Cor 3:6). He is sovereign. He will save whomsoever He has chosen to save. We are called to be watchmen. If we do not do our job, their blood will be required at our hands. Fatalism is not biblical. God is sovereign, and we must be responsible.

Allow me to end with a rather lengthy quote from Charles Haddon Spurgeon on this matter, as preached August 1, 1858:

The system of truth is not one straight line, but two. No man will ever get a right view of the gospel until he knows how to look at the two lines at once. I am taught in one book to believe that what I sow I shall reap: I am taught in another place, that "it is not of him that willeth nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy." I see in one place, God presiding over all in providence; and yet I see, and I cannot help seeing, that man acts as he pleases, and that God has left his actions to his own will, in a great measure. Now, if I were to declare that man was so free to act, that there was no presidency of God over his actions, I should be driven very near to Atheism; and if, on the other hand, I declare that God so overrules all things, as that man is not free enough to be responsible, I am driven at once into Antinomianism or fatalism. That God predestines, and that man is responsible, are two things that few can see. They are believed to be inconsistent and contradictory; but they are not. It is just the fault of our weak judgment. Two truths cannot be contradictory to each other. If, then, I find taught in one place that everything is fore-ordained, that is true; and if I find in another place that man is responsible for all his actions, that is true; and it is my folly that leads me to imagine that two truths can ever contradict each other. These two truths, I do not believe, can ever be welded into one upon any human anvil, but one they shall be in eternity: they are two lines that are so nearly parallel, that the mind that shall pursue them farthest, will never discover that they converge; but they do converge, and they will meet somewhere in eternity, close to the throne of God, whence all truth doth spring. Amen! ♦



AN UNHIDDEN TRUTH: THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

IAN HAMILTON

In 1961, the publication of J. I. Packer's *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* created a huge stir within evangelicalism. Without a hint of apology, Packer taught that in the work of salvation, from its absolute beginning to its ultimate consummation, God was sovereign. Nothing in the work of salvation, conceived in eternity by the triune God, accomplished in history by Jesus Christ, and applied to sinners by the Holy Spirit, was dependent on men and women. Even the faith by which sinners, dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1) are savingly united to Jesus Christ is the gracious gift of God (Eph 2:8). In this conviction, Packer was only echoing the Apostle Paul. As he concludes his exposition of the "salvation of God" (Rom 1:1) in his Letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "From him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory" (Rom 11:36).

For the first time in a generation, Packer gave coherent biblical credibility to the Reformed conviction that the work of evangelism, commanded by God, is in no sense undermined, far less made redundant, by belief in the absolute, unabridged sovereignty of God in salvation. How could it be, if the sovereign God commanded His church to go and make disciples?

For many Christians, however, it still seems that salvation cannot be wholly of God. If it were, surely evangelism would be neither necessary, nor even desirable. It would not be necessary because God will save whomever He chooses to save, come what may. It would not be desirable because if we believe God is unconditionally sovereign, it is temerity to attempt to intrude into God's sovereign domain. This was an attitude William Carey (1761–1834), a Calvinistic Baptist, often called the father of modern missions, encountered when he proposed to his local fraternal of pastors that they establish a mission to promote the cause of worldwide evangelism. After one of Carey's impassioned sermons on the obligation and necessity of evangelizing the heathen, an older pastor responded with a withering rebuke: "Young man, sit down: when God pleases to save the heathen, he will do it without your aid or mine." How is this ancient and modern response to "evangelism and the sovereignty of God" to be answered?

THE SIMPLE RESPONSE

The simple and straightforward response has been, and always will be, the best one: The God who is unconditionally sovereign *commands* His church to evangelize. Evangelism is first a moral command to obey, not a theological puzzle to unravel. Evangelism is more than a moral command. It is a personal, compelling, inward necessity (read Rom 1:14–15 and 1 Cor 9:16–17: surely here Paul is not speaking only for himself). But first, the people of God evangelize sinners in the same way that we love sinners, because our gracious God

commands us to, not because we conclude that we should (Matt 28:18–20; John 13:34–35).

OUR FUNDAMENTAL STARTING POINT

A Christian is someone who believes, not only notionally, like the Pharisees, but personally and life-transformingly, every word that God has spoken. Like our Savior, we believe that "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). Like Paul, we believe that "all Scripture is God breathed" and to be revered because it has "sprung from heaven" (Calvin on 2 Tim 3:16). We do not stand above God's infallible written Word and affirm it only when it conforms to the canons of our fallen understanding. "Let God be true and every man a liar" is the heart conviction of every regenerate child of God. The only question a faithful Christian asks is, "What says the Scripture?" If the Scripture teaches that God's sovereignty is unabridged *and* that men and women, boys and girls are responsible to hear and believe the gospel as it is proclaimed to them, so be it. So, what does the Scripture say?

A CASE STUDY

A joyful confession of the sovereignty of God and a passionate commitment to evangelism is nowhere more placarded than in the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Consider Jesus' unembarrassed, even exultant confession of divine sovereignty and His passionate appeal to sinners in the following words from Matthew's Gospel:

At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matt 11:25–30).

Jesus here affirms both the sovereignty of God in salvation and, at the same time, God's open-hearted appeal to "all who labor and are heavy laden" to come to Him to find rest for their souls. Jesus is not highlighting qualifications for coming to Him. Rather, He is assuring everyone that no matter who they are, no matter how needy they are, they are invited, even summoned, to come to Him.

Jesus does not spend any time rationalizing the relationship

THE SALVATION OF SINNERS DOES NOT ULTIMATELY REST ON ME, BUT ON THE SAVING GRACE OF GOD.

between God's unabridged sovereignty and the summons to sinners to come to Him and find rest for their souls. He simply and unambiguously teaches them both, without any embarrassment.

