

Is Theology Important in Evangelism?

Theology should have a major role in everything we do as Christians. What is theology? Literally, it means “the study of God”. We use it here to refer to one’s understanding of the teachings of the Bible. God’s word should be our only authoritative guide on how to engage in the work of evangelism.

I. ARMINIANISM VS. CALVINISM

One’s theology greatly affects both the message and the method of evangelism. The theology of Arminianism is more man-centered whereas the theology of Calvinism is uniquely God-centered.

A. Differences in the message of evangelism. There are important contrasts between a man-centered and God-centered gospel. Will Metzger, in his book Tell the Truth, p. 32-33, gives a helpful chart to show the contrasts in gospel content. It has been adapted below.

| <u>MAN-CENTERED</u> | <u>GOD-CENTERED</u> |
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| <p><i>View of God:</i> Point of contact with non-Christians is the love of God (God loves you). God’s authority is secondary.</p> <p>Love is God’s chief attribute.</p> <p>God is impotent before the sinner’s will.</p> <p>God desires to save all but does not have the power to actually save any.</p> <p>God is a friend who will help you.</p> | <p><i>View of God:</i> Point of contact with non-Christians is creation (God made you). God has authority over your life.</p> <p>Holiness and love are equally important attributes of God.</p> <p>God is able to empower the sinner’s will.</p> <p>God has chosen to save some and will bring them to Christ.</p> <p>God is a King who will save you.</p> |
| <p><i>View of Man:</i> Fallen, sinful, yet able to choose Christ.</p> <p>Seeks truth but lacks correct facts.</p> <p>Needs more info and motivation to change.</p> <p>Makes mistakes, is imperfect, needs forgiveness and salvation.</p> <p>Man is spiritually sick and ignorant.</p> | <p><i>View of Man:</i> Fallen, sinful, & unable to choose Christ.</p> <p>Mind is enmity vs God, none seeks Him.</p> <p>Needs a new heart and nature, regeneration.</p> <p>Rebels against God, has a sinful nature and needs reconciliation and salvation.</p> <p>Man is spiritually dead and lost.</p> |

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| <p>View of Christ: Savior from unhappiness, mistakes, hell.</p> <p>Our salvation and happiness is His ultimate goal.</p> <p>His death was more important than His life.</p> <p>Emphasizes only His priestly office as Savior.</p> <p>Submission to Christ’s Lordship is optional for salvation.</p> <p>View of Response to Christ: Invitation waiting to be accepted now.</p> <p>Salvation is our choice; God responds to our decision.</p> <p>We decide for Christ when we give mental assent to the truths of gospel.</p> <p>Appeals are made to motivate the human desires of the sinner.</p> <p>Saved by faith alone, repentance is viewed as a “work”.</p> <p>Assurance of salvation is immediate and based on promises of God.</p> <p>Sinners must open the door for Christ to enter their hearts.</p> | <p>View of Christ: Savior from sin and sinful nature.</p> <p>His glory and kingdom is His ultimate goal.</p> <p>His death and life of obedience are equally important.</p> <p>Emphasizes his priestly, kingly, and prophetic offices.</p> <p>An attitude of submission to Christ’s Lordship is necessary for salvation.</p> <p>View of Response to Christ: Loving command to be obeyed now.</p> <p>Salvation is God’s choice; we respond to His gospel as He grants us faith.</p> <p>We respond with our whole person (mind, heart, will).</p> <p>Truths are driven home to conscience of the sinner about his state before God.</p> <p>Saved by faith alone, saving faith is always accompanied by repentance.</p> <p>Assurance of salvation comes from the HS applying biblical promises to conscience and effecting a changed life.</p> <p>God must open the sinner’s heart to enable them to believe in Christ.</p> |
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J. I. Packer helps us to understand the changes that occur when we leave a God-centered gospel for the Arminian gospel that denies depravity, election, limited atonement, and effectual grace.

