



EVANGELISTIC PREACHING

Some suggestions for pastors

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Introduction

Evangelistic preaching is more than verbally describing the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to those who are yet to believe.

We praise God for the content of the good news. It is profound and a source of joy beyond words. But we may briefly sum it up in terms of God and his glorious goodness, man and his outrageous sin, Christ and his magnificent cross, and saving faith which brings salvation. Each of these elements of the gospel may be expanded upon in a variety of ways. But when we have cogently set out our systematic theology of the triune God, the catastrophic effects of sin, the different dimensions of Jesus' love at Calvary and the offer of forgiveness and eternal life to all who repent and believe, have we truly *preached* the gospel to our hearers? Often the answer to that question must be 'no'. There is a great difference between describing the gospel and actually preaching the gospel. There is a great difference between a lecture and a Spirit-inspired sermon.

The individual

True preaching lovingly and energetically engages with the individual. As we shall see that can happen in a number of ways. But in the NT preaching is linked not only to the idea of declaring, but also must be thought of in terms of proving the truth and even pleading with people to come to Christ personally, Acts 2.40; 2 Corinthians 5.20.

In other words, true preaching will never emerge from a hard or indifferent heart. 'Here are the facts, take it or leave it,' is not the attitude of a genuine preacher, especially one involved in the work of evangelism. True preaching of the gospel comes from a loving heart which is concerned for the eternal destinies of the individuals who are listening to the preacher.

Our walk with Christ

The heart of the preacher must, therefore, approximate as closely as possible to the heart of the Lord Jesus. He felt for the weary and heavy laden, Matthew 11.28. He sympathised with the spiritual thirst of the compromised woman at the well which had driven her into immorality and sin, John 4.10. His heart went out to the outcast Zacchaeus who was perceived as having betrayed his own countrymen in his collaboration with the occupying Roman authorities, Luke 19.5. He engaged with the self-righteous and sought to stir the interest of the hard-hearted, Matthew 13.43.

The only way to have and to maintain a heart like that of Jesus is to follow him and seek to stay as close to him as possible. This must always be the first place to start

when it comes to preaching evangelistically. The preacher's devotional life matters. Therefore, there is a sense in which what I have to say and suggest in this booklet is of secondary importance. I think it is important. But nothing is as important as walking with Christ as we seek to make him known and to commend him to others.

It is therefore in that spirit that we come to give some consideration to the subject of evangelistic preaching. We preachers are sinners too but can rejoice in the great miracle of the forgiveness of sins. And thankfully that forgiveness is not something which is fragile, a pure 'whim'¹ on the part of God. We praise him that forgiveness is firmly established in the atonement wrought for us by the Lord Jesus Christ in irreversible history on the hill of Golgotha. We say with Paul, 'God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ', Galatians 6.14.

¹ If such a thing were possible, which it is not.

Chapter 1: Types of evangelistic preaching

There are different kinds of evangelistic messages.

We find this in the NT itself. It is well-known, for example, that in Acts, the apostle Paul does not preach to the Athenians, Acts 17, in the same way he declares the gospel to the Jews in the synagogue, the ‘men of Israel’, in Antioch in Pisidia, Acts 13. In Athens, speaking to a Greek Gentile audience he began his message by fastening on to the idea of ‘an unknown god’ contained among the idols of their city and moving from there to speak about the true God and the true nature of mankind. But, by contrast, for the Jews in Antioch his sermon was rooted in the Bible – the history of the OT.

Again, Jesus’ approach to the Samaritan woman at the well in need of him as her Saviour was not the same as he used in answering the rich young ruler who took it for granted that he could do whatever was necessary to do to gain eternal life.

All of these include the essential ingredient of pointing to Christ as the Saviour of sinners. Just so, every evangelistic talk must include the basics of the gospel.

A range of possibilities

But we need to be aware of the range of different types of evangelistic message and to have thought and prayed through what kind of message would best fit with the people to whom we are talking. Both the Lord Jesus and Paul adapted to their audience. The Gentiles did not have the same cultural background and thought patterns as the Jews. Further, though both the rich young ruler and Zacchaeus were Jews, they were very different personalities with very different outlooks on life. Christ dealt with them differently.