CONFIDENCE FOR MINISTRY

If what we read in the Word of God that all sinners by nature are "dead in trespasses and sins . . . (and have) no hope and (are) without God in the world" (Eph 2:1, 12) is true, then without the assurance that salvation is "of the Lord," there would be an air of undisguised futility about all attempts at evangelism. Christian ministry, whether from the pulpit or by engaging in conversation with an unbeliever, would leave us bereft. What native powers or gifts do we have to raise anyone from spiritual death? Who are we to think that in our own strength we can plunder "the domain of darkness" and bring sinners into "the kingdom of (God's) beloved Son"? (Col 1:13). Paul is emphatic that it is God Himself who does this: "He has delivered us" (Col 1:13a).

In the work of evangelism, our confidence does not lie in our giftedness, nor in our technique, nor in our passion, nor in our ability to commend Christ and confute error. It is true that God may use these and other means to awaken sinners and draw them to a saving trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. But they are "means" only. Salvation is of the Lord. He alone has the will, the power, the grace, and the love to invade "dead-in-trespasses-and-sins" men or women, convict them of their lost, hell-bound state, and bring them to Christ the only Savior.

This is our foundational confidence in evangelism, and indeed in every sphere and aspect of gospel ministry. It is liberating to know that the salvation of sinners does not ultimately rest on me, but on the saving grace of God.

SOVEREIGNTY AND MEANS

None of this entails, however, that Christians should be careless or unconcerned about how they live and how they minister. God is most often pleased to use "means" in His work of gathering in His elect and building up His church. Packer makes the point this way: "Our evangelistic work is

the instrument that [God] uses for this purpose, but the power that saves is not in the instrument: it is in the hand of the One who uses the instrument."

Paul's solemn words to Timothy should ever be in the forefront of every Christian's mind, especially pastors: "Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work" (2 Tim 2:21). Robert Murray McCheyne's memorable words to a young ministry student should likewise be branded on the lives of every Christian: "A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hands of God."

Divine sovereignty does not ignore the urgent call for Christians to be holy as God Himself is holy (1 Pet 1:15). Without holiness, no man will see the Lord (Heb 12:14); equally, without holiness, no man will be of evangelistic use to the Lord.

The opening words of E. M. Bounds' *Power through Prayer* makes the point eloquently and heart searchingly:

We are constantly on a stretch, if not on a strain, to devise new methods, new plans, new organizations to advance the Church and secure enlargement and efficiency for the gospel. This trend of the day has a tendency to lose sight of the man or sink the man in the plan or organization. God's plan is to make much of the man, far more of him than of anything else. Men are God's method.

SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN BOASTING

The Bible does not dwell on God's unabridged sovereignty merely to inform us about a truth that needs to be acknowledged. The primary concern of God's Word in detailing God's sovereignty in creation, providence, and redemption is to bring us to confess with the Psalmist, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast (covenant) love and your faithfulness. Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?' Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases" (Ps 115:1-2).

This is why the Apostle Paul, after his profound exposition

of the “gospel of God” (Rom 1:1), exclaims in exultant doxology, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom 11:36). There is nothing more obnoxious to God than human boasting. What do we have that we did not first receive? (1 Cor 4:7). The whole work of God in salvation is so ordered by God that “no flesh might boast” in His presence (1 Cor 1:29). It is solely because of God’s sovereign goodness and mercy that anyone is “in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor 1:30). So, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1 Cor 1:31).

Nothing more humbles men and women, and nothing more exalts God, than the discovery that their salvation is the result of the sovereign good pleasure of God. There is no human admixture in salvation. To God all praise and glory.

THE GOAL OF EVANGELISM

All the foregoing has been to prepare us to understand that the goal of the divinely commanded work of evangelism does not terminate on the sinner and his salvation, but on God and His glory. If all our righteousnesses are truly like a polluted garment (Isa 64:6), and if “none is righteous, no, not one” (Rom 3:10), then all our evangelism must look first to God in humble dependence.

It is His sovereign prerogative to open hearts (Acts 16:14). He alone has the power, the will, and the grace to rescue men and women as brands from the burning (Zech 3:2), to clothe them in the spotless righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:30; Phil 3:9), and to bring them safely and triumphantly to heaven’s glory (Phil 1:6). If we do not tell men and women that they are utterly incapable of saving themselves, of even contributing one atom of ability to their salvation, and that they must cry out to God to save them, human flesh will have something, however small, to glory in; God will be robbed of *all* the glory.

THE EXAMPLE OF THE EARLY CHURCH

The early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles reveal a church committed to both the sovereignty of God and evangelism. In his Spirit-anointed sermon at Pentecost, after which “about three thousand souls” were added to the church, Peter announced to the vast crowd, “This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (Acts 2:23). Later, in 4:28, the church prayed in the wake of Peter and John’s release from prison, “For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”

For these first Christians, God’s sovereignty was not a

truth to hide, or be embarrassed by; it was a truth to glory in and be comforted by. But this conviction did not hamper in any way their evangelistic zeal—on the contrary! Peter’s magnificent evangelistic sermon at Pentecost shows that. The church’s prayer after Peter and John’s release underlined its commitment to evangelism: “And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.’ And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:29–31).

Evangelism was in the lifeblood of those believers, who unitedly confessed the Lord’s absolute sovereignty. This is why the early Christians gave themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). They understood that the church’s calling was to glorify God as God, and to go out at His command to seek and to save the lost, just like their Savior.

This is why the church of Christ must embrace the apostolic “program” for ministry, prayer, and the Word.

A WORD OF PERSONAL TESTIMONY

When it pleased the Lord to grant me repentance unto life (Acts 11:18) in my late teens, out of no Christian background whatsoever, I simply assumed that God played His part by sending me a Savior, and I played my part in receiving and not rejecting God’s Savior. I understood that I could not make myself right with God, but I had no understanding of total human depravity and utter spiritual inability. In God’s great kindness that came later, especially through reading John Murray’s quite wonderful *Redemption, Accomplished, and Applied*, I began to realize that, but for the sovereign mercy of God, I would have remained dead in trespasses and sins all my days. I remember saying to some of the church officers in the church where I had come to faith, “I have found something wonderful in the Bible, God chose me before I chose him.” The response was immediate: “That’s Calvinism.” Not really knowing what Calvinism was, I replied, “No, I found it in Romans 8.”

