DR. D. JAMES KENNEDY: A RADICAL VIEW OF THE GOSPEL AND CONVERSION

A Biographical, Theological Study

Presented to

Dr. Timothy Beougher

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for 88580

by

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December 15, 2014
DR. D. JAMES KENNEDY: A RADICAL VIEW OF THE GOSPEL AND CONVERSION

Dr. D. James Kennedy was passionate about evangelism. One could argue that his greatest contribution to the Church was *Evangelism Explosion*, his training manual for lay evangelism at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. God used this curriculum to transform Coral Ridge from declining attendance to leading its denomination in baptisms for six consecutive years during the late 1960’s and early 1970’s.¹ Kennedy believed without reservation that a pastor’s job was to train the congregation for the work of ministry. This conviction is seen vividly in the following from his speech to the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in America:

It might be a good idea for us to focus on that—discipling believers and evangelizing the nations. Equipping the saints and evangelizing the nations are great to emphasize, if they are more than words and are daily practices in our lives. Unfortunately, many of our saints are not equipped to evangelize at all. They are like soldiers going to war, and we’ve failed to do one thing—we have never given them any bullets to fight that war. Yet, that is the way it is with many people in our churches. There are churches full of people who are completely impotent when it comes to winning souls for Christ. . . . Paul tells us that God has given a pastor/teacher to equip the saints to do the work of ministry. That is our job. Are you equipping the saints? If you never make it back to your church after this assembly, how many lay people would you leave discipled, trained, and evangelizing for Christ? I have often thought that at that great final day, in the Great Assize, when the tomes of judgment are opened, and the books are read, and the rewards are given for faithful service and witness for Christ, that many people will be saying to their pastors, “Pastor, why didn’t you train me to witness?” What are you going to say, pastor? Why are you depriving your members of not only fantastic joy in this life, but of everlasting rewards in the life to come?²

With evangelism in mind, one could ask concerning Kennedy’s understanding, “What is the gospel and how is one converted to Christianity?” This paper will address this question in

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four sections. First, it will describe the life experiences that influenced Kennedy’s theological development. Second, it will investigate the gospel presentation from *Evangelism Explosion*. Third, it will survey key theological ballasts for Kennedy’s view of conversion. Fourth, it will highlight significant observations from Kennedy’s understanding of the gospel and conversion.

**Kennedy Experiences the Gospel and Conversion**

Life experiences shape the particular direction of one’s future. In Dr. Kennedy’s life, he never got over his personal experience of the gospel and conversion. In many ways, his conversion was radical. He was in one moment living for Jim and only Jim and in the next moment he was living for God.\(^3\) He often appealed to his experience of this phenomenon as proof of its reality.\(^4\) He did not approach this subject in a remote, distant way, but with the experience of a transformed life.

**Kennedy’s Conversion**

Dr. Kennedy believed the gospel was the *dunameis* or “dynamite” of God.\(^5\) He possessed a strong conviction that it was the only reality that could save a person’s life. He came to this conclusion first by his experience. In a time of dissatisfaction with life, several events


\(^4\)D. James Kennedy and Jerry. Newcombe, *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?* (Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1994), 201. Kennedy writes, “But Jesus was born! And what a difference He made in my life. He came, and I know that God loves me. In sincerity, I can say to you that I love Him.”; D. James Kennedy, *Why I Believe* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1999), 163. He writes, “Most of all I believe in the new birth because I have experienced it. To this day I have friends from twenty-four years ago who do not know what happened to me. One moment there was a young man managing an Arthur Murray Dance Studio, his heart and affections fastened entirely upon the things of the world. Then suddenly, overnight, something happened: A new person was born and an old person died.”

\(^5\)D. James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion*, Rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1973). Preface., Though it does not technically mean “dynamite”, *dunameis* is the English transliteration of the Greek word most often translated “power”. Kennedy is referring to Paul’s use of this word in Romans 1:16, which reads as follows, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (ESV).
prepared him to hear and receive the gospel. One day, Anne, who was his girlfriend invited him to church. Mary Lou Davis records:

Jim laughed. ‘Church! I haven’t been to church since I was a little kid in Chicago’ . . . He threw back his shoulders and said in an authoritative voice, ‘You don’t have to go to church to be a good person.’ He cleared his throat and spoke as if from recitation. ‘You can be just as good a Christian without going to church.’ Anne pushed him, ‘Oh, no you can’t, Jim Kennedy,’ she said with her brows knit together and her mouth set in a tight frown of disapproval.  

Her adamant response rattled him, but he defended his position. However, her chastisement set him up for future consideration of eternal realities.

As he was still in this season of questioning, the radio woke Jim one day during the early afternoon. It was the voice of a radio preacher, so he moved quickly to turn it off. As he did, the messenger of God asked, “Young man, if you were to die tonight and stand before Almighty God and He asked you, ‘What right do you have to come into My Heaven?’ What would you say?” Through the air waves, Dr. Donald Gray Barnhouse refuted Jim’s reasons why God should let him into heaven. Finally, Barnhouse proclaimed that salvation was free and that God would give it to anyone that would ‘invite him into your life as Savior and Lord.  