The purpose of this chapter is to enumerate some of the varied approaches we can utilise in addressing unbelievers and commending Christ. The words that come to mind are curiosity, confirmation, conviction, caution and comfort. We can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, make the non-Christian curious about Christianity. We can use evidence of many kinds to confirm the truth of Christianity. The preacher can seek to expose and convict people of their sin and so their need for a Saviour. The speaker can sound the warning of hell for the unsaved and heaven for the saved, and press home the caution. Often broken sinners need to hear about the comfort of a God who loves them and yearns for them to turn to Christ.

These may not be the only ways to preach the good news. There may be others. But the preacher needs to think about the people he will be addressing and what approach is likely to be best for them. Let's spend a little while expanding on these various possibilities.

Messages that make people *curious*

We find this, for example, in Jesus' use of parables. They tend not only to engage people but to leave them with questions. 'How come the king (God) invites both the good and the bad to the wedding feast of his son?' Matthew 22.10. 'What was it that made the elder brother so hard-hearted towards his younger brother? And did he go into the celebration party or not when his father asked him?' Luke 15.28. Such questions seem to stick with people and get them wondering about themselves and the nature of the gospel. 'What is keeping you from entering the kingdom?'

If we are not clever enough to imitate the parables of Jesus – and indeed, who is? – we can at least point out the glaring inconsistencies in the secular way of thinking to which most of our non-Christian hearers in the UK will be wedded. 'If the universe came about by chance, how come that we can do science and seem programmed to be able, at least in part, to understand it?' 'If we believe that every child is special then how come we are willing to abort so many of them?' 'If we believe that the driving force of life is evolution, then how come we avoid a "survival of the fittest" view of life and make such a lot of selfishness being wrong and kindness to the needy being a good thing?' It isn't consistent.

The point here is to make people curious and make them realise that secularism does not answer everything. We are sowing seeds of doubt in their minds which hopefully the Holy Spirit can use to open their hearts to the gospel, Acts 16.14. Plead with those who hear to pursue their curiosity as it will lead to the truth.

Messages which *confirm* the gospel

We are to use rational argument to confirm the gospel. God made us with the ability to reason and rational creatures require a reasonable faith – a faith that makes sense. Only the fact of God can make sense of our lives and of our world. It is the fool that says in his heart 'there is no God', Psalm 14.1.

The late Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones has a wonderful evangelistic sermon on Psalm 14 which confirms the gospel. His two headings are *first*, the atheist jumps to conclusions on the basis of insufficient evidence and *second*, atheists refuse to face the actual facts.

Think, for example, about one of the atheist's favourite arguments. Thousands, if not millions of people in our country today would say 'I don't believe in God,' and when you ask, 'Why not?' they reply something like. 'If there is a God, why are there wars and disabled children and earthquakes?' And on that basis alone they jump to the conclusion 'there is no God.' I found this on an atheist's website: 'Every day I am reminded why I think there is no God. I am surrounded by tragedy at all times and no matter how horrible or devastating an event may be; life goes on. You finally realize that despite what you have been taught in the Bible about your special place in the universe,' you are a piece of dust in a brutal universe.

Now can you see that although our atheist mentions the Bible he has done so very superficially? Scripture does teach that God made a perfect world and if that was the end of the story then of course the atheist's argument would carry weight. But that's not where the Bible story ends. Instead, it goes on to tell us about the Fall, man's rebellion against his Creator which brought devastation, disease and death into the world. It's no good saying 'I don't believe in God because this world is a bad place' when a major thrust of the Bible's message is that Jesus came precisely to save us from this bad place and bring us to heaven. The atheist has jumped to conclusions on the basis of inadequate thought.

To point this out and to indicate how atheists avoid the actual facts (like, for example, the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy) helps to confirm the gospel and to show people that it makes sense. The preacher can use this 'making sense' to persuade people to turn from half-baked lies to the truth, John 8.32.

Messages that bring *conviction of sin*

There can be no true conversion without conviction of sin and so a realization of the need of the Saviour. However, it has been made more difficult to preach a convicting sermon in our current cultural climate. This is due to two things. *First*, our secular society now has no agreed idea of what is good in any absolute way. So, there is no agreed idea of evil. *Second*, we have become increasingly an individualistic therapy society. Life is to be enjoyed. So, it is thought that the only evil is making people feel bad about themselves – which is very much a part of what conviction of sin is about. For a preacher to be seen to set out to make people feel bad about themselves is to immediately put himself in the wrong in the eyes of many people and therefore his message is ignored.