“The result of these omissions is that part of the biblical gospel is now preached as if it were the whole of that gospel; and a half-truth masquerading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth. Thus, we appeal to men as if they all had the ability to receive Christ at any time; we speak of His redeeming work as if He had done no more by dying than making it possible for us to save ourselves by believing; we speak of God’s love as if it were no more than the general willingness to receive any who will turn and trust; and we depict the Father and Son, not as sovereignly acting and drawing sinners to themselves, but as waiting in quiet impotence “at the door of our hearts” for us to let them in. . . . But it needs to be said with emphasis that this set of twisted half-truths is something other than the biblical gospel. The Bible is against us when we preach in this way; and the fact that

such preaching has become almost standard practice among us only shows how urgent it is that we should review this matter. To recover the old, authentic, biblical gospel, and to bring our preaching and practice back into line with it, is perhaps our most pressing present need.” *Introductory Essay to John Owen’s The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* , pp. 2-3.

To expand on the differences between these two gospels, consider the different approaches they have to the issue of man’s sin. “Man centered evangelism is not radical enough in its opposition to sinful human nature,” Will Metzger says and then follows this statement with a quote from Tozer,

“The new cross does not slay the sinner; it redirects him. It gears him into a cleaner and jollier way of living and saves his self-respect. . . It misses completely the whole meaning of the cross. The cross is a symbol of death. It stands for the abrupt, violent end of a person. God salvages the individual by liquidating him and then raising him to newness of life. . . [The sinner] must repudiate himself and concur in God’s just sentence against him. . . He must forsake his sins and then go on to forsake himself. Let him cover nothing, defend nothing, excuse nothing. Let him not seek to make terms with God, but let him bow his head before the stroke of God’s stern displeasure and acknowledge himself worthy to die.” (Tell the Truth, p. 39).

J.I. Packer has also expressed the above contrast well, when he wrote in his “Introductory Essay to John Owen’s *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*” ,

“The new gospel conspicuously fails to produce deep reverence, deep repentance, deep humility, a spirit of worship, a concern for the church. Why? We would suggest that the reason lies in its own character in content. It fails to make men God-centered in their thoughts and God-fearing in their hearts because this is not primarily what it is trying to do. One way of stating the difference between it and the old gospel is to say that it is too exclusively concerned to be “helpful” to man - to bring peace, comfort, happiness, satisfaction - and too little concerned to glorify God. The old gospel was “helpful” too - more so, indeed, than is the new - but (so to speak) incidentally, for its first concern was always to give glory to God. It was always and essentially a proclamation of divine sovereignty in mercy and judgment, a summons to bow down and worship the mighty Lord on whom man depends for all good, both in nature and in grace. Its center of reference was unambiguously God. But in the new Gospel the center of reference is man. This is just to say that the old gospel was *religious* in a way that the new gospel is not. Whereas the chief aim of the old was to teach men to worship God, the concern of the new seems limited to making them feel better. The subject of the old gospel was God and His ways with men; the subject of the new is man and the help God gives him. There is a world of difference. The whole perspective and emphasis of gospel preaching has change.”

B. Differences in the method of evangelism. One’s theology will also drastically affect the method of doing evangelism. Bill Nichols has given a helpful chart in his *Evangelism Outreach Teacher’s Training Manual* of the contrast in the methods used in man-centered and God-centered evangelism. Below is a modified version.

| <u>MAN-CENTERED</u> | <u>GOD-CENTERED</u> |
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| <p>Methods: make converts Get them to verbally agree with certain facts or “laws”.</p> <p>Work through a simple step-by-step presentation of the gospel in one sitting</p> <p>Emphasize the blessings: abundant life, forgiveness, heaven, eternal life, while at the same</p> | <p>Methods: faithful presentation Teach them the whole gospel clearly and forcefully.</p> <p>Repeatedly communicate the truths of the gospel over a period of time.</p> <p>Teach them the importance of counting the cost of following Christ and to surrender all to Him, as</p> |

