



What Evangelism **IS** and **ISN'T**

A few years ago I was on a mission trip with a team in Guatemala. One of the nights the team was standing around listening to the team leader. It was getting late and I was getting tired. To ease the tension in my back I decided I would lean on my wife's shoulders for a minute. I lean forward while looking at the ground as my forearms gently land on her shoulders. After a few seconds I bring my head up to make eye contact with the speaker, and suddenly notice that it was not my wife I was leaning on, but another girl on the trip who had a similar build and hair color as my wife did.

I will let your imagination finish the story as I draw attention to one major point. Who I thought I was leaning on was in actuality not who I was leaning on. The mistake I made was that I thought I was doing something, while in reality I was doing something different. I have found a similar problem with evangelism. Often we think what we are doing is evangelism, but in all actuality we are doing something different. If we don't understand what evangelism is

and what it isn't, we may be leading people down a path that does not connect them to Christ. This is why we must understand, and understand well, what evangelism is, and what it isn't. My hope is that this article will get your slimy paws off that cute girl in front of you and back on your beautiful wife where they belong... or something like that.

What Evangelism Is

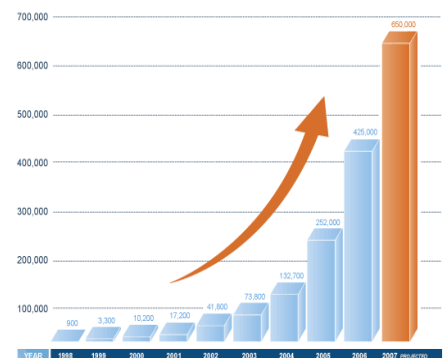
Put simply, "evangel" means gospel, so an evangelist is someone who shares the gospel, or the good news. Though it sounds simple, questions abound as to what the good news is and how we need to share it. This article will focus on the basic components of evangelism, while the next article will focus on the specific elements of the gospel.

There are three main components that must be present if we are going to call what we do evangelism. The first component is to present what Christ has done: Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead to defeat sin so that those who believe in Him will have eternal life (1Cor 15:1-4, Jn 3:16). Second, evangelism must spell out why we need a savior in the first place. This involves communicating a proper understanding of sin. Without understanding the need, than why would people believe? Third, we must understand that this is not just good news because of what Christ did, but because it does something for us – so we must

respond to it. The New Testament is full of instances where the herald is asking the people to repent or to turn from their sins (cf. Acts 2:38, 17:30). This is not a matter of asking people to clean up their act before coming to Christ; it is making clear that a decision must be made by the hearers. If we decide to follow Jesus, we are accepting to be transformed by Him and live differently. So evangelism is 1. sharing what Christ did, 2. sharing why we need Him, and 3. asking those we share with to respond. Memorize these three points, for these three points will help us determine if what we are doing is evangelism.¹

What Evangelism Isn't

In unpacking what evangelism isn't, I need to make one thing clear. I am not arguing for evangelism to replace all of these things, I am arguing that evangelism, true evangelism, needs to be central in all we do. Much of what I list below that isn't evangelism are things we are called to do as Christians. So the answer to this



¹ Packer, J.I. Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God. 47-50

list is not to quit one for the other, but to do all with a gospel centered attitude: connecting people to Jesus Christ.

1. Results based

We have a “habit of defining evangelism in terms, not of the message delivered, but of an effect produced by our hearers.”² This is a habit that must be put to an end, for it is not our job to convert people, our job is merely to share the good news of Christ and invite people to accept it. When we share, we hope people will accept the message, but the work of accepting it is for God, not us (1Cor 3:5-7). Evangelism is sharing and inviting, not converting.

Because of this, we don’t measure success in evangelism based on how many people claim to come to Christ through it. We measure success by obedience. Are you being obedient in sharing the message, and is the message you are sharing faithful to Scripture. Evangelism is about a message, not a result.³

2. Imposition

While in Zambia my wife discipled a 15 year old girl named Grace, who had a heart breaking life. It were the stories Grace told of forced incestual relations that led my wife to bring Grace to the clinic to get tested for HIV, a disease that is rampant in Zambia. Though her positive test was devastating news, there was silver lining in it. Now that she knew she was infected, she could receive antiretrovirals (ARVs) to help prolong her life and minimize the symptoms. Whether it was because she was still in denial or because she just felt so unworthy from abuse Grace decided she did not want to take the

ARVs. Without them, her life could end in a matter of years, but with the ARVs she could live a relatively long and normal life. We pleaded with her, as did many others who cared for Grace. We explained the benefit of taking them, and through long and difficult conversations, Grace finally agreed to take the medication!

In pleading with Grace to take the ARVs, we were not imposing our personal opinion on her. We were offering a life saving solution. There is no opinion as to whether or not ARVs would help, it is a fact. In the same way, we who believe in Jesus Christ truly believe that the message we share is true. To us, it is not an opinion, but a fact.⁴ We who share are just communicating that fact. We can’t convert anyone, as we mentioned above. We just share and invite. We are not imposing our opinion on others at all, we are offering something we believe is factual and of supreme value. In the same way that it would be cruel to withhold lifesaving drugs from someone like Grace, it would be cruel for us to keep silent about the gospel.