However, both conscience and the Holy Spirit are on our side. Simply describing the holiness and loveliness of God, without directly accusing people of their sins, is often enough to bring conviction. Our hearers make the connection for themselves without

the preacher having to point the finger. We find something like this going on in the conversion of the apostle Peter. 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord,' says the fisherman on his knees before Christ, Luke 5.8. There has been no mention of sin by Jesus. So, what is going on? It seems it was simply the presence of Jesus in his miracle-working majesty which brought it home to Peter just how unlike the carpenter of Nazareth he was. And when the preacher accurately describes Jesus in all his loveliness, Christ himself is present, and conviction of sin comes to our listeners.

Messages which *caution* concerning eternal destiny

People need to be warned of the consequences of unforgiven sin. It leads to hell – an eternity in outer darkness. How can the preacher mention eternal realities without being dismissed as someone who is simply seeking to frighten his hearers into becoming Christians?

Perhaps one of the most helpful ways of approaching this is to point out the deep unhappiness and darkness that pursuing the ways of sin brings in this life. These things are not mentioned by our secular media but are nevertheless clear for all to see. Adultery breaks up families and often brings misery for the children. Drugs and pornography lead to lives wasted on an addiction. Unbridled selfishness will leave a person friendless and unloved. If this is the way sin works out in this life, it is not too difficult to see that will lead to misery in the next. Sin cannot be ignored. It has consequences. It needs the forgiveness of God. And so, we plead with our fellow men and women to come to Christ.

Messages which bring *comfort*

Our godless world leaves many people broken and isolated. They are sheep without a shepherd not knowing which way to turn. They need not simply the warnings of the gospel but the good news that there is a great God who loves them and desires above all things that they come to him and are saved. Jesus spoke repeatedly of the joy there is in heaven, and by implication, the joy of God over one sinner who repents, Luke 15.7, 10.

Spurgeon used to say something like 'more flies are caught with honey than with vinegar' – sweet rather than sour. And the preacher has been commissioned to spread the news of the sweet love of God. What a privilege that we can speak of a God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life, John 3.16.

Thoughtful fishermen

Our hearers in evangelistic settings are unlikely to be used to listening to someone speak for 40 or 50 minutes. It is best therefore, to keep our gospel message short. That means that it is unlikely that we can include all the different approaches we have covered here in one message. It may be best to choose just one approach and run with it. But we will need to think through what would seem most appropriate for the group we will be addressing.

I remember us hosting a music evening in the Guildford church and inviting outsiders to come and listen or even participate and play their instruments, with the understanding that there would be a short talk about Christian faith as part of our time together. For many of those we invited it would be their first contact with evangelicals. It was a situation which was crying out for the speaker to gently make people curious about the faith or to give some short apologetic confirming the truth of the gospel which could then be followed up. Instead, sadly, our speaker, knowing what he was coming to, decided to preach judgment and hell-fire with little or no apparent sympathy for the lost. It left everyone, including the Christians, feeling decidedly uncomfortable.

If only the man had been a wise fisherman. What bait are these fish most likely to take? It is good to prayerfully think before we speak.

Chapter 2: Evangelistic preaching today

What do we say about evangelistic preaching in today's society?

Thankfully there has been something of a change in people's attitudes in the last few years. Whereas for the last part of the twentieth century and the earlier years of the twenty first, people in the UK seemed fairly hardened against the gospel, now there are many reports of people, especially younger people, showing interest and walking in off the streets into a church service to find out what Christianity is all about. Some have begun to get disillusioned with what secularism has to offer. In ones and twos people have been genuinely converted and we have started to talk about 'the Quiet Revival'.²

Preaching is still central today?

We know that the Great Commission of Matthew 28.18-20 is not rescinded. The gates to both heaven and hell are still open. We still need to make Jesus known.

But how do we do that? Some Christians think that perhaps preaching – public declaration of the gospel – is no longer appropriate in modern times. Some speak in terms of 'evangelism without words'. But though we are to seek to live such good lives as to provoke questions, 1 Peter 2.12; 3.15, from non-Christians, there is no such thing as evangelism without words. There must be verbal witness to Jesus as Lord and Saviour otherwise it is not evangelism. The vocabulary of 'sharing' the gospel is popular. In his recent book *Evangelism as Exiles*, Elliot Clark says that 'sharing' is seen as a kind of charitable activity whereby we give the gospel to willing recipients. Theologically that is a non-starter. We love darkness rather than light, John 3.19. What about those who, initially at least, don't want to hear. Do we just abandon them? Is that the Great Commission? We fall into a modern 'hyper-Calvinism.'