The sovereignty of God is not a Calvinistic distinctive; it is a revealed truth. It is the God who is sovereign who commands His church to go and make disciples of all peoples, baptizing them into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Is this a theological puzzle for Christians who know that God is absolutely sovereign? No. The God who is sovereign is all wise and all good. He can only do good because He is good (Ps. 119:68). How can it be puzzling to trust absolute goodness? ♦





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EVANGELISTIC PREACHING

DAVID P. MURRAY

There has been a welcome resurgence of expository preaching in the Reformed church over the last 20-to-30 years, and especially of “consecutive expository preaching”—preaching through books of the Bible, verse-by-verse and chapter-by-chapter. But together with that resurgence of consecutive expository preaching, there has also come a decline in what I would call “converting evangelistic preaching.”

NEGATIVELY

What do I mean by “converting evangelistic preaching”? Let me give two negatives to begin with. I don’t mean teaching sermons with an evangelistic postscript: doctrinal sermons with a brief concluding appeal or call to the unconverted to seek Christ, believe in Christ, look to Christ, and the like. Neither, at the other extreme, do I mean content-less sermons made up simply of repeated evangelistic imperatives, commands, invitations, and exhortations: sermons that have nothing for the head but are all addressed to the heart or will.

POSITIVELY

What do I mean, then, by evangelistic preaching? Let me put it positively: Evangelistic preaching expounds God’s Word (it is expository) with the primary aim of the salvation of lost souls (rather than the instruction of God’s people). Stuart Olyott says it is to “preach from the Bible with the immediate aim of the immediate conversion of every soul in front of us.”

So, what really distinguishes evangelistic preaching from all other kinds of preaching is its obvious and unmistakable aim—conversion. Its target is unconverted hearers. And its conscious and deliberate aim is to call, invite, and command needy souls to repent and believe the gospel. It is this kind of preaching that has become increasingly rare in many Reformed churches.

I’d like to look at this subject from four angles. First, I’d like to examine the rarity of evangelistic preaching (as defined above): Why is it so rare? Then I will propose reasons in favor of it: Why should we engage in evangelistic preaching? Next I will survey the range of evangelistic preaching: the different kinds of sermons that come under this heading. And, finally, I will look at the results: What does evangelistic preaching look like and sound like?

1. THE RARITY OF EVANGELISTIC PREACHING

The great expository preacher Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones made sure that at least one sermon every Sunday was directed primarily to the unsaved in his congregation. That was also the practice in the Scottish Presbyterian churches I grew up in and pastored for twelve years. But most Reformed churches have no such distinction today. Both morning and evening

sermons tend to be primarily teaching sermons for God’s people. Why is this so?

The Preacher

We start by pointing a finger at ourselves. Many of us have to admit that we much prefer to be teachers than pleaders. It is easier to engage in explanation than application. It is more socially acceptable, and it is more dignified and respectable to be engaged in calm reasoning and deduction, rather than in anxious weeping and beseeching. I think we’d all have to admit that it is easier emotionally and socially to be teachers than evangelists. And that prejudice, that bias, influences our choice of text and the way we preach our texts.

In addition to our prejudice, there is also our pragmatism. Let’s get people in first. Get them used to our church. Then we will become more “evangelistic.” After all, we don’t want to put them off by telling them they are sinners who need a Savior; or that they must abandon their own works and trust in Christ’s grace alone; or that without faith in Christ they will be punished forever in hell. Surely it’s much wiser to begin more slowly, more carefully, more diplomatically; and then, once they have been attending for a while, we can be a bit more confrontational and demanding. But then more new faces appear, and so the pragmatic cycle begins again.

Presumption also lurks in the background of many preachers’ minds. Some pastors dangerously presume that their hearers are already saved. Assuming that all is well with their souls, they teach, instruct, and give guidance on how to live the Christian life; but they rarely preach for conversion.

The Congregation

When we preach evangelistic sermons, some mature Christians in our congregations, those we often lean on for our encouragement and strength, might feel (or even say), “Well, there wasn’t much for me in that sermon . . . that’s more like milk for babies than meat for the mature.” Of course, many mature Christians love to hear evangelistic sermons. They enjoy being evangelized all over again, and they especially love to hear sermons addressed to their unconverted family and friends. However, others may not respond so appreciatively as they do to our epic sermons on Romans. That lack of response can impact what we preach and how we preach.

Also, we might not have many unconverted people in front of us. My first congregation had only 20 or 30 people. Sometimes there were maybe only a few unconverted hearers in an evening service. It’s a lot harder to preach an evangelistic sermon in these circumstances, because everyone knows to whom you are directing your warning, wooing, and pleading words. Teaching messages are so much more comfortable

than convicting messages—both to preach and to hear. That’s especially true if our few unconverted hearers are very “moral” or “churchy” people.

There may also be in our congregation those who might view evangelistic preaching with a suspicious eye and ear, especially if they come from a hyper-Calvinistic stream of Christian upbringing. Maybe others have come out of Arminian easy-believism, hyper-emotionalism, and decisionism, and react against any kind of emotional appeal to the unsaved. We don’t want to offend these people, we want to keep them on our side, and so again perhaps we hold back from regular, full-throated evangelistic preaching.

The World

We are not pluralistic. We believe, surely, in the exclusive claims of Christ. That’s what we swear to, sign up to, and state at our ordinations. But, we live in such a pluralistic, many-ways-to-God world, that it’s extremely difficult not to be influenced by that, even subconsciously.

Maybe, in the back of many pastors’ minds, the sharp edge of gospel exclusivity has been blunted by worldly influence. They may not deny that Christ is the only way to heaven, and they may not preach many-ways-to-God. But they do not keep the believer/unbeliever distinction or the heaven/hell contrast constantly and vividly before their minds. And of course that’s going to affect their preaching—both its content and tone.

The real test of incipient pluralism is, “How do we really view the unconverted?” Is our first thought when we see them, “These precious souls are hell-bound, without Christ, lost, under the wrath of God, however religious they may be?” I’m deeply afraid that a kind of incipient, subtle, often unnoticed pluralism has blunted the sharp edge of evangelistic preaching.