Concerning the gospel, Jim chafed in unbelief, but this planted a seed in Jim’s heart, and he was not able to shake thoughts of eternity. This new interest moved him to read the book, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. In a short time, he consumed the book until he broke. Jim recalls:

When I completed the book, it seemed as if the Cross of Christ had been erected in my apartment and now I knew – for the first time – I knew why Christ was suffering there. I slipped out of my chair onto my knees and asked Christ to come into my heart and forgive me and cleanse me of my sins. From that day until this, my life has never been the same. I shall forever be grateful for the radio broadcast of Donald Gray Barnhouse and for this

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7Ibid., 57.

8Ibid., 58.
book by Fulton Oursler, both of which God used to bring me to a saving knowledge of His Son."

He began a new life as he prayed, “I’m sorry. . . Oh, God, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. I didn’t know what you had done for me. Forgive me. Forgive me . . . Come into my heart and never let me forget what you have done for me.” From this moment, Dennis James Kennedy served Jesus. He intuitively knew that he should attend church. During his first church experience since childhood, the pastor failed to preach from the Bible and Jim learned the pastor did not comprehend the truth any more than he did. As a result, he sought a more biblical church. The next week, he attended services and an evening Bible study. He had an insatiable desire for God’s Word and within a month he became the leader of the Bible study. The change was real.

The Birth of Evangelism Explosion

His conversion shaped him and his understanding of the gospel, but it would take other life experiences to build the gospel presentation for Evangelism Explosion. One such experience was a visit to Atlanta, Georgia. Kennedy had been serving at Coral Ridge Presbyterian for a few months, and attendance had dropped from the 50’s to 17. He was discouraged and needed a break. Providentially, a seminary friend invited Jim to lead evangelistic meetings in Atlanta. Jim was unaware of it, but this opportunity would change him and the course of his church radically.

Kennedy Smartt picked Jim up at the airport and reported that Jim would not only preach for ten days, but would go door-to-door to share the gospel with some of the city’s tough cases. Fear swept over him. Anxiety seized him. He was not excited. He slept little that night, but his prayer life abounded. The following morning, Smartt picked up Jim and their first visit was Hank, a bear-sized, intimidating man. Smartt introduced Jim as a professional evangelist. An


10Davis, The Truth That Transformed Me, 60.
intense pressure seized Jim with this introduction. He fumbled around his words, spewed out some theology and ultimately angered Hank. Helpfully, Smartt interrupted, calmed Hank down and shared the gospel to him in a way that Jim had never witnessed. It was not long before Hank prayed to receive Christ. For ten days, Jim watched him share the gospel until he was able to do it as well. This experience changed Jim, but he wondered if this would work at home.

It did! Kennedy returned to Florida with fresh zeal and a new skill to make an impact for the kingdom of God. After one month, on May 22, 1960, Jim preached to Coral Ridge’s sixty-six members.\(^{11}\) The presbytery could now recognize them as a church since they had fifty congregants. Jim regularly practiced the method he learned in Georgia. At first, he made visits alone. However, he soon recognized he needed help.\(^{12}\) As a consequence, he commenced to bring others with him. With others’ help, more could be accomplished for the kingdom.

Hoping to get more members involved and equipped, Jim developed a curriculum to teach evangelism. He first took mental notes of what he was saying during visits, and as he did, he noticed a general pattern. This pattern was the basis of the program. Jim thought the first class went well, but at the end of six weeks no one went out to share. These dismal results puzzled him.\(^{13}\) He decided to double the class length. Still, nobody went out to share their faith. In response, he doubled the course length, yet again. Indeed, this would give everyone the confidence needed to practice evangelism. Still nothing. Finally, one day he noticed a driver’s education car on the highway. The revelation Jim gained that moment still reverberates in Christendom today. The students needed hands-on experience. They required on-the-job training.\(^{14}\) Therefore, he implemented door-to-door visits after class meetings. The first outing was nothing short of spectacular. Jim and Anne, now his wife, both led groups. After a couple of

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\(^{11}\) Davis, *The Truth That Transformed Me*, 152.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 152.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 153.

hours of making calls, they returned to debrief. The excitement of the participants was immeasurable. The success was wonderful, and this was the birth of Evangelism Explosion.

**The Gospel Presentation of Evangelism Explosion**

Kennedy wrote *Evangelism Explosion* for the purpose of training others to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. His *Evangelism Explosion* training manual includes an outline of the gospel according to his understanding. Though his sermons and books regularly include these same points, this is the most succinct record of Kennedy’s gospel message. From the beginning until the present, the gospel presentation associated with Evangelism Explosion has been in the same format.\(^{15}\) Therefore, if one desires to learn his view of the gospel, this is the primary place to look. The outline includes five main points: grace, man, God, Christ, and faith.