Without rubbishing the witness of our lives, or the attempts Christians make at personal evangelism, the truth is that preaching has been and always will be the most appropriate way of getting the gospel out. And it seems that God is using preaching in church in the current 'Quiet Revival'.

² Or as one friend of mine refers to what is going on, as 'the Manageable Revival'. 'All these people need following up and discipling' she reminds me, and a constant dribble of ones and twos is just right for that at present.

Preaching is the mode of communication most fitting for what the gospel is. This is for at least 3 reasons:

1. Because it's good news. We announce news. That's what the TV newsreader does – announces facts – 'such and such happened today in Parliament' etc. Don Carson says, 'The essentially heraldic element in preaching is bound up with the fact that the core message is not a code of ethics to be debated etc...but good news to be publicly announced'
2. Because the response is belief. This is brought out by Jonathan L. Griffiths in his book, *Preaching in the New Testament* (Apollos/IVP). 'What we require in response to the gospel is not primarily that people 'do' something – rather that people hear - we are passing on the truth which is to be believed. '
3. Because the heart of our message is that 'Jesus is Lord'. The King's word is not ultimately up for discussion or open to opinion. The preacher is nothing less than the king's commissioned herald who brings the King's announcement. You don't interrupt the King's Christmas message. He's the king! And so is Jesus – only much more so.

So, despite even Christians questioning the appropriateness of preaching – seen theologically, preaching is and always has been the most appropriate form of communication. We need to defend that and be confident in it.

Of course, this preaching can take place in many different settings. It doesn't have to be from a pulpit in a chapel building. It should take place wherever we can get a hearing from non-Christians. Even on Zoom! So, we can take opportunities to speak in a café or in a pub or in someone's home or on the street etc. And it is good to try to find 'neutral ground' where non-Christians would feel comfortable to come. If they will come to church – fine. But if they won't let's go to them.

Adapting to today?

If we sent a missionary to a foreign country then we would expect them, without compromising the gospel, to adapt to the customs of the country and to adjust their presentation to connect with the way people think. The apostle Paul famously said, 'For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the

law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings', 1 Corinthians 9.19-23.

Thankfully our country seems to be changing. We had a Christian heritage. Some people they are rediscovering that heritage. However, for the majority, that heritage still remains nonsensical and anachronistic in today's world. We are still in a land to which the gospel is, by-and-large, foreign. We are called to shape ourselves and the way we preach the gospel in ways appropriate to 21st century Britain. We need to think about that.

Let me give 7 suggestions

- *Opportunity*

People talk about the need to be contemporary / relevant. I think that is the wrong way around – it's as if the present moment is setting the agenda.

People do need to know that the gospel always speaks into the here and now – but the way to play that is to start with the gospel (in all its different aspects) – and see what opportunities for the gospel are being thrown up by the contemporary world. Don't be a slave to current trends – that will lead you to change the gospel message in an attempt to come across as 'cool'. Rather know that the secular world does not work. It can't because secularism is not the truth. So read the current culture for its failures, for its heartbreak, for its lack of humanity and use those to both expose secularism's lie and to bring the truth of the gospel. Harking back to chapter 1, make people curious. See changing trends as a flow of different opportunities.

Take for example the recent success of the TV series *Fleabag*. It's a witty but dreadfully ungodly piece of work. But at the heart of it is a very lost, hopeless and unhappy woman who knows she is never good enough and is always disappointed in herself. That's what secularism does to people. And sometimes there are little soliloquies in the show which express that lostness.

- *Authority*

We are heralds on the King's mission with his message and therefore his authority. The Holy Spirit is with us. People need to sense that. So, we must pray. We must be humble and courteous but at the same time, in our hostile environment, know we are not there to please people.

Again, Elliot Clark writes: ‘If you proclaim the gospel, it will be offensive – there’s no way round it. There will be inevitable conflict. You must come to a point of being willing to offend, or else you’ll never say much of anything.’ With a humble spirit you are prepared to call sin, sin. You are prepared to humbly say that Muslims are wrong about who Jesus is. You are prepared to say that you can’t find anywhere in the Bible that same-sex relationships are pleasing to God. You must be more concerned to please Christ than to please people.