The Devil

Then, of course, there is our great enemy, the devil. If there’s any kind of preaching that has been more successful in stealing captives from him and claiming them for the Lord, it is passionate evangelistic preaching. No weapon in the gospel armory has been so effective in rescuing souls. Of course, he’s going to fight it, and he’s going to supply every excuse not to preach in an evangelistic way.

2. THE REASONS FOR EVANGELISTIC PREACHING

The most obvious reason is biblical warrant. The Old Testament prophets were passionate pleaders for the souls of their fellow men and women. Deuteronomy reads like an Old Testament evangelistic tract, as Moses expostulates with Israel and beseeches them to embrace the God of Genesis to

Numbers. Study the weeping reasonings of Jeremiah and the powerful pictorial pleas of Hosea. Even apocalyptic and enigmatic Ezekiel contains the most beautiful calls to Israel to turn from their evil ways and live.

The same is true in the New Testament. In encounter after encounter, in public and in private, Jesus exhorted souls to seek salvation. The Acts of the Apostles show us Peter and Paul pleading with individuals, groups, congregations, and public gatherings. “Teacher” Paul cannot resist tearful expressions of angst and desire in Romans 9–11, that most doctrinal of letters.

Then we could turn from the Bible to church history and consider the regular evangelistic sermons of Bunyan, Whitefield, Edwards, Spurgeon, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and so many more. But I’d especially like to argue for evangelistic preaching by considering the effects of its absence.

Preaching becomes lecturely and academic

When sermons are almost exclusively aimed at teaching Christians, and rarely aimed at the unconverted, preaching begins to sound more like cold, objective, academic lecturing.

But, when a preacher has caught a glimpse of hell, when he really grasps the terrible spiritual predicament of the lost in his congregation, and when he is gripped by the urgency of the gospel in the looming shadow of judgment and eternity, his preaching is transformed into present tense, personal, passionate preaching of the truth. The lecture hall is left behind as we enter the presence of God. The lectern becomes a pulpit. The “professor” becomes a preacher.

Christians become forgetful, proud, inward-looking, and prayerless

It’s not just the unconverted that are damaged by the lack of evangelistic preaching; Christians are too. Why? In the absence of it, Christians forget. We forget the pit we were dug out of, we forget the debt we were in, and we forget the remarkable work of God in our life. In the absence of evangelistic preaching, the memory of saving grace fades, weakens, and disappears. In its place comes proud self-confidence and self-focus, which quickly drains prayerful concern for the souls of others. As the gospel no longer grips our own souls, we have little motivation or desire to tell others.

But, if the gospel is regularly preached to Christians, then they are re-humbled, re-convicted, and re-minded of what they have been saved from. They re-repent, re-believe, and re-ignite their first love. The contagious gospel passion in the preacher infects the hearers, and the hearers become enthusiastic carriers, as they go out into the world with a renewed and prayerful vision and mission for the lost and the perishing all around them.

EVERY SERMON TEXT CAN BE PREACHED WITH AN EVANGELISTIC APPLICATION.

Christians do not bring friends to church

One of the reasons why Christians seem to have stopped bringing friends to church is that most preaching is directed largely toward already well-taught Christians. Many Christians feel that if they take a friend to church, the message will go “way over their heads.” Many of us have taken someone to church, and to our disappointment and embarrassment, there was little or nothing that our guest could understand or relate to.

But, if Christians know that, say, every Sunday morning, or every second Sunday night, their pastor will preach “simple” evangelistic sermons suited to the special needs of the unsaved, or even the unchurched, then they will be much more motivated to invite their friends, family, colleagues, and neighbors.

Children growing up in the church assume they are saved

The absence of regular evangelistic preaching often means that children grow up in churches hearing teaching and doctrine addressed to Christians. Without being continually reminded that they must be born again, they presume they are “just like the other Christians” and so never seek regeneration or saving faith.

But, if they often hear of their vile natural condition, their perilous spiritual state, their need for personal regeneration and conversion, and the insufficiency of their own worth, words, and works, then they will much more earnestly seek the Savior. In the church of my childhood, I was reminded every Sunday night, in no uncertain terms, that I was not a Christian and that I needed to seek the Savior. It was not comfortable or pleasant. It ruined many a Sunday night’s sleep. But I knew without a shadow of a doubt that if I went to judgment in the same condition I was born in, I was going to hell . . . forever. I also knew, although I wished I didn’t, that Christ was calling me to turn, turn, why will you die!

Lost souls go to hell

I’m not saying that lost souls can’t be converted through teaching sermons. Of course they can, and of course they are. But evangelistic preaching is especially blessed to the conversion of souls. If you were to take a survey of the whole world, I’m sure that the vast majority of true Christians would say that it was an evangelistic sermon, a sermon specially directed to appeal to lost, perishing sinners, that God used to turn them from their idols to Himself.

Who knows what a revival of preaching, evangelism, mission, and worship might result from a widespread return to evangelistic preaching in the Reformed church!

3. THE RANGE OF EVANGELISTIC PREACHING

Every sermon text can be preached with an evangelistic application. But this isn’t “evangelistic preaching.” Remember our previous definition: “Evangelistic preaching is preaching that expounds God’s Word (it is expository) with the primary aim of the conversion of lost souls (rather than the instruction of God’s people).” So, though every text can be preached with an evangelistic application, there are certain texts and topics that are especially suitable for such evangelistic preaching. Let me propose four categories of evangelistic sermon.

“Warm-up” sermons

These are sermons we preach to clear and prepare the ground for the gospel. They address some of the common objections to Christianity, the caricatures of and prejudices against Christianity. Such “apologetic” sermons will set out to prove the truth and relevance of Christianity, and demonstrate its doctrinal and practical superiority. Examples are:

- Proofs of the resurrection
- Evidence for creation versus evolution
- One way or many ways to God
- Do only good people go to heaven?

- The Bible's analysis of current economic, social, moral problems.