3. Personal Testimony

In the Gospel of John we are told of how Jesus healed a man who was born blind. After the healing there were many in the crowd who doubted as to whether the man who was healed was the man they knew who was blind from birth or just someone who looked like him. Towards the end of this story the healed man was asked give a testimony of what happened. The man said that whether or not he was a sinner he didn’t know, but what he did know was that he once was blind and now he could see. (Jn 9) This is an incredible testimony of what Jesus has done,



so incredible that we marvel at His power. Though powerful, this is not evangelism. The story did not share about Jesus’ work on the cross; in fact, the man who shared the testimony didn’t even know Jesus.

Telling about what God has done in your life is not the same as telling about what Christ has done for sinners. Testimonies are encouraging and can often contribute to evangelism, but they are not, in themselves, evangelism.⁵ This is why we must be very purposeful when we tell testimonies, and make sure that we aren’t merely telling about what God has done in our life, but include what Christ has done and invite the listeners to believe. Testimonies can be made to be evangelistic, but are not in themselves evangelism.

4. Social Action

As Christians we are not merely called to believe something, but live it out. Part of living it out is getting involved in social justice causes, which have benefited millions of people over the years. Though these social action programs have done so much for others, they are not in and of themselves evangelism. Our actions should and often do commend the gospel, but that does not replace the gospel needing to be communicated in verbal form.⁶ I am not calling for us to cease from social action, I am calling us to clearly define what it is we are doing, and since many

² Packer, 46

³ Dever, Mark. *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*, 78-79

⁴ Dever, 72

⁵ Dever, 72

⁶ Dever, 72

have mistaken good deeds for evangelism, this point must be made.

The problem is not that we are involved in social action; the problem is that we are not involved in evangelism, and begin to prioritize other things above the gospel. “When our eyes fall from God to humanity, social ills replace sin, horizontal problems replace the fundamental vertical problem between us and God, winning elections eclipses winning souls.”⁷

5. Apologetics

Peter tells us that we should be able to “give a reason for the hope that is in” us. (1Pe 3:15). This makes apologetics a very important part of Christianity, for apologetics helps us to answer questions about our faith. It helps defend the very things we believe in through reason, science, and history. Though apologetics are helpful and can often contribute to evangelism, apologetics are not evangelism. “Evangelism is not defending the virgin birth or defending the history of the resurrection,”⁸ evangelism is proclaiming that they happened! Proving that something is historically feasible does not lead people to realize their sinfulness and need for a savior. Only proclaiming the gospel can do that.

6. Invitation to church/programs

Inviting people to church is a great thing to do, but do not think for a second this is evangelism. The things I have mentioned so far that aren't evangelism have a primary issue of not keeping the gospel central, but rather keeping manifestations and practices of the gospel central. Invitation as evangelism has the same problem as those, but I have found it has another huge problem: timid-

⁷ Dever, 75

⁸ Dever 78

ity. Most people who invite others to church without ever sharing the gospel with them do it because they are timid. They are afraid of what the person might think, how it will affect their relationship, or concerned as to how the conversation might go. It is a tragedy to bring someone to church in hopes that they might be saved, when you would rather the pastor share the gospel than have a conversation that might be uncomfortable. There are many people who come to Christ through listening to preachers, but there are also many who don't. We are not called to bring people to places where the gospel is preached. We are called to preach the gospel. So I ask that you continue to invite people to church, but do so hoping to develop a relationship with that person so you can share the gospel. If that is not your hope, than an invitation to church is no different than an invitation to a Cowboys game.

7. Ticket out of hell

We don't believe the gospel because it gets us out of hell, we believe it because we love God. So when you share the gospel, if you are merely offering the person fire insurance (a way to protect them from burning), than you are not communicating the truths of the gospel. It is easier to communicate the difference between eternal damnation and eternal glory, but those are merely results of our decision about Jesus. Communicate about Jesus. Evangelism is about Him, and sinners coming to accept Him as savior, not about avoiding something else. We aren't trying to scare people out of hell; we are trying to woo them to the feet of our precious Savior.

Conclusion

The reason these things must be spelled out so clearly is because of

the gravity of the topic. We are not talking about preference here, we are talking about salvation. So we must be clear as to what we are doing. Are we evangelizing or are we doing something else? Our primary task as believers is to preach the gospel, which is why we must be clear about how we are doing it. This article's purpose was to bring to light what evangelism is, and reveal areas where we thought we were evangelizing, but in fact were doing something else. Since the central idea of this article is that evangelism is preaching the gospel, the next article will focus on explaining exactly what the gospel is, and showing areas we have strayed from it.

I know this can be a lot to soak in. It was for me. There are so many things here that I am not doing, while still not participating in evangelism as I should. So here is what I ask. Don't let this article overwhelm you. Find one area that you have substituted for evangelism, and begin to incorporate evangelism in that area. So if you are involved in social action ministries, being to share the gospel with the people you serve. At first it will be awkward, but it will become more natural. The goal here is to progress, to learn to better share the gospel, and we do this one attempt at a time and one person at a time.

Dever, Mark. *The Gospel & Personal Evangelism*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2007.

Packer, J.I. *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. Downers Grove: Inervarsity, 2008.