**Grace**

Kennedy taught first that salvation was a gift. It was a result of God’s grace, and that those needing rescue could not earn it. He remarks, “All my life I felt exactly as you did. I thought if I was ever to get to heaven I’d have to earn it. I’d have to become good enough, and work for it and deserve it. And then I discovered something that absolutely amazed me. I discovered that according to the Bible, heaven is absolutely a free gift.”\(^{16}\) He based this portion upon Romans 6:23 and Ephesians 2:8-9 throughout his presentation.\(^{17}\) He thought grace was the vital context for the communication of the gospel, and if one did not understand grace, they would misunderstand everything else about Christ.

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\(^{17}\)For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord, (The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Romans 6:23; “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast, (The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ephesians 2:8–9.
In a sermon about grace, he describes it for his hearers, “Grace is that attitude in the heart of God that cause Him to be favorable toward wretches like you and me and all the rest of the wretches on this planet of wretches.”\textsuperscript{18} He wanted people to understand grace because it was rare and often misunderstood. He longed for many to know that grace was God’s undeserved favor and was not a right.\textsuperscript{19} Over and over, he preached this theme. He believed that grace was the most transformative power in life.\textsuperscript{20} God’s favor to man was the heart behind the gospel.

**Man**

Kennedy taught second that man was a sinner and was not capable of saving himself.

Man was a sinner and had made a “colossal mess” out of things. Kennedy defines sin below:

When we think of sin, many times we think only of robbery, murder, adultery, etc., but the Bible tells us that sin is anything that doesn’t please God or is a transgression of His law. Anything we do that we shouldn’t do, like losing our temper or stealing – these are sins of commission. Anything we should do, but don’t, like failing to pray or read the Bible, or to truly love our neighbor – these are sins of omission. There are not only sins in deed but also sins in word and thought, like lying, cursing, lust, pride, and hatred. The Bible says these are all sins.\textsuperscript{21}

Kennedy emphasized from Romans 3:23, “that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”. Man’s sin possessed duel aspects according to Kennedy. First, it was a legal issue before


\textsuperscript{20}Kennedy, “What's So Amazing About Grace?”

God. Man had broken God’s law and was infinitely guilty.22 Second, it was a moral issue. Man was polluted in his nature and did not want to please God his creator.23

In addition to the reality of sinfulness, the truth exists that a man cannot save himself. Kennedy referenced Jesus’ demand in Matthew 5:48 that his disciples “be perfect as the Father in heaven is perfect.” He argued that perfection was the only “passing grade” to get us into heaven and to make us right with God.24 Kennedy further describes the comprehensive way God articulates man’s inability in Scripture:

This is not an isolated text that might be interpreted in some other way, but this is something that is taught throughout the Bible. For example, Paul said, “Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.” If we don’t continually do everything that we are told to do, then we are under the curse of God. James puts it another way: “If we offend in one point we are guilty of all.”If we commit just onesin, wee step outside the realm of the law and become an outlaw. You don’t have to break every law in the book to be an outlaw and have the police looking for you; just one crime is all it takes to have a lot of policemen looking for us. One sin is all it takes to make us guilty and to make us an outlaw. Just one sin! Satan thought just one evil thought and because of that he was cast out of heaven.25

In the presentation of the gospel, Kennedy understood that one must know their helplessness. They could not change their condition, so they would need to look outside of themselves for an answer. He calls this solution an “entirely different way” which God originated and provided.26

God

Kennedy taught third that there are two important truths concerning the nature of God. First, God is merciful and loving. He taught that God was not willing that any would perish and


24Kennedy, Evangelism Explosion, 37.

25Ibid., 37.

26Ibid., 37.
did not want to punish mankind, even though man had rebelled against him. He argued from Scripture that God is love by emphasizing this teaching from 1 John 4:8. Kennedy taught the immensity of God’s love for humanity. However, there was more about God’s character.

Second, though God is loving and merciful, he is also holy and perfect. Flowing out of this perfection is God’s justice. He does not and cannot do anything that is unjust. Therefore, he cannot leave sin unpunished. Kennedy appeals to Exodus 34:7, which states that God “will by no means clear the guilty.” He elaborates on this reality as he speaks with Rene (Rene is the imaginary person to whom he presents the gospel in Evangelism Explosion):

God is loving, Rene, but wouldn’t you view with contempt a judge who was overtly lenient with offenders? If one were to “slap the wrist” of his friend who was guilty of a heinous crime, we would cry, “Impeach him! Justice must be preserved.” The teachings God emphasizes about Himself are that He is holy and just and must punish sin, but He is also loving and merciful and does not wish to punish us. In effect, this creates a problem, which He has solved in Jesus Christ.

Kennedy points to the problem of man’s sin in relationship to God’s holiness. This prepares for the good news and the solution provided by God in sending Jesus Christ to save sinners.