These sermons are aiming at conversion, especially the early stages of conversion. They are clearing away all the rubbish that has accumulated in a sinner's mind in order to gain a hearing for the gospel. They deal with issues that will open the pathway for Christ and His grace. That's why I call them "warm-up" sermons. We are taking sinners who are cold, prejudiced, and opposed to Christianity, and using God's Word to break up the soil, warm the heart, and provide an opening for the core message of Christ and His grace.

Warning Sermons

Some warning sermons are characterized by a focus on the more threatening aspects of God's character, especially His attributes of holiness, justice, sovereignty, and power. Other warning sermons may focus on human sinfulness, inability, frailty, and mortality. We may expound and apply the law, showing what God defines as sin and wickedness. We might deal with the speed of time, the uncertainty of life, the imminence of death, the certainty of judgment, the length of eternity, the reality of hell. These are all warning sermons. They are designed to alarm the complacent, the comfortable, and the thoughtless: to make them anxious, and fearful, and even terrified. Examples include these and related subjects:

- Remember Lot's wife—and Saul, and Judas
- God's law
- The end-of-time parables
- Revelation's great white throne, bottomless pit
- Ecclesiastes' view of the best this world can offer
- The Psalmist's view of our frailty and mortality

The great aim of these sermons is to convict—to bring our hearers to an awareness of their perilous state before God, and their need of repentance.

Wooing Sermons

Having prepared the way for the gospel with "warm-up" sermons, and having shown the need for the gospel with warning sermons, we then come with a wooing word. We explain the wonders of the Father's willingness to send His Son to sinners, and to save them by His suffering, death, and resurrection. We also focus on the Lord Jesus; His willingness to come, suffer and die for sinners; His tender, wise, and winning ways with sinners. We explain the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in regenerating and renewing the hardest of hearts. We explain that God saves by grace through faith, not by merit through works. We are trying to address people who

are trembling, who are fearful, who are scared, and are seeking to draw them in to the love and the mercy and the grace of God. No pastor can pluck the chord of grace enough. Sample topics might be:

- The prodigal son
- Christ's tender dealings with sinners during His ministry
- The sufferings of Christ on the cross
- The atonement
- Free justification
- The gospel invitations and commands
- The sufficiency and suitability of Christ
- Adoption

If the aim of the warm-up sermon is to demonstrate *relevance*, and if the aim of the warning sermon is to bring people to *repentance*, the aim of the wooing sermon is to bring people to *rest* in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Will Sermons

Every sermon is ultimately addressed to the will. Yes, we address the head; and through the head, we address the heart. But we don't just want to give people facts and feelings. We want changed lives. That's surely the aim of our preaching. Ultimately, then, every sermon is addressed to the will. But evangelistic sermons, and especially this fourth kind of evangelistic sermon, are addressed especially and repeatedly to the will.

These are sermons that bring people to the signpost at the junction, with two choices. These are sermons that bring people to the ballot box, where they must cast their vote. They bring people to that point at which they are faced with the two great and ultimate options: faith or unbelief, life or death, heaven or hell. These are sermons that are full of persuasion, pleading, arguing, and beseeching, and may address the following:

- Paul and Agrippa
- Jesus and the woman of Samaria
- Parable of the wedding invitation
- Paul on Mars Hill
- Peter at Pentecost
- "Choose you this day whom you will serve"
- Narrow/broad way
- Revelation 22:17
- Elijah on Mount Carmel
- "Stretch out your hand"
- "Lazarus, come forth."

But, is man not totally depraved? Are we not "dead in tres-

passes and sins”? Are we not spiritually “disabled”? Is the will not in bondage? Yes, yes, yes, and yes. There is no question the Bible teaches this. However, as the examples above show, the Bible also describes the depraved, dead, disabled, and enslaved will being addressed. It may seem illogical to us, but God has chosen to free the will, enable the “disabled,” and give life to the “dead” by the persuasive preaching of the gospel.

These sermons have content for head and heart, but are especially focused on pressurizing, yes pressurizing, the will. The truth is pressed home so closely that every hearer is “forced” to make a choice. The Puritans used to speak of the gospel vise that squeezes hearers so tightly that they cannot but say “yes” or “no.”

From this range of sample evangelistic sermons, I hope you can see that this isn’t the kind of preaching that will sound repetitive. There is a great range and variety of evangelistic sermons. There is no need for us to sound the same every time we do this. The Word of God has provided us with so many models and so much material that we can preach evangelistically and freshly every time.

4. The Results of Evangelistic Preaching

Let’s conclude by asking: “What does evangelistic preaching sound/look/feel like?”

Present

Evangelistic preaching majors in the present tense. Yes, it deals with biblical data, which is usually in the past tense. But it moves rapidly from the past to the present. These are not sermons that are taken up with large amounts of history, geography, and chronology. They may begin there, but they move swiftly to the here and the now.

Hearers realize the sermon is about here, about now. It’s clearly connected to the present, it’s relevant, it has an impact on them, here and now, in this day and in this age. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to speak of such sermons being in the “urgent tense,” and that really is what should be communicated. We must show that the ancient Word connects with today’s world, and is relevant both to the present and the future.

Personal

These sermons should also be personal. Yes, again, we begin with explaining the Word as originally given to the Israelites or the disciples. It starts with “they” and “them.” However, in evangelistic preaching, we move rapidly to “you.”

I’m sure we’ve all sat in congregations and heard sermons about the Philistines, the Israelites, the Corinthians, and the Philippians while wondering, “But what about me? Does this have anything to say to Americans, Scots, Africans, etc.?” When teaching God’s people, we can spend longer explaining

the teaching as it applied to the original hearers. But when we are going after lost souls, we have to move more swiftly, engage more rapidly, and show relevance much earlier on.

Also, when we are addressing the unconverted in front of us, we should work especially hard at moving away from reading our notes. When we are appealing, beseeching, arguing, and reasoning in a very personal way with unbelievers—let it be eyeball to eyeball, “we beseech you.” Don’t let paper get in the way, distracting and breaking the eye contact. Make it really personal so that people immediately grasp, “he is speaking to me.”