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| <p>time downplay sin and obedience.</p> <p>Use an outward physical sign to confirm an inward spiritual reality, i.e. signing a card, raising a hand, going forward, repeating a prayer.</p> <p>Get them to ask Jesus into their heart as the essence of getting saved.</p> <p>Do whatever is necessary to get them to choose God and make a decision for Christ.</p> <p>Makes use of stirring music, celebrity testimonies, performances of worldly artists, drama, emotional appeals to cause a decision.</p> <p>Give them immediate assurance based on their decision and/or outward physical sign.</p> <p>GOAL: decisions, mental assent. immediate responses by repeating a prescribed prayer. In essence: to make converts.</p> | <p>well as the benefits of salvation.</p> <p>Counsel them to seek God for salvation with all their heart. Teach them that it is not outward acts that save, but Jesus Christ. Go to Him.</p> <p>Teach them the meaning of true faith and repentance.</p> <p>Show them their need for God's mercy to believe the gospel for God would be just to condemn them.</p> <p>Relies on the power of the gospel and the Holy Spirit to convict and convince sinners of their sin and need of Christ.</p> <p>Teach them the biblical means of assurance: inner witness of the HS and the objective evidence of a changed life.</p> <p>GOAL: Disciples wholeheartedly committed to Christ, genuine conversion, no manipulation of decisions. Faithful presentation of gospel trusting God to save Whom He will.</p> |
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J. I. Packer reminds us that if our goal is to make converts then “our approach to evangelism would become pragmatic and calculating. Techniques would become ends in themselves But it is not right when we take it on us to do more than God has given us to do. It is not right when we regard ourselves as responsible for securing converts, and look to our own enterprise and techniques to accomplish what only God can accomplish. To do that is to intrude ourselves into the office of the Holy Spirit, to exalt ourselves as the agents of the New Birth - thus: only by letting our knowledge of God's sovereignty control the way in which we plan, and pray, and work in His service, can we avoid becoming guilty of this fault.” *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* , pp. 27-29.

II. EVANGELISM AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD.

What is evangelism? Simply put, evangelism is the “preaching of the gospel”. In Greek, the word “evangel” means the gospel or good news about the crucified and risen Christ. Evangelism is not winning converts. The salvation of sinners is the *result* of evangelism not the work of evangelism. In evangelism we communicate the gospel with the goal of bringing sinners to Christ. But whether it succeeds or not, the work of evangelism is in proclaiming the gospel to unbelievers.

The reformed understanding of the sovereignty of God and evangelism are very much compatible. See J. I Packer's book, [Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God](#).

The doctrine of God's sovereignty in choosing whom He will save (unconditional election) does not discourage evangelism. In fact, it is a very valuable doctrine to aid us in this work.

A. The value of the doctrine of election in evangelism.

- 1) We will place a faithful witness to the gospel over results.
- 2) We will not manipulate “decisions” because we know that God must and will give faith to His elect.
- 3) We labor in faith and hope knowing that God’s elect will come to Christ and trust that God will lead us to them in time.
- 4) Our responsibility is not in saving souls, but in giving a faithful presentation of the truths of the gospel. The burden for actually saving a sinner is not ours but God’s.
- 5) We can pray for the salvation of others with confidence knowing that God will save some (Jn. 6:37).
- 6) Our desire for results is high (Rom. 9:1-3; 10:1), but we submit to the mysterious and sovereign will of God.
- 7) We do not shy away from talking about sin and judgment and hell knowing that this is part of the gospel and that God will cause it to bear fruit in the hearts of the elect.
- 8) We rely on God’s Spirit to change the heart and will of the sinner and not our method, technique, or abilities of persuasion.

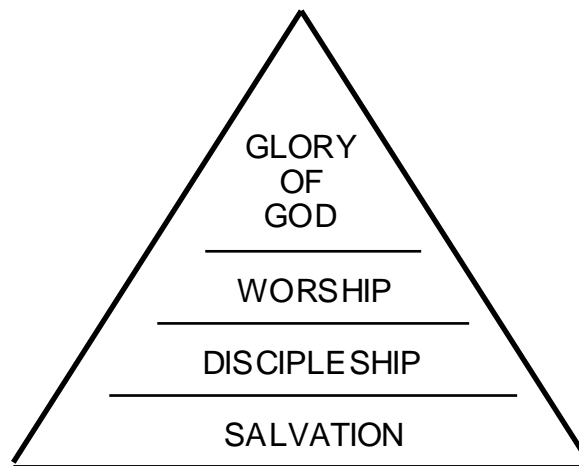
B. The doctrine of election is consistent with evangelistic zeal.