- *Cogency*

As we have mentioned before, rational people need a gospel that makes sense of the world. We are not to fall into the irrationality of which Richard Dawkins accuses us – calling people to a faith, which is belief despite the evidence. We find that Paul *reasoned or argued persuasively* concerning the gospel in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, Acts 19. He did this daily. This went on for over 2 years, Acts 19.10. I think it is John Stott who points out in his Bible Speaks Today commentary on Acts that Paul probably gave more teaching on the truth of the gospel than there is teaching in most university courses today. So, note – although we preach authoritatively – at the right point we are open to proper questioning.

- *Urgency*

Again, in our concern to be non-offensive, sometimes we can soft-pedal the need for response. We don’t just describe the gospel, we urge our hearers to come to Christ.

The preachers of the NT did this. Our hearers’ response is a matter of life and death, of heaven and hell. There is an urgency in preaching. Peter *warned and pleaded* at Pentecost: ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.,’ Acts 2.40. Paul *implored* the Corinthians to be reconciled to God, 2 Corinthians 5.11, 20.

- *Doxology*

This is often a missing note in Reformed preaching. This gospel is good news for sinners. If that is the case, there must be a note of joy about it to the glory of God. So much which passes as ‘sound’ preaching is grim and dour. Ordinary people might well ask, ‘If this gospel is so good, why do you look so sour?’

We quote from Elliot Clark once more – ‘We must recognize that the apologetic force of preaching isn’t always that our message is more believable than another (though it is), but that it’s more desirable. In evangelism you don’t just make a logical case, but a doxological one. We aren’t just talking to brains. We are speaking to hearts that have desires and eyes that look for beauty. We are not merely trying to convince people that the gospel is true, but that our God is good.’ Romans 15.8, 9.

J. C. Ryle, in his book *Five Christian Leaders*, says of George Whitefield: ‘He was eminently a rejoicing Christian, whose very demeanour recommended his Master’s service. A venerable lady of New York, after his death, when speaking of the influences by which the Spirit won her heart to God, used these remarkable words: “Mr. Whitefield was *so cheerful* that it tempted me to become a Christian!”’

- *Testimony*

We must preach Christ – not our experience. We should call attention to Jesus not to ourselves. Nevertheless, if the gospel is true, and if Christ is so wonderful, and if this gospel really works, we ought to be able to say something of what the Lord has done for us. Testimony has a proper part to play – either our own testimony or else an interview with someone of how they came to Christ and what it has meant to them. Often in Acts, Paul’s preaching includes his own conversion story.

We live in a politically correct society which, for all its failings, seeks to respect other people. But at least that means people are prepared to respect what they see as the genuine experience of others. That doesn’t mean they will agree with it – but it does mean they’ll listen.

- *Certainty*

We believe in the sovereignty of God in salvation and in full atonement at the cross. Amidst a secular age of not being sure and being anxious about everything, the gospel can be sounded with refreshing assurance to a worried generation.

Listen to Spurgeon, preaching evangelistically to a mixed crowd on the sovereignty of God. He speaks of a God who says, ‘I will save.’: ‘God says “will” and it will be. Many shall come. The devil says, “they shall not come”, but they “will come”. You yourselves (might) say “we won’t come”; God says, “You shall come.” There are some here who are laughing at salvation...and mock the gospel; but I tell you some *you* shall come yet. “What!” you say, “can God *make* me become a Christian?” I tell you yes, for herein rests the power of the gospel. It does not ask your consent, but it gets it. It knocks the enmity out of your heart. It does not say, “will you have it?” But it makes you willing in the day of God’s power...You say, “I do not want to be saved”; Christ says you shall be! He makes your heart turn round.’ He is sovereign. So, you and I can be confident preachers!

Chapter 3: Evangelistic Invitations

My own conversion began like this. I was from a non-Christian family. I had been sent to Sunday School once as a little boy – but felt really out of place and never went again!

At the Grammar School, however, there were a group of youngsters in my own class who were Christians. And these friends invited me to a ‘Youth for Christ’ rally at a local civic hall. Along we went. There a young man preached on the 10 commandments, with great power. It was very convicting. It was not the kind of Saturday night out I was looking for as a young teenager! I felt so bad, so convicted of sin that on the walk home I remember saying to the friends I was with that it had made me feel so bad that ‘speaking like that did not ought to be allowed!’ It had got to me. And so it was that talking to Christians, being taken to church a few times and particularly through the kindness of a Christian teacher at school that I saw the great need of the cross and atonement and put my faith in Christ and soon after was baptized.