We can also make it personal by getting inside the minds of our hearers and saying things like this: “Well, as you’re sitting there, you are thinking this . . . aren’t you? But this is what God’s Word says.” Or, “you’re here today, and you’re hearing this, and you are feeling so and so . . .” And the person sitting there says, “He is thinking about me. He knows how I think, he knows how I tick; he is concerned to address what is going on in my mind.” Again, all of this simply emphasizes that everyone present is involved in a very personal, intimate transaction.

Persuasive

In evangelistic preaching, the great aim is persuasion. Much of such sermons will be taken up with Acts 2:38–42 type beseeching, pleading, arguing, and reasoning. It’s not just, “here are some facts; take them or leave them,” as if we are just dispassionate conveyors of information. We are here to persuade. People must see our anxiety that they respond to the gospel in faith and repentance.

Passionate

To be really persuasive, we must also be passionate. Let people see that we feel this deeply, that we fear for their eternal state, that we are anxious over them, and that we love them deeply. Let that be communicated in our words, but also in our facial expressions, our body language, and our tone.

I’m not arguing for acting here; this should come naturally. Sometimes, before preaching an evangelistic sermon, I spend some time trying to think of lost, unbelieving souls in my congregation, and even of particular individuals. I may try to see their faces (often lovely characters by nature—helpful, kind, loving people—but lost). I try to see them dying and going to judgment, and then I imagine their faces as they hear the verdict. I envision them sinking into the bottomless pit, being burned in eternal fire, going to the company of the devil and his angels. I try to see them there, try to hear them there. Sometimes I might even think of one of my own unsaved family members, just to try and bring home the reality and the enormity of the unsaved’s predicament. If we can re-

ally feel it ourselves, we will be passionate in our pleading, in our loving, and in our reasoning.

Plain

Evangelistic preaching will be plain. If we love sinners and are anxious for them to be saved, we will be clear and plain in our structure, content, and choice of words. If we can use a small-er word, we use it. If we can shorten our sentences, we do so. If we can find a good illustration, we tell it. Everything is aimed at simplicity and clarity, so that, as it was said of Martin Luther, it may be said of us, “It’s impossible to misunderstand him.”

And this is exhausting work. People may think at times that doctrinal sermons are harder to prepare and preach than evangelistic sermons. But this is not the case—not if you are really going to edit and trim and modify until your message communicates the profoundest truth in the simplest way possible. That involves real labor, sweat, toil, and tears.

In *Preaching and Preachers* Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote:

If I am asked which sermons I wrote, I have already said that I used to divide my ministry, as I still do, into edification of the saints in the morning and a more evangelistic sermon in the evening. Well, my practice was to write my evangelistic sermon. I did so because I felt that in speaking to the saints, to the believers, one could feel more relaxed. There, one was speaking in the realm of the family. In other words, I believe that one should be unusually careful in evangelistic sermons. That is why the idea that a fellow who is merely gifted with a certain amount of glibness of speech and self-confidence, not to say cheek, can make an evangelist is all wrong. The greatest men should always be the evangelists, and generally have been; and the idea that Tom, Dick, and Harry can be put up to speak on a street corner, but you must have a great preacher in a pulpit in a church is, to me, the reversing of the right order. It is when addressing the unbelieving world that we need to be most careful; and therefore I used to write my evangelistic sermon and not the other.

Powerful

When we go into the pulpit with an evangelistic sermon, let’s not go in defensively, and apologetically. Yes, it may be an “apologetic” sermon, but we are not apologizing for the truth. When we go in front of sinners with the gospel, let’s not come across as if we have something to hide or be afraid of. Let’s not hedge and qualify. Let’s not “discuss” or “share.” Let’s preach with powerful, bold, divine authority. People need to hear, “Thus says the Lord.” This isn’t an option, and this isn’t just another idea; this is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Persevering

And let our evangelistic sermons also be characterized by perseverance. We preach. No one’s converted. We do it again. We preach. No one’s converted. We do it again, and again, and again.

How often should you preach an evangelistic sermon? That will largely depend on context. In Scotland, I was expected to preach one evangelistic sermon and one teaching sermon every Sunday. Once a week is probably too much if you and your church are not used to this. But how about once a month? And you can tell your congregation that on such a morning/evening, this is going to be a sermon for the unconverted, so that Christians will think, “I can take my friends to this. This is something I know my boss could listen to with some understanding.” Make it regular, and make it known that this is what you are going to be doing.

Prayerful

Above all, of course, evangelistic preaching is to be prayerful—before, during, and after. Pray to be delivered from the fear of man. Pray that God would give you a passion for souls. Pray that you would be able to communicate naturally and easily and freely. Pray that you’d get a hearing for the gospel and that you’d be able to present Christ so that you “disappear.” And pray afterward that the seed sown would bring forth a harvest of saved souls, and that the church will be revived and built up. “And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever” (Dan 12:3). ♦



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EVANGELISM AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

TIMOTHY BEOUGHER

Charles H. Spurgeon was once asked if he could reconcile divine sovereignty with human responsibility. He replied, “I wouldn’t try. I never reconcile friends.” Some people who read Spurgeon’s response are surprised. What does he mean that these two doctrines are “friends”? Are they not opposed to each other? Can they really both be true and work together in God’s plan?

The Bible clearly teaches the sovereignty of God. God can do anything He desires. Job affirms, “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2). Psalm 135:6 teaches, “Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.” In Isaiah 46:9–10 God testifies, “Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’”

Yet Scripture also emphasizes that people have real responsibility and freedom in the choices they make. A person cannot blame God for his or her choices. Consider Judas Iscariot and his betrayal of Christ: “For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!” (Luke 22:22)

Some argue that a strong belief in God’s sovereignty harms evangelism. They cannot understand how a person holding a firm belief in the sovereignty of God can be evangelistic. Persons making this argument usually point to someone they know who affirms God’s sovereignty but who is not evangelistic.