Christ

Kennedy taught fourth two vital doctrines about Jesus Christ. First, Jesus was the infinite God-Man. Kennedy presents this God-Man as the sole answer to man’s predicament. God sent Jesus, his only Son to earth as a man. He explains, “Jesus of Nazareth, the Carpenter of

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27 Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. (English Standard Version, Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), 1 John 4:8.

28 Kennedy, Evangelism Explosion, 40.


30 Ibid., 44.

Galilee was and is God! He is the Creator of the world! He is the One who created the whole universe! Jesus is God Almighty, himself!“32 He further articulates, “God the Son became man! This is what is meant by incarnation. This is what we celebrate at Christmas. He became man for a particular purpose.”33 He would be as Messiah the perfect representative and mediator between both God and man in his life, death, and resurrection.

Second, Jesus Christ died on the cross, rose from the dead to pay the penalty for our sins and to purchase a place for us in heaven.34 This second aspect focuses on what Jesus accomplished for sinners. He was perfect in his life. He was part of the essential “transaction” which is vital to Christianity.35 Kennedy highlights verses from Isaiah 53 and Romans 6 to support this point. He articulates that Jesus took the punishment due to sinners and purchased for them the gift of being right with God and the right to reside in heaven forever.36 In addition to dying on the cross, Kennedy teaches that Jesus is presently alive because God raised him from the dead. He calls this the “best-attested fact of human history.”37 He also writes, “We do not worship a dead Christ, but a living, glorious Savior. The most important reality in the history of mankind is that Jesus rose from the dead and is the Lord of life”.38 A final point that Kennedy makes is that Jesus has completed the work required to save sinners and that he offers it freely to all that will trust in him.39

32Ibid., 125.
33Kennedy, Evangelism Explosion, 42.
36Kennedy, Evangelism Explosion, 42; Kennedy, “‘Cur Deus Homo’”.
37Williams, D. James Kennedy., 127; Kennedy, Why I Believe., 129-42. In this chapter, Kennedy gives multiple evidences for his belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.
38Williams, D. James Kennedy., 127.
39Kennedy, Evangelism Explosion, 42.
Faith

Kennedy taught fifth the realities of faith, what it is not and what it is. He believed that it was necessary to delineate between false faith and saving faith. First, faith is not mere intellectual assent. In this case, Kennedy clarifies that possessing only a head knowledge of who Christ is cannot save. He pointed out that the demons believed that Jesus was who he said he was and yet were unconverted and condemned according to James 2:19.\(^{40}\) Genuine faith includes mental assent or cognitive agreement, but is not this alone.

Second, faith is not mere temporal faith. Here, Kennedy refers to the type of faith in God that primarily concerns temporal things or the things of the world that are passing away.\(^{41}\) He reveals the natural tendency to associate saving faith with the general hope in God for stuff rooted in this life. Kennedy agrees that this is a form of faith and even included in the life of a believer. However, this type of faith alone does not save.

Third, He taught about genuine faith as one trusting Jesus Christ alone for salvation. In describing the nature of saving faith, Kennedy uses a helpful illustration:

Jim: The chair: Let me illustrate. You see this chair here? A lovely chair, isn’t it?

Rene: Yes.

Jim: You believe that chair exists? Do you believe that it would hold me up?

Rene: Yes.

Jim: But, you see, it’s not holding me up for a very simple reason: I’m not sitting on it. Rene, how could I prove to you that I really trust that chair?

Rene: You would have to sit on it!

Jim: Right! That is the way I was with Christ. I believe Jesus existed. I believed He was divine. I trusted Him for finances, for health, and for travel . . . But you see, saving faith is trusting him for eternal life.\(^{42}\)

\(^{40}\)Williams, D. James Kennedy., 129; You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! (The Holy Bible: English Standard Version - Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), James 2:19.

\(^{41}\)Kennedy, Evangelism Explosion, 47.

His emphasis in the illustration is that true, saving faith involves a whole trust or complete reliance in Jesus Christ alone as Savior. This is the only type of faith that saves.

**Radical Conversion**

Dr. Kennedy understood conversion to be radical based on his experience and his study of Scripture. He believed in a clear presentation of the gospel that included certain truths, as articulated above. However, the gospel presentation itself does not reveal all the biblical and theological constructs that shaped and undergirded his grasp of conversion.

Though, Dr. Kennedy did not make it his practice to preach Calvinism from the pulpit at Coral Ridge, it is important to realize his general subscription to a Reformed view of salvation. This is evident in Coral Ridge Presbyterian’s adoption of the Westminster Confession of Faith as its confessional standard for biblical doctrine. These convictions surfaced regularly in his ministry, especially his sermons and books. As a Reformed Presbyterian, he follows this tradition’s historical formulation of the *order saludis* pertaining to conversion. This explanation of salvation’s order includes a robust view of the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man, which drove Kennedy’s evangelistic zeal for the salvation of souls and the glory of God.