The law had been instrumental in opening me up to the gospel and my need of Christ. Is that the way the gospel always has to be preached? Start with the law?

Should we always follow Flavel?

John Flavel 1628-91 laboured for the gospel in Dartmouth, Devon and was a great preacher of the gospel. He has a wonderful treatise, entitled *The Method of Grace in the Gospel of Redemption* – and he has one section ‘The things which ordinarily precede and lead to a Coming to Christ.’

These things would be Awakening (being disturbed); Enlightening (understanding); Conviction of sin (conscience); Repentance and Conversion (faith) to Christ. He bases what he has to say mostly on Paul’s words in Romans 7.9: ‘Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died.’ He argues that Paul is saying of himself (and other unconverted people) that he had an unfounded security – a life of presumptuous hope – founded on such things as perhaps church connections, self-love which makes a man overlook great evils in himself, while he is sharp sighted to see others’ faults. Comparing ourselves to other people. And it is the law which can shatter this false security, and so lay people open to Christ. Sometimes it is said there needs to be a ‘law work’ before there can be a gospel work – so start with the law of God. Or it might be put as the Scottish street preacher Robert Flockhart did, ‘the law is the needle (to pierce) and the gospel is the thread to bind up and sew together.’ And, although Paul’s purpose in Romans 7 is

not first of all to give us a template for preaching the gospel but rather to defend the goodness of God's law, we can see that this approach has a certain logic to it.

Some people go a step further and want to say to preachers they MUST preach the gospel like this. This method, they would say, follows the path of what Jesus said about the work of the Spirit in John 16.8-11 – convict the world of sin etc. and we must follow that same path in preaching the gospel. So, to begin with the law becomes THE way to preach the gospel and if you don't do it this way you haven't preached the gospel.

What do we think about that?

It has much to commend it. But this way of thinking can easily lead us into the minefield of the idea of 'preparationism' – that someone has to be somehow 'prepared' and reach a certain state of conviction before they can believe the gospel. I want to say, 'be careful.'

Although there is some truth to that, if we take it too far we land ourselves in much trouble (and ruin our preaching since you will always be preaching essentially the same evangelistic sermon over and over again). Here are some of the problems:

1. If a person has to be brought to a certain state to receive Christ – that might be taken as saying they are under no obligation to believe until they have reached that state. (But God commands all men to repent, Acts 17.30). We are on the brink of Hyper-Calvinism.
2. If that is the case, what are the marks that they are now in the right state to look to Christ or receive him? How would anyone ever know they had reached the right level of conviction or awakening?
3. If we go down this road – it would leave some people with the idea that they had no warrant to come to Christ because – suppose there are 10 steps to what is required to be qualified to look to Christ – they feel are only on step 7.

Indeed, our job as preachers is to lead people to want Christ. Thus,³ it is that Paul reasoned with Felix about 'righteousness, self-control and judgment to come,' Acts

³ I'm sure that John Favel did not mean his work to be taken this way. Note that his title for this part of his work is 'Things which *ordinarily* precede and lead to a Coming to Christ. The use of that word

24.25. But it is not our job to ascertain who may and who may not be invited to come to Christ.

The offer of the gospel

The evangelism of the NT is more varied than the reliance on the law we have been considering. Atonement for sin and Christ and him crucified is, of course, the *sine qua non*, the absolute necessity, of evangelistic preaching – but that does not mean that we must always come at it from the same direction.

We do not find that the evangelism of the NT always begins with the law. With the woman at the well the Lord Jesus starts with the great benefit of the gospel – living water, the gift of the Holy Spirit (so suited to her empty life which she has, it seems, tried to fill with men) John 4.10. Or think of Jesus dealing with the outcast Zacchaeus. He does not start by castigating him for his cheating – but begins with a loving befriending of this man whose sin had isolated him from the community, Luke 19.5. And upon his conversion underlines his acceptance with God, Luke 19.9, 10. Ultimately, we preach the love of God to sinners – and an over-emphasis on the law can obscure that.