A quick survey of church history shows the assertion that God’s sovereignty harms evangelism is disproved historically. Some of the greatest pastors, evangelists, and missionaries in church history affirmed the sovereignty of God in salvation (Richard Baxter, George Whitefield, Andrew Fuller, William Carey, C. H. Spurgeon, and Lottie Moon, just to name a few). A survey of Scripture also shows this assertion is disproved biblically. Both God’s sovereignty and human responsibility are taught in Scripture, at times in the very same passage (see Luke 22:22; John 1:12–13; Acts 2:23; Acts 4:27–28; John 6:37; John 6:44, 47). And certainly the Apostle Paul, who strongly affirmed the sovereignty of God throughout his writings (e.g. Romans 9 and Ephesians 1), was one of the greatest evangelists and church planters and missionaries the world has ever seen (e.g. 1 Cor 9:16, 19–23).

In this article I will to argue that a belief in God’s sovereignty does not diminish evangelistic zeal, but rather fuels such zeal. I believe that a proper understanding of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility will affect our evangelism in five ways.

1. A BELIEF IN GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY WILL MAKE US FAITHFUL IN EVANGELISM

Those who try to use God’s sovereignty as an “excuse” not to do evangelism do not really understand the implications of God’s sovereignty in their lives. I once heard of a young preacher who came to a seasoned preacher and exclaimed, “I don’t invite people to respond to the gospel because I believe in the sovereignty of God.” The older preacher asked him a question, “Do you really believe in the sovereignty of God?” “Yes,” the young man replied. The older man asked again, this time with more force, “Do you REALLY believe in the sovereignty of God?” “YES, I DO,” came the adamant reply. “Well then, OBEY your sovereign God and call on people to repent and believe!”

Evangelism is a part of God’s revealed will that He expects people to obey. Matthew 28:18–20, the passage we know as the Great Commission, begins with Jesus asserting His authority both in heaven and on earth. He then commands His followers to go into all the world and make disciples of all the nations. These verses do not contain the Great Suggestion, but the Great Commission. Evangelism is an essential part of God’s plan to save people (Rom 10:14–15, 17).

The God who ordains the ends also ordains the means. The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter V: “Of Providence,” contains these helpful assertions:

I. God the great Creator of all things does uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

II. Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, he orders them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

III. God, in his ordinary providence, makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.

In other words, God often displays His sovereignty not apart from the use of means but through the use of means. It is not an affront to God’s sovereignty but an acknowledgment of His sovereignty to use the means God has given for the securing of His purposes.

No one will be saved apart from hearing and responding to the gospel message. Obeying our sovereign God requires us to

be faithful in sharing the good news and calling on persons to repent and believe. Regardless of whether one believes in election based on fore-ordination or fore-knowledge, questions remain: “Who are the elect? How do we identify the elect?” The elect are not walking around with special marks on their foreheads. The elect are those who repent and believe.

No one will be saved who does not repent and believe. So, our task is not to spend all our time in theological debate and speculation but to share the gospel and call on people to repent and believe. As George Whitefield asserted in his *Journal*, “Let a man go to the grammar school of faith and repentance, before he goes to the university of election and predestination.” That is good advice not only for the lost person who needs to be saved but also for believers seeking to be faithful witnesses.

Paul, in 2 Corinthians 5:20, reminds us that our role as witnesses is to be “ambassadors for Christ.” Paul reveals the dynamic at work in our witnessing through a key phrase in verse 20: “God making His appeal through us.” It is God’s appeal—but how does He make that appeal? Through us—through faithful ambassadors who share the message with which they have been entrusted. What is that message? “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” Faithfulness in evangelism requires not merely informing but also inviting. The invitation is clear: “Be reconciled to God.”

The promise is for all who believe. John reminds us, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12–13). Jesus testifies, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Romans 1:16 and Matthew 11:28–30 highlight this same emphasis.

Paul affirms, “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom 10:13). The Apostle follows that affirmation with a series of questions in verse 14: “How are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” Paul concludes in verse 15 by noting, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” A belief in God’s sovereignty makes our feet beautiful as we faithfully proclaim the good news to lost persons.

As I have been involved in evangelism and training others in evangelism for over four decades, the biggest barrier people face in witnessing is the fear of man. That fear of man is tragically presented in John 12:42–43: “Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not

be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.” A proper understanding of the sovereignty of God frees us from the enslaving fear of other people, which often is our greatest hindrance in evangelism.

Thus, it is wrong when someone says, “Because God is sovereign I don’t need to evangelize.” A proper response would be, “Because God is sovereign I must evangelize faithfully.” Our sovereign God has commanded us to share the gospel with the world.

2. A BELIEF IN GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY WILL MAKE US CONFIDENT IN EVANGELISM

Biblical hope is not “wishful thinking” but confidence—not in our own skill or ability but in God’s power to change hearts. Years ago I had a conversation with a missionary friend as he was reflecting on his ministry among the unconverted billions in China. He told me, “I’m still trying to sort out where I stand on God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility, but I know one thing for sure—these people’s only hope is for God to open their eyes.”

When we understand the spiritual condition of lost persons, we are reminded of how impossible evangelism is from a human standpoint. Paul asserts, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14). Furthermore, Paul confirms that lost persons are spiritually dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1), that no one seeks after God (Rom 3:11), and that “the gospel is veiled to those who are perishing” because “the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers so they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor 4:3–4).

What hope does such a person have? The good news of the Bible is that faith is a gift of God (Phil 1:29; Eph 2:8) and that repentance is granted by God (Rom 2:4; Acts 5:31; Acts 11:18; 2 Tim 2:25). God can open blind eyes, God can soften hard hearts, God can raise the spiritually dead to new life. We cannot do any of that—but God can!

Many persons who affirm God’s sovereignty also are fearful of spurious conversions. Jesus warned us that in the day of judgment there would be *many* persons who thought they were saved but who were not truly saved (Matt 7:21–23). I want witnesses to try and avoid spurious conversions, but I do not want us to be so afraid of spurious conversions that we never seek real ones! Paul reminds us that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes (Rom 1:16). We can share the good news with confidence.