Kennedy’s most systematic treatment of these doctrines is the work, *Truths That Transform*. In this volume, he presents his understanding of the following: the sovereignty of God, the free will of man, predestination, effectual calling, repentance, faith, justification, sanctification, adoption, assurance of salvation, good works, perseverance of the saints, hell,

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heaven and the Bible. Using this book as a guideline along with reference to his sermons and other similar titles, one can ascertain with near certainty Kennedy’s view of conversion.

**God is Sovereign**

God’s sovereignty, which is God’s control over all things, fashioned the life and ministry of Dr. Kennedy. He considered it to be vital to the transformation of believers as he covers it first in his book, *Truths That Transform*. He argues for God’s control below:

According to Scripture, God controls everything from the mightiest galaxy to the most infinitesimal atom. He controls the angels in heaven, the inhabitants of earth, and the kings and fortunes of nations. He raises them up and casts them down . . . God sets up nations and sets the basest men to rule over them. God controls planets and nations as well as dumb beasts of the earth. . . . God controls the free acts of men. . . . It is only God who can change the human heart. . . . There is no group of men who could oppose, frustrate, or limit any purpose of God.

God’s power and control informed Kennedy’s approach to all things including conversion. He believed that all people without exception should hear the gospel. However, he equally believed that God must act upon and in them in a powerful, radical way if they were to be saved.

**Man’s Free Will**

Kennedy often concluded his sermons or writings with a phrase such as, “The choice is yours.” These regular calls for a response reveal Kennedy’s belief that man had the

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45 Kennedy, *Truths That Transform*, Table of Contents.

46 Ibid., 15-28.

47 Ibid., 18-20.


49 Kennedy, “The Uniqueness of Christ”, Dr Kennedy preaches, "You will either accept Him, the Savior God as your own, or you will continue trusting in what you are trusting in now-and I will tell you exactly what that is; It is yourself, and you will do that right into Hell forever. Which will it be - the God of all grace or self of all sin. The choice is yours"; Kennedy, “What About Those Who Have Never Heard?”, In this sermon, Dr. Kennedy
responsibility to choose Christ. However, he did not believe that man possessed libertarian free will. He was more comfortable with the language that man was a “free agent” or “free soul” because one’s will does not act separate from other faculties. On this subject, he argued along the same lines as Martin Luther, which taught that man was free to do all that he wants to do, but not necessarily what he ought to do. In this regard Kennedy writes, “Man ought to love God, repent of his sins, by faith embrace Jesus Christ. Man ought to love the commandments of God, desire a holy life, love purity, holiness, righteousness. Man ought to strive for all these things. However, the Bible makes it clear that every man is not free to do what he ought to do”

articulates the invitation to all men, "Therefore, the light of Christ is not extended to everyone, but is to be offered to the whole world. Thus we see the exclusivity of the Gospel, but also its inclusiveness as well, because no one is kept our because of his race or color, because of his social status, because of his education or lack of it. Everyone is invited to come. There is no difference. All may come and find mercy at the hands of Christ."; D. James Kennedy, “If Christ Had Not Come” (sermon preached at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Ft. Lauderdale, FL, March 19, 2000) "The Timeless Works of D. James Kennedy", accessed November 3, 2014, http://www.djameskennedy.com/SitePlanner/Timeless%20pdfs/if%20christ%20had%20not%20come_djk20150a.pdf, Dr. Kennedy encourages his hearers to pray, "Lord Jesus Christ, come into my heart right now. I receive you as Lord and Savior. I repent of my sins and my rebellion, and from this day forward it is my desire to follow Thee."; Kennedy, “Cur Deus Homo”, Dr. Kennedy declares, "Ah, dear one, how shall you pay? Ah, guilty one, how shall you pay this debt? Thou hast nothing to pay and shalt be cast into the prison house of sin and death and Hell until thou hast paid all, or else you shall bow before the God-man who paid it for you."; D. James Kennedy, “Why the World Needs Christ” (sermon preached at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Ft. Lauderdale, FL, December 1, 1996) "The Timeless Works of D. James Kennedy", accessed November 3, 2014, http://www.djameskennedy.com/SitePlanner/Timeless%20pdfs/why%20the%20world%20needs%20christ_djk19648a.pdf, Dr. Kennedy proclaims, "So I would ask you who have received much light . . . have you truly surrendered to Christ? Have you truly repented of your sins? Have you truly trusted Him as your Savior? Have you ever really been lost? Do you know that you have really been found?"; D. James Kennedy, Truths That Transform, 27, Dr. Kennedy writes, "If you've never received Jesus, then I urge you to examine yourself and see your utter helplessness . . . "; Kennedy, Why I Believe, 167–68, In the chapter about the new birth, Dr. Kennedy addresses the reader, "Would you be born anew? There has never been a person who sought for the new birth who did not find it"; D. James Kennedy, Beginning Again (Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Coral Ridge Ministries, 2002), 2, In this book, Dr. Kennedy addresses the reader with the following statement, “You have made the most important decision anyone can make! You have decided to receive Jesus Christ as your own Lord and Savior and have begun a new and exciting adventure.