The Persons of the Trinity

There is a passage in B. B. Warfield that relates our Christian experience to the Persons of the Trinity and is relevant:

'Every redeemed soul, knowing himself reconciled with God through His Son, and quickened into newness of life by His Spirit, turns alike to Father, Son and Spirit with the exclamation of reverent gratitude on his lips, "My Lord and my God!" If he could not construct the doctrine of the Trinity out of his consciousness of salvation, yet the elements of his consciousness of salvation are interpreted to him and reduced to order only by the doctrine of the Trinity which he finds underlying and giving their significance and consistency to the teaching of the Scriptures as to the processes of salvation. By means of this doctrine he is able to think clearly and consequently of his threefold relation to the saving God, experienced by Him as Fatherly love sending a Redeemer, as redeeming love executing redemption, as saving love applying redemption: all manifestations in distinct methods and by distinct agencies of the one seeking and saving love of God.

'ordinarily' implies – this is not always the case – hence he guides us away from taking too strict a line on it.

Without the doctrine of the Trinity, his conscious Christian life would be thrown into confusion and left in disorganization, if not, indeed, given an air of unreality; with the doctrine of the Trinity, order, significance and reality are brought to every element of it. Accordingly, the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of redemption, historically, stand and fall together.’

How to close an evangelistic message

We are to call people to Christ – even though they are dead in trespasses and sins. Jesus called the man with the withered arm to do precisely what he could not do – stretch it out. Jesus called dead Lazarus to do precisely what he couldn’t do – to come out of the tomb. The Spirit alone enables – but we are to call. How?

First, we need to leave our hearers with a clear idea of what is required by way of response to the gospel. We are wanting to challenge them to come to Christ. They need to know what they must do. This ‘set of instructions’ should not become too long or convoluted. You need to call (in some way) for repentance and faith in a way which is easy to understand and memorable. See Acts 2.38, 39.

Second, our conclusion should be decisive and leave hearers with a clear decision. (see for example the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 7.24-27). The gospel is a matter of life and death. Our message should not tail off – but end with a clear thrust. This can be explosive or gentle according to our audience. The main matter is that it is decisive.

Third, they need to know that you care. Spurgeon speaks about a proper ‘emotional persuasion’ and ‘pleading’ with our hearers. There may be a place for warning / threatening – but that must be mixed with invitation. In this sense, we are not to leave people hopeless.⁴

⁴ Read Spurgeon’s ‘On Conversion as Our Aim’ in his *Lectures to my Students*.

Chapter 4: Evangelistic Calvinism

I want to encourage you to see that the Five Points of Calvinism not as a hindrance, but as full of encouragements for sinners, and extremely helpful in evangelism.

We use the traditional acronym for the 5 points – TULIP: Total depravity; Unconditional election; Limited atonement; Irresistible grace; Perseverance of the saints. In this chapter we will move through those headings, and briefly show how they answer a sinner’s most pressing questions.

Total Depravity

Total depravity teaches that left to ourselves, sinners are completely incapable of responding in the required way to Christ. The light of Christ has come but the world has not understood it – not a flicker of recognition, John 1.5, 9. 'Light has come into the world, but people love darkness not light', John 3.20.

This is because every part of our nature is in the grip of sin – mind, affections and choices, Ephesians 2.1-3. (But thankfully, God intervenes v4,5).

How does total depravity help the sinner to come to Christ? How can it be ‘good news’?

First, it is because it gives a realistic view of us as people. Secular views of mankind always turn out to be too optimistic about our goodness. We continually fail to live up to our good intentions because every part of us is tainted by sin. But total depravity says – ‘yes, that’s all true but there is still hope, not in us, but in God and his grace.’

Second, it is because total depravity tells us that God loves sinners – real sinners – not ‘nice’ sinners – but people who are totally depraved! There therefore needs to be no goodness in us for God to love us! God’s love reaches out to people in whom there is not one iota of pure goodness and who cannot overcome sin. Hallelujah! That’s so encouraging to us.

Third, though the truth of total depravity devastates our pride and humbles us – it also means that we can be totally honest with ourselves before God. There is no need for the sinner to pretend that they are better than they really are. This is wonderful.

Unconditional Election

God loves totally depraved sinners. But what is the origin of this love? It can't be anything in us – we are sinful. It is God's unconditional choice. It is not that somehow God foresaw some good in us, or that we passed some test. It was God's free grace, 2 Timothy 1.8-10; Ephesians 1.6. The Bible tells us that God chooses freely, all kinds of people. There are no preferred categories.