We also have the confidence that the Great Commission will one day be fulfilled! In Revelation 7:9–10, the veil of

WITHOUT A BELIEF IN GOD'S POWER TO CHANGE HEARTS, IT IS EASY TO GROW DISCOURAGED WHEN OUR EFFORTS DO NOT BRING IMMEDIATE RESULTS.

eternity is pulled back and the Apostle John is given a glimpse into heaven. What does he see? “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” God’s sovereignty gives great confidence in our mission endeavors, especially among unreached people groups.

We should not depend on slick marketing or our own skills of persuasion to bring people to faith, but on the power of God. In 2 Corinthians 4:6, Paul compares the salvation of a lost sinner to the creation of the world: “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness’—He has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God’s glory in the face of Jesus Christ.” At the beginning of creation, when there was only darkness, God said “let there be light” and there was light. God shines His light into the dark hearts of sinful persons so they can see Jesus Christ for who He really is. The God of creation, who first called light out of darkness, is the only one who has the power to overcome people’s spiritual darkness and blindness.

If God did not open the eyes of blinded sinners, all would perish in their sins (Rom 9:29). The sovereignty of God is the only basis for confidence in our evangelistic endeavors. Only God can raise the dead, give sight to the blind, and turn hearts of stone into hearts of flesh.

3. A BELIEF IN GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY WILL MAKE US PATIENT IN EVANGELISM

When Paul began his ministry in Corinth, he was filled with fear (1 Cor 2:1–5). But according to Acts 18:9–10, God gave

him incredible words of encouragement: “And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.’” God is telling Paul that there are people in Corinth who have been elected to salvation but who have not yet repented and believed. Notice Paul’s response. It was not, “Since God has already chosen these people then I guess I’m not needed here—I’ll head out to somewhere else.” No, Paul’s response was, “And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them” (Acts 18:11). An understanding of God’s sovereign work in the city of Corinth gave Paul patience. It is why he would elsewhere testify, “Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory” (2 Tim 2:10).

Without a belief in God’s power to change hearts, it is easy to grow discouraged when our efforts do not bring immediate results. But when we witness God’s workings of grace in Scripture (e.g. Paul) and in history (e.g. John Newton), we are reminded that God is in the business of saving people we might have written off. In Mark 4, Jesus teaches what we know as the Parable of the Sower. I think we often misapply this parable. The sower went out to sow—he did not go out to inspect the soil, and where he thought he found good soil, he sowed the seed—but where he thought he found bad soil, he withheld the seed. No, the sower sowed the seed everywhere.

In our evangelistic efforts we need to stop being soil inspectors and start being sowers of the gospel seed! Another way to phrase this truth is: “Never say ‘no’ for someone else.” We make that mistake far too often. We decide they are not good soil, and we say “no” for them, withholding the seed of the gospel. We need to reflect on God’s work of grace in the

life of Lydia: “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:14). Let’s stop saying “no” for other people. A belief in God’s sovereignty will make us patient in evangelism.

4. A BELIEF IN GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY WILL MAKE US PRAYERFUL IN EVANGELISM

Prayer is a sign of our dependence upon God. Every time we pray we are acknowledging God’s sovereignty and our own limitations. When we pray for unconverted persons, we do so recognizing that only God can soften hard hearts, that only God can open blind eyes, that only God can raise to new life those who are spiritually dead.

We pray for God to open blind eyes and soften hard hearts. We ask God to save—not merely to make it possible for people somehow to save themselves. And we ask God to bring fruit to our gospel endeavors as Paul did: “Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you . . .” (2 Thess 3:1). Paul’s request for prayer, found in both Colossians 4:2–6 and Ephesians 6:18–20, reflects his understanding of the vital connection between evangelism and prayer.

To the person who argues, “Because God is sovereign, it doesn’t matter whether I pray or not,” the Scriptures would answer, “No: because God is in control, you should pray persistently!” Because God is sovereign, He can answer our prayers!

5. A BELIEF IN GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY WILL MAKE US JOYFUL IN EVANGELISM

In 2 Corinthians 4:1–2, Paul sets forth his “agenda” in ministry: “Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.” Paul saw his responsibility as sharing the gospel and then leaving the results up to God. He affirms in 1 Corinthians 3:6, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything but only God who gives the growth.” But knowing that God will bring the growth caused Paul to persevere joyfully in ministry: “I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls” (2 Cor 12:15).

In Ephesians 1:3–14, Paul notes that, in God’s wisdom, all things have been designed to bring about “the praise of His glorious grace” (vs. 6) and “the praise of his glory” (vv. 12, 14). We are joyful in evangelism because we know that God is using our efforts not to glorify us, but Himself and His glorious grace.

CONCLUSION

An important historical witness to how a belief in God’s sovereignty fuels evangelistic zeal can be found in the life and ministry of Andrew Fuller. Fuller wrote:

A fleshly mind may ask, “How can these things be?” How can Divine predestination accord with human agency and accountability? But a true, humble Christian, finding both in his Bible, will believe both, though he may be unable fully to understand their consistency; and he will find in the one a motive to depend entirely upon God, and in the other a caution against slothfulness and presumptuous neglect of duty. And thus a Christian minister, if he view the doctrine in its proper connexions, will find nothing in it to hinder the free use of warnings, invitations, and persuasions, either to the converted or the unconverted. Yet he will not ground his hopes of success on the pliability of the human mind, but on the promised grace of God, who (while he prophesies to the dry bones, as he is commanded) is known to inspire them with the breath of life.

Fuller’s last line in that quotation brings to mind Ezekiel 37:1–14, where Ezekiel was commanded to preach to a valley of dry bones. Ezekiel was fully aware of the futility of such preaching, but on the basis of God’s command and God’s promise, he preached, and the dead came to life.

As we share the gospel with dead sinners today, we recognize this same sense of hopelessness apart from God’s sovereign work. Let no convert take credit for his or her salvation. Let no witness presume to take credit for another’s salvation. As Luke testifies in Acts 2:47, “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” And yet as we share, we witness God bringing life from death, and as a result God receives the glory. As Paul testified in Romans 11:33–36:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. ♦



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