- 1) God has freely chosen to save His elect through the means of preaching (Rom. 10:14-15).
- 2) Our sovereign God commands the church to take the gospel to the world. We believe in the universal proclamation of the gospel.
- 3) We also believe in the free offer of the gospel (Isa. 55:1; Rev. 22:17). We place the responsibility to believe on the sinner while directing him to God for grace to believe. Salvation is freely offered and granted on the condition of faith in Christ. This is a real and sincere offer of the gospel, “IF YOU BELIEVE, you shall be saved.”
- 4) We are held responsible to obey the commands of God. We should seek to cultivate in our hearts a zeal for evangelism. Read Acts 4:29 where a prayer for boldness is made.
- 5) Evangelism is the proclamation of the gospel to the unbeliever and is not measured by results.

III. WHAT IS OUR GOAL IN EVANGELISM?

The ultimate goal of evangelism is not the salvation of sinners. This is certainly “a goal” but not the highest goal. There are at least three goals of evangelism above that of the salvation of sinners.

THE GOALS OF EVANGELISM



The salvation of sinners is not the ultimate goal of the Christian life just as child-birth is not the ultimate goal of parents. Rather, it is only the beginning. Evangelism is the process by which God births new souls into His kingdom but the show does not stop there, the curtain does not drop. The goal of it all is ultimately the worship and glorification of God. The great job of the church is therefore not just evangelism unto salvation but much more: discipleship, worship and the glory of God.

“Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exist because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.” John Piper

“Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal in missions. It’s the goal of missions because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God’s glory. The goal of missions is the gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God. ‘The Lord reigns; let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!’ (Ps. 97:1). ‘Let the peoples praise Thee, O God; let all the peoples praise Thee! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy!’ (Ps. 67:3-4).”

But worship is also the fuel of missions. Passion for God in worship precedes the offer of God in preaching. You can’t commend what you don’t cherish.” John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, p. 11.

HOMEWORK:

Take each of the 5 points and list how you think they would impact both the message and method of evangelism.

Read J. I. Packer’s *Introductory Essay to John Owen’s The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. What would you say is the greatest difference between the old and new gospels?

The Altered Call: The Dangers of the Invitation System

"I am going to ask you to come forward. Up there - down there - I want you to come. You come right now, quickly. If you are with friends or relatives, they will wait for you. Don't let distance keep you from Christ. It's a long way, but Christ went all the way to the cross because He loved you. Certainly you can come these few steps and give your life to Him . . ." - *a typical example of an invitation from Billy Graham.*

"Sometimes we are inclined to think that a very great portion of modern revivalism has been more a curse than a blessing, because it has led thousands to a kind of peace before they have known their misery; restoring the prodigal to the Father's house, and never making him say, 'Father, I have sinned.'" *Charles Spurgeon*

"American Protestantism is characterized by a peculiar evil which I may describe by the term 'spurious revivalism.' . . . The common mischief resulting from all its forms is the over-hasty reception into the communion of the churches, of multitudes of persons whom time proves to have experienced no spiritual change. . . . Many churches are loaded down with dead members." *Robert L. Dabney*

The hymn, Just As I Am, was written in 1836 by Charlotte Elliott, who wrote this hymn for the infirm and invalid, not for those walking down an aisle. (John Julian, A Dictionary of Hymnology, p. 609).