D. James Kennedy, Truths That Transform., 23.

Ibid., 24–6; Martin Luther, J. I. Packer, and O. R. Johnston, The Bondage of the Will (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1957). In this volume, Luther is writing against the humanism of Erasmus and libertarian free will. Luther argues that man does have the responsibility to choose. However, man always chooses what he wants and in a fallen condition, man will always choose sin over God.

summary, man is in bondage to his fallen, sinful desires. Good and bad options are available, but the natural man desires only and always the evil and unrighteous.

Predestination

Predestination is perhaps one of the most controversial concepts in the Bible. It is often heavily disputed among Christians. However, it was not a dispute for Dr. Kennedy, though he understood faithful men interpreted it differently throughout history. Nevertheless, he described Calvinism, in general, as “pre-eminently” biblical. Kennedy argued that one must believe in predestination if one believes the Bible. He used predestination and election interchangeably for the concept that God chose certain ones out of the fallen human race for salvation. He claimed that God’s choice was free and not based on any reason or cause in mankind. Kennedy writes, “...And that, my friends, is election and predestination. That God looked down from all eternity upon a world of sinners and decided to extend mercy to a vast number of people whom no man can number and in their appointed time He extended mercy, not because of anything foreseen in them but entirely and totally because of what God was. . . the God of all grace.” For him, this was a clear expression of God’s sovereignty. Without this freedom of choice, God was not God.

Effectual Calling

If man’s condition is that of bondage, then he is in need of a deliverance. Kennedy expressed this truth with the phrase “effectual calling.” He precisely delineates between two callings of God; one that is effectual and one that is not. In other words, God calls all men to do what they ought, “to repent and believe in Christ”. However, many do not heed this call because

53 Kennedy, “Why I Am a Presbyterian”.
54 D. James Kennedy, Truths That Transform., 32.
55 Ibid., 35.
they love sin and hate God. In contrast, there is a call effective in the lives of the elect, also called “irresistible grace or efficacious grace.” On this matter, Kennedy appeals to the Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter X:

All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed time, effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ: enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh: renewing their wills, and, by His almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace. This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.

Kennedy’s understanding of the human condition and free agency moved him toward compatibilism. Compatibilists teach that the Spirit of God does an inward work on the soul of man through the application of the Word of God and, as a result, men come freely to Christ by their newly liberated will. Kennedy further describes the effectual calling with the language of regeneration or the new birth, “We are begotten by God. We are created anew. . . . We are the objects, and God is the subject. Regeneration is something God does to us with His almighty

56 Ibid., 44, Kennedy writes, “There is the outer calling which is merely the Word unaccompanied by the Holy Spirit. When I say in the name of Jesus Christ that He declares, ‘Come unto me and I will give you life,’ that’s an outward, external calling by the Word. If someone should respond to that calling, they would receive eternal life because God will refuse no one. ‘. . . Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.’ . . . But there is a problem. Man in his fallen condition (natural, unregenerate man) is so bound by sin and blinded by his iniquity that he desires to have nothing to do with the holy God because his heart is at enmity with God.

57 Ibid., 45.


59 Justin Taylor, “We Are All Compatibilists at the Cross | TGC,” accessed December 14, 2014, http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2013/06/17/we-are-all-compatibilists-at-the-cross, Taylor writes, ''D. A. Carson provides a good introduction when he argues that the following two propositions are both taught and exemplified in the Bible: 1) God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in Scripture to reduce human responsibility. 2) Human beings are responsible creatures—that is, they choose, they believe, they disobey, they respond, and there is moral significance in their choices; but human responsibility never functions in Scripture to diminish God’s sovereignty or to make God absolutely contingent; For a more thorough treatment of compatibilism see D. A. Carson, Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981).
power. The agent is the Holy Spirit, and the instrument is the Word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ.” As a result, Kennedy called men to repentance and faith, but was praying that God would send the Spirit to draw them into the kingdom.

**Repentance and Faith**

Kennedy stressed repentance and faith in every aspect of his ministry. He called these two truths of Scripture “inseparable.” There would not be genuine faith without repentance and no genuine repentance without faith. He considered these graces or gifts, but that man was active in both. He contended that the necessary result of the effectual call was repentance and faith. He gives a description of repentance and faith in the following:

> We must intellectually grasp that sin, because of its heinousness, will inevitably be punished by God. We must also intellectually grasp and understand the divine remedy for sin. We must come to know the way of salvation as it has been divinely appointed by God and must not be deluded by some false plan of salvation of our own making. We must understand it is only through Christ, His grace, and death on the cross that we have eternal hope. But even understanding will not be sufficient. It must go beyond the mind to the heart, to the affection.