Now this is the answer to many people who hear the gospel and say to themselves 'this is not for me – I'm not the right sort of person.' You tell of Christ and his love but they respond, (honestly from their point of view) by saying, 'Yes – but I'm not the religious type' – or 'Yes – but I'm gay – God wouldn't choose someone like me,'

Unconditional election tells us that however you categorise people – rich or poor, male or female, respectable or wanton, religious or non-religious, intelligent or not so bright, European, African, Chinese or whatever – God chooses people from every category.

It is 'free grace.' Therefore, no-one can say to themselves 'I'm too bad' or 'I've gone too far' or 'I'm just not the right sort'. To put it another way, he chooses your type – so why not you? The doctrine of *unconditional* election means we can offer salvation to everyone – to 'whoever will.'

The first question a person must ask is not 'Am I one of God's chosen ones?' They will never know by looking at themselves, their sins or the categories other people put them in. The first question is rather 'Will I come as a sinner to Jesus and trust him?' If the answer is 'Yes' then, for certain, you are one of God's elect people. The Light has come into the world and instead of hiding from it you come to it. That only happens by the work of God. Jesus said: 'All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away,' John 6.37.

Limited Atonement

Christ died savingly for the elect – in other words for everyone who believes. It was limited to them, but is totally effective for them, John 10.11, 27; Ephesians 5.25.

He did not die to give a potential salvation. He died to actually secure the salvation of his people. (And this is a vast number no man can number says the book of Revelation) That being the case, limited atonement becomes a joy.

First, it means that all who believe are definitely and for certain saved. 'So, believe!' we can say to our listeners. We rejoice to offer a fire-proof salvation which does not

depend on us and our failing abilities but is all done and dusted – it is finished. We do not offer a ‘maybe’ salvation but a certain salvation.

Second, the truth of limited atonement means that all who believe belong to Christ. He purchased us with his own blood. We are his, 1 Corinthians 6.19-20. When we believe we belong. To a rootless and lost generation of people that is good news – and we belong to the best possible owner – who loved us so much as to die for us.

Third, the truth of limited atonement sounds the death knell of all religious legalism and spiritual bondage. Many unbelievers see Christianity as some kind of joyless drudgery – a list of rules to be kept. They feel we are inviting them to life in a straight-jacket. But that’s not true – all the rules have been kept for us, fulfilled for us by Jesus. He gives us time to change against the background of an unbreakable salvation. So, the Christian life can be genuine – no cover ups – no pretending.

Fourth, the truth of limited atonement communicates the good news that God loves us as individuals. We can all say, with the apostle Paul, ‘the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me’, Galatians 2.20. In an increasingly impersonal world, we are loved personally by our Saviour.

Irresistible Grace

The gospel call is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. But there are those who would say ‘I’d like to believe but I can’t.’ Or they might put it in terms of the call to repentance (implicit in true faith) – ‘yes, but I know I could never be different’ or ‘I’m too old to change now.’ What can we say to them if we believe that it all depends on them and their will? We have no answer.

But the NT has an answer. ‘You might not be able to change – but God can change you!’ It is the work of God. ‘But God who is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ,’ Ephesians 2.4-5. God does it – not us.

Yes, sinner, you may feel unable to believe – but God can give you faith. Yes, you may feel too weak to repent but God can grant you repentance. So, seek him, ask him, look to him, pray to him – in Christ’s name.

Perseverance of the Saints

Not only is it God’s work to save us, but it is his work to keep us. ‘He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ,’ Philippians 1.6. He will not leave the job half done. He will complete it. And even though the

world, the flesh and the devil do their utmost to prise us away from Christ, they find that they are not strong enough to do it. We will, by God's grace, persevere and continue in the faith. Even if we stray, God, like the Good Shepherd he is, will bring us back. Jesus said, 'I give them eternal life and they will never perish, and no-one will snatch them from my hand,' John 10.28, 29. God will preserve us to salvation.

This is the lovely answer of the gospel to those anxious souls who might say, 'Well I'd like to be a Christian but I know I could never keep it up.' The NT tells them. 'God will keep you!'

Don't dispense with your Calvinism when it comes to evangelistic preaching. Don't turn into an Arminian. In evangelistic preaching people's eyes need to be turned away from themselves and fixed upon the greatness of God – here is the real source of faith.