"Dear friends, we know that souls are not won by music, if they were, it would be time for preachers to give way to opera singers." *Charles Spurgeon*

I. INTRODUCING THE PROBLEM

It might be helpful to start with a definition of the *invitation system*. It is commonly understood to refer to any organized method that requires people to make an outward response to a gospel presentation. This response can be of any kind but usually it is a call to come forward during an invitation for salvation. It is also known as "the altar call", "going down the aisle", "the anxious bench", or in older terms, "hitting the old sawdust trail". This system was first used by the early Methodists in this country, but was quickly perfected and polished by Charles Finney (1792-1875).

The *invitation system* is a fabricated and confusing distortion of God's *invitation* [or the Gospel Commanding Call]. It has only been in operation since the 1800's and yet it has become so commonplace that many today equate "coming to faith" with "coming down an aisle." An example will illustrate this point. Jim Ehrhard, a reformed pastor, recounts an experience he had early in his ministry when he believed in an invitation system. He said, "I once made the 'mistake' of closing a Wednesday evening service without extending a public invitation. Early the next morning, an irate husband came to my office. For the first time in years, his unsaved wife had come with him to church. 'If you had only given an invitation,' he angrily explained, 'she would have gone down the aisle.' In this man's opinion, "I had missed the opportune time, and if she never came to Christ, I would have to bear her damnation on my conscience for eternity."

In a nutshell, we have replaced a biblical understanding of God's *invitation* with man's invitation system. Why has this come about? Primarily because the church has been feeding [gorging?] at the trough of Arminian theology for a long time and evangelistic methods are greatly affected by one's theology. Arminian theology chooses methods based on two criteria: *first*, is it consistent with Arminian beliefs, and *second*, does it produce results. The invitation system meets both criteria. It is consistent with Arminian theology, and it works, that is, it gets results. Thus, it has become the standard practice among Arminian preachers.

Calvinism, [*a theological term for a biblical understanding of the gospel*] on the other hand, believes that one must be “born again” before they can be saved and that true faith can only come from a regenerated heart. The flesh can simulate faith for a while, but it will be proven defective in time and worthless (Titus 1:16). Calvinist preachers proclaim the gospel and point sinners to repent and believe in Christ alone for salvation. But, they are not intoxicated with a need to see immediate results, or some proof of salvation. They yearn for sinners to come to faith in Christ, but they are also confident that God will draw His elect so that humanistic “techniques” to reveal so-called converts are unnecessary. They rejoice in professions of faith but they know the fickleness of man’s heart and that some who profess faith have only a “temporary’ faith which does not save (Lk. 8:12-14). Thus, they do not attempt to manipulate sinners to make a show of their faith, and they are more cautious in giving assurance of salvation to those who do profess faith.

The invitation system has become such an important element in the church service that it makes or breaks the effectiveness of the pastor. One author wrote, “At a well-known Bible Institute students were told, ‘Your credibility as a pastor will depend entirely on what you make happen during the invitation.’ This is the kind of thing that is likely to happen when rampant Arminianism dictates the methodology.”

II. THE ALTERED CALL: THE DANGERS OF THE INVITATION SYSTEM

A. Jim Ehrhard gives some of the dangers of this system in his article, *The Dangers of the Invitation System*, Reformation and Revival, vol. 2, #3 (Summer, 1993), pp. 75-91.

- 1) It deceives many into resting their salvation on walking an aisle rather than on personal trust in Jesus Christ. Although some evangelists who use the “altar call” will say that going down the aisle does not save anyone, yet in their invitations they use language that contradict this assertion. Many speak of coming to the altar as equivalent to coming to Christ for salvation. Dangerous indeed.
- 2) It is not found in the Scriptures. It is often said in support of the invitation system that “Christ called people publicly.” But, when Christ called His disciples and said, “Follow Me,” he was not giving an altar call but a personal command to life-long discipleship. Christ had chosen His disciples and called them individually to come and be a part of His select followers (Jn. 15:16). No where does Jesus address a crowd and call people to come forward in order to express their faith in Him.
- 3) Many who come forward during an altar call do so because of psychological and emotional pressure on their wills to respond in this way, rather than from a true Godward repentance of their sin and a true desire to find salvation in Christ alone through faith alone. [For example, many may come forward to find relief from a temporary or momentary guilty conscience without ever experiencing true repentance. Others may come out of peer-pressure, “others are going down so I may as well too.”]
- 4) The altar call system caters to the desire of evangelists to measure the success of their ministry. Given the pride of man, such a system is often used and adapted to produce the most numbers.
- 5) This system also lends itself to bringing shame on the name of Christ as many respond to the preacher’s call and come forward to make a profession of faith in Christ without