It is important to remember Kennedy taught that repentance and faith were man’s response to the gospel, though he believed repentance and faith to be gifts of grace in the ultimate sense. In other words, he found that it was man’s choice to make. However, in order to choose that particular option, the new birth or the effectual calling was necessary to liberate man’s will from the tyranny of sin. In addition, he saw faith as the means by which one was made right with God.

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60 Kennedy, *Why I Believe.*, 166.
62 Ibid., 46.
63 Ibid., 65.
64 Kennedy, “Justification By Faith Or Faith Plus Works”, Justification by works is the first religion that exists. The antithesis to that is Christianity. Christianity says that we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ alone. Paul gives his great summary of the Gospel in the third chapter of Romans, and he finally concludes it with these words: ‘Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law’ (Romans 3:28); Kennedy, *Beginning Again*, 5.
**Justification**

Dr. Kennedy knew that man’s problem with God was two-fold. First, there was trouble with man’s will because it was naturally captive to sin. Second, man had violated God’s law and was now eternally guilty by the standard of God’s holiness. Man lacks righteousness before God. Regeneration frees man’s will, but does not remove guilt nor provide the perfect righteousness that God requires. In Kennedy’s thought process, one’s faith in Jesus Christ alone triggered God’s action of declaring one “not guilty.”

He realized the significance of clarity on this doctrine. Therefore, he elaborated on the nature of justification, “Let me say that it does not mean to make holy: it does not mean to make virtuous; it does not mean that it makes you good. You are no better the moment after you are justified than you were the moment before. . . . We are justified as ungodly sinners. God justifies the ungodly.” He considered it vital for one to understand that justification was more than mere forgiveness, but the declaration by God of one righteous based upon the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. In his presentation of the gospel, Kennedy assures those trusting in Christ that their sin has been forever dealt with by Jesus’ completed work.

**Hell**

Though many professing Christians and preachers have speculated about the existence of hell, Kennedy did not. His view of biblical authority would not allow him to undermine the clear witness of Scripture. He realized the hatred and unpopular nature of this subject, but

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65Kennedy, *Truths That Transform*, 79

66Ibid., 77.

67Ibid., 78.


preached it because of its importance. He knew that without the backdrop of hell, the presentation of the gospel would not have its desired impact. One’s doctrine of hell can either make the gospel the only hope or make it of little value.

He argued the existence of hell from three angles. First, he states that the Bible explicitly says in multiple ways that the unbeliever will “go into endless punishment.” Second, he believes that man’s moral nature demands it. He teaches this based on the general recognition of right and wrong, as well as the desire to reward good behavior and punish evil behavior. Third, he highlights the message of Jesus. He maintained that though most consider Jesus to be a mild, almost neutral person, it was Jesus that spoke of hell more than any other person in Scripture. Convinced that hell was real and that unsaved persons would be sent there, Kennedy was active in sharing the gospel with those needing rescue.

Heaven

If the reality of hell motivated Kennedy to share the gospel, the existence of heaven moved him in a different way. He saw enduring punishment in a Christless eternity as something one should avoid and that heaven was a delight to gain. As seen, above, the right to be in heaven was purchased once for all by Jesus Christ. He describes several realities of heaven.

70Kennedy, 121. Kennedy calls hell the most unpopular subject in the world.
71Kennedy, Why I Believe., 74-5.
72Ibid., 75.
73Ibid., 75-6.
75Kennedy, Why I Believe., 70.
First, the saved have glorified bodies like Jesus’ after the resurrection. Second, it is a place where we will grow continuously in knowledge. Third, there will be no sorrow or pain. Fourth, there will be no sin or rebellion against God. Fifth, there is complete, unchanging security. The joys of heaven cannot be lost or become undiminished. Sixth, there will be a reunion of believing loved ones. Heaven was a joy to preach, therefore Kennedy was excited to offer this gift to anyone who would trust in Christ alone as savior.

The Bible

The Word of God is the bedrock of all that Dr. Kennedy believed. Were it not for his tireless commitment to the Scriptures, all else crumbles. He knew the Bible to be the Word of God because it makes that claim within its pages. His point here is that Christians claim nothing more than what the Scriptures declare. Kennedy recognizes that making a claim and that claim being true are two distinct matters. Therefore, he argues that the Bible demonstrates that it is, in fact, the Word of God based upon the multitude fulfilled prophesies. He also defends the Scriptures’ truthfulness by the changed lives it produced, including his. He unequivocally stood upon the testimony of God’s Word.

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76 Kennedy, Truths That Transform., 130.
77 Ibid., 131.
78 Ibid., 131.
79 Ibid., 131-2.
80 Ibid., 132.
81 Ibid., 132-3.
82 Kennedy, Why I Believe., 71.
83 Kennedy, Truths That Transform., 136.
84 Ibid., 138-153.
A Summary Description

Based on the investigation of Dr. Kennedy’s theology, one could conclude that he understood conversion from two perspectives. The first is narrow. One could call it man’s perspective. Christians are called, according to Scripture, to preach the gospel to all men. All men are responsible for repenting and believing in order to be saved from hell and given heaven as a gift.