ever being regenerated. They leave being told they are now Christians and secure in their salvation, but without any true spiritual life in their souls, they fall back into their sinful lifestyle.

6) The danger of giving assurance of salvation to those who are deceived and unconverted. George Whitefield warned users of this method:

“I am glad you know when persons are justified. It is a lesson I have not yet learnt. There are so many stony ground hearers that receive the Word with joy, that I have determined to suspend my judgment till I know the tree by its fruits. . . . That makes me so cautious now, which I was not thirty years ago, of dubbing converts so soon. I love now to wait a little, and see if people bring forth fruit; for there are so many blossoms which March winds you know blow away, that I cannot believe they are converts till I see fruit brought back; it will never do a sincere soul any harm.”

[In my own experience, we’ve had an apple tree full of blossoms and a freeze killed them all so that only a few produced fruit. There were hopeful signs of an abundant harvest early on, but the freeze caused the vast majority to produce no fruit at all.]

Spurgeon, “It very often happens that the converts that are born in excitement die when the excitement is over.”

B. Iain Murray in his excellent book, Revival and Revivalism, pp. 366-69, gives us a survey of the viewpoints of some of the men who opposed the invitation system during the 19th century.

1) “They alleged that the call for a public response confused an external act with an inward spiritual change. This confusion was inevitable because . . . coming forward and becoming a Christian were so closely related as to be virtually identical. The hearer was given the impression that answering the public appeal was crucial because salvation depended on that decision.” Even if there was a word of caution given by the preacher, such as, “Coming forward does not make you a Christian”, it is immediately neutralized by the requirement that in order to come to Christ and get saved you have to come forward.

2) The invitation system has serious consequences. “Those who come forward and who experience no saving change are liable either to go back to the world, hardened in the idea that ‘there is nothing in it’, or they may go on to join the church, assured that they have done all that was required.” This latter group possesses a false confidence that they are in fact Christians. Spiritually, they are tares among God’s wheat.

3) The advocates of the altar call claimed that “a sinner who is not humble enough to take the step is not humble enough to be saved”. But, those who opposed these new measures correctly understood that it was unsafe to presume that it was a spiritual power that produced these physical responses. In fact, they reckoned that those most likely to walk the aisle were the “the forward, the sanguine, the rash, the self-confident”. In other words, there are many reasons why people go forward and humility or any other spiritual grace is often not one of them.

4) The evidence was clear to all on both sides of this controversy that many who went forward were not really converted. However, the proponents of the invitation system

argued that “If only *some* souls are saved by this method then we ought to rejoice and endorse it. Besides, those who fall away are simply where they were before.”

Robert L. Dabney, chaplain to Stonewall Jackson and a great theologian of the Southern Presbyterian Church, exposed the error of this reasoning.

First, it is a fallacy to say that those who were held up before the public as converts and who consequently fell away are “where they were before”. Actually, they are worse off. They are likely to be more careless and more indifferent to spiritual things than before. As one man commented after witnessing this new brand of evangelism in central New York state in 1828, “For the little that I saw, I would say that if good is done by these irregular means, it is done at frightful expense. It is like slaying hundreds to save one.”

Second, by their lapse the gospel is also worse off for it is mocked in the eyes of the world because of those who fall away.

Third, the “some” who were genuinely saved did not owe their conversion to their public response. God had worked in their hearts and their consciences were “tender”, so that they were quick to respond to what they were told was their duty. But the truth of the matter is that their conversion was not the result of that action of coming forward. It was the work of the Holy Spirit who brought about faith in the truth of the gospel. Nothing was gained by the unbiblical measures used in the invitation system.

5) The altar-call method of evangelism confuses regeneration and faith with a physical response. It is assumed, falsely so, that there is faith in the heart when there is movement in the feet.

6) The altar-call method of evangelism distorts the biblical doctrine of assurance. When people are told that all they have to do to be saved is to get out of their seats and come forward, then their assurance of salvation is understood to be automatic. If coming forward is preached as essentially the same as “submitting to Christ”, or “deciding for Christ”, then once the public response has been given, it is assumed that they are saved. After all, didn’t Christ say, “him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out”, and didn’t the people come to the front in order to come to Christ? This distorts what the Bible says about assurance of salvation.

C. Another work by Iain Murray, The Invitation System, gives an excellent critique of the invitation system as used by Billy Graham. In it he makes the following observations:

1) It is argued in favor of the invitation system that Christ said “Whosoever shall confess Me before men, him will I confess before My father who is in heaven” (Mt. 10:32), and that this takes place when they come down front during an invitation. But Christ is not saying here that by an act of confession we *become* Christians but that one of the indispensable marks of those who *are* Christians is that they live a life which openly acknowledges Him. If this text were telling sinners how they are to make “a decision for Christ”, it would overturn a myriad of other texts which clearly teach that one is saved by faith alone. Confessing Christ is understood in the Bible as the way to manifest one’s faith in Christ, it is not given as a means of producing faith. This is true not only of confession but all the other works which the Bible commands us. They are all the necessary evidence of salvation and true faith, not the conditions for getting saved.

It should also be pointed out, that in the Bible the time of the convert's first public confession of Christ was at their baptism, when their faith was outwardly confessed before men. Baptism was never presented as a means of getting saved, but as an act of obedience to Christ from those who already profess faith in Christ. The invitation system has confused this required testimony of believers for a public confession that is *required in order to become a believer*. They are totally different in nature.

[Let me also add that Rom. 10:9-10 does not contradict this, "that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation." Paul has already made it clear that salvation comes by faith (Rom. 3:22, 25-26, 28, 30; 4:5, 9, 11, 16; 5:1, etc). He is not adding another condition here. Confessing Jesus as Lord is a sign of a living faith, it does not produce faith, it reveals the faith that is already in the heart. The importance of confessing Christ is understood in this test: if faith is genuine it will confess Christ. Again, confession, like good works, are a necessary testimony [and sure fruit] of true faith, but they are not to be understood as means of salvation.]

2) Advocates of the invitation system also defend its use with a psychological argument that goes like this, "There is something about coming forward which settles it." Settles what? It settles supposedly the issue of whether or not they have really accepted Christ. It is supposed that a response which involves action before others will commit their wills more than an act in private. So, to go forward settles it. It settles the issue that they have in fact committed their will to Christ and their going forward proves it (at least until the next time they feel lost and have to repeat it). The public confession of faith is supposed to help prevent a relapse.

This is why they consider the invitation to be so vital. It is at that time that the unconverted feels the pressure of his sin and is brought to the "valley of decision". You see, the invitation system assumes that the unwillingness of the unconverted to come forward is the essence of their spiritual problem. They are led to believe that if they come down they are obeying God, and if they don't they are disobeying Him. This builds pressure. The evangelists who use the invitation system also assume that the Spirit is at work during the invitation to convict them of this sin, with the result that they become miserable. At this point the evangelist must press home the invitation to come forward which psychologically is the only way for them to find relief from their miserable condition. Thus, the main objective in the invitation is to motivate man's will to come forward which many do to find relief from the pressure of disobeying God by remaining in their seats. If the invitation is not given, or delayed, the pressure is off and the results will be diminished.