The second perspective is broad in that it includes more of the story. One could say this is God’s view. In this case, man must be enabled by the power of God in order to repent and believe. Upon trusting in Christ, man is justified by the finished work of Christ completed on behalf of the elect. Kennedy did not include the more broad aspect in his gospel outline, but he knew what was necessary if anyone was to trust Jesus Christ. Though not part of a gospel conversation with an unbeliever, Dr. Kennedy did not shrink back from these deep truths with his congregation because he valued their importance for growth and security in the Christian life.

A Hero to Emulate

It is a privilege to study significant men in the history of the church. The life of Dr. D. James Kennedy does not disappoint. In his approach to service, there are lessons to learn and practices to imitate. With that in mind, there are three main areas that one should note from Kennedy’s understanding of the gospel and conversion: balance, zeal, and faithfulness.

Balance

Kennedy held tenaciously to various doctrines that many assume to be contradictory. He grasped such truths as God’s sovereignty/man’s responsibility, heaven/hell, and salvation by grace/necessity of good works with the essential balance. Carl Trueman warns about imbalances in theology with the following question, “When do the particular useful insights which they bring to bear upon particular situations become not simply insights but overwhelming and exclusive ideologies which prevent them from seeing wider realities and which fundamentally
distort their perception of, and responses to, reality?"85 The danger is to overemphasize one particular doctrine to the detriment or demise of another, which results in a distorted view of both truths. Kennedy teaches observers to preach what Scripture says in all things and to maintain the mysteries or paradoxes of the Christian faith.

**Zeal**

Often, men relegate their understanding of the Scriptures to abstractions and mere objective understanding. The life of Dr. D. James Kennedy was not an abstraction. As witnessed above he believed in the importance of the Great Commission for the whole church, but that included him. Therefore, he and Anne made it their practice to share the gospel when they went out on a date. He led Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in training thousands for evangelism.86 It was the lay evangelists of Coral Ridge that taught pastors in the Evangelism Explosion seminars, because Kennedy believed insistently that they were able to do so. For him, Christianity was not some part of his life, but it was his life. As a result, he was zealous to see the kingdom of God advance.87

**Faithfulness**

There are two aspects of faithfulness one should observe in the life and ministry of Dr. Kennedy: biblical faithfulness and practical faithfulness. As noted previously, Dr. Kennedy valued the authority of Scripture and took seriously the concept of orthodoxy. He desired to


86Tom Stebbins, *D. James Kennedy’s Explosion of Evangelism: The Evangelism Explosion Ministry: Past, Present, and Future* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Evangelism Explosion International Pub., 2002). This entire volume highlights the growth and expansion of Evangelism Explosion, the organization established to train the church to evangelize.

develop a Christian worldview from the Bible. In this regard, his understanding of the gospel and conversion fit within a conservative evangelical, Protestant and Reformed framework. Though many would not agree with his conclusions, he is safely within the confines of historic Christianity and orthodox doctrine. He held to the truth tenaciously, without fear. His conscientious commitment to truth allowed him to maintain his orthodox beliefs, though he partnered with others that were more broad in their beliefs.  

88 He was biblically faithful.

In addition to biblical faithfulness, Dr. Kennedy continued in practical faithfulness. Dr. Albert Mohler succinctly describes him, “A theological conservative; he led Coral Ridge into the young Presbyterian Church in America in the 1970’s and was highly involved in a host of evangelical causes. He defended biblical inerrancy and the doctrine of justification. He believed in the need for sinners to come to Christ, and called persons to come to Christ by faith”.  

89 He held certain convictions concerning the gospel, and acted on them. He believed in evangelism and consistently did it personally. He believed that every believer should evangelize and sought to train them through Evangelism Explosion. He believed that parents should train their children in the truth of the gospel, so he began Westminster Academy.  

90 He believed that politicians should know the gospel, so he established the Center for Christian Statesmanship.  

91 He believed that the gospel should be applied to all of life, so he started Truth in Action Ministries.  

92 He believed it was vital to train men how to preach the gospel, so he founded Knox Theological


90 Williams, D. James Kennedy., 205-13


92 Ibid., 199.
Seminary. All this, he did while pastoring Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church for 48 years. He was not one to sit back and pontificate theologically apart from action. His orthodoxy in belief led him to orthopraxy in life.

**Conclusion**

Dr. D. James Kennedy experienced the reality of the gospel and conversion long before he could articulate it plainly. His experience of the truth began a life long journey to know Jesus and to make him known. Armed with a biblical understanding of the gospel and a passion for the glory of God, Dr. Kennedy worked with an unyielding resolve to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, which he did by beginning where he was. Doing it where he was, in essence, is his greatest contribution to God’s kingdom. He believed the good news concerning Jesus Christ should be shared, and he shared it. And not only that, he helped the Church universal share it, as well.

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