This whole psychological argument is flawed. It makes conversion no different than any other appeal designed to give an emotional release, religious or not. This leads to a discrediting of the true evangelical experience altogether, so that now, with this approach, people can have a "born again" experience for about any religion, conviction, or fad that is out there. Conversion, then, becomes no different than any other experience in which the human will is redirected. Add to this all the conditioning influence of a large meeting and the auto-suggestions that go on when "every head is bowed and every eye is closed", and you may get a technique that is, psychologically-speaking, able to move a human will, but which is defective to the core in producing a

true convert to Christ. Decisions for Christ based on an emotional response in order to relieve the pressure and misery of remaining in their seats, are psychologically valid, but spiritually bankrupt. Such techniques may produce real results, but few if any real converts.

3) By treating two distinct issues, “come to Christ” and “come down to the front” as though they were one, the unconverted are easily misled regarding their gospel duty. The issue of the gospel becomes garbled for the unbeliever who does not go down to the front. He is told, or it is implied, that his failure to go down means that he has rebelled against God and grieved the Holy Spirit. Instead of making repentance and faith the issue, it is now all wrapped up in the act of going down front. If the unconverted person is more gullible and does go down, he is led to believe that he has performed a saving act or at least one that pleases God. Either response produces a defective understanding of the gospel.

Eventually the unconverted who did respond to the invitation will realize that no real change has taken place in their lives and this will harden them all the more. They may feel that a cruel trick has been played on them as come to the bitter realization that their religious experience was a delusion. How easy it will be for them to think that everyone else who came down front are also deluded, the only difference being that they have not yet detected it.

4) The test of conversion should be taken wholly out of the sphere of public profession and made to rest on the reality of a changed life afterwards. To make the test of conversion depend on the outward and immediately observable act of those who come down during the invitation is to base it on a false standard of judgment.

D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, in his book, Preaching and Preachers, gives us additional insights into the errors of the invitation system.

1) The invitation system intentionally puts direct pressure on the will of man, “Come down now, come down and decide for Christ, come down for salvation, if you do not come now you are grieving the Holy Spirit”. This is wrong. The will should be approached primarily through the mind, and then through the affections. The action of the will should be determined by those influences. See Rom. 6:17 where the obedience of the will was produced by the heart which was moved by the doctrine. When the mind grasps truth and understands it, the affections are kindled and moved, and the will finally reacts in obedience. To put pressure directly on the will is to bypass the mind and affections and the result will always be a decision which is short-lived and unstable.

A similar thing can be said about appealing to the emotions apart from the mind. The use of music can have the effect of creating an emotional state in which the mind is no longer functioning as it should be, and no longer discriminating. Some can sing themselves into a state of intoxication merely by the emotional power of the music and such effects are not produced by the truth impacting the mind. When the will chooses based on the emotions only, the mind is not involved so that the decision is based on influences which are not guided by truth.

Revival meetings often stir emotions powerfully and people respond to invitations because of what they are feeling. Such decisions are as fickle as the emotions that

produced them. The biblical way to address the will is to first appeal to the mind with truth, then to the affections based on that truth, then to the will to respond accordingly.

2) The invitation system implies that sinners have an inherent power of decision and of self-conversion. This is opposed to 1 Cor. 2:14, "The natural men receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God for they are foolishness to him, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned," and Eph. 2:1 "You were dead in your trespasses and sins," and many other texts as well.

3) This method produces a superficial conviction of sin, if any at all. People often respond out of an impression that by doing so they will receive certain benefits. For example, one man responded that he went forward because he did not want to "miss the boat", that was all he could say to explain why he went down. By doing this he now believed that he was "on the boat", but he was not clear about what that meant. There was little understanding of the gospel, in fact, he felt that he was "on the boat" because of something he did, rather than by trusting in Christ.

4) This system dishonors the Holy Spirit for it implies that the Holy Spirit needs to be helped and His work supplemented by our efforts before a sinner can be saved. In addition, the whole work of regeneration is maligned. The Scriptures clearly teach that regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit alone, no one else can do it. The work of conviction of sin, implanting new spiritual life in the soul, and giving the gift of faith is solely the work of the Holy Spirit. Yet, the invitation system attempts to produce faith and regeneration by its techniques. They believe that they can induce these things to happen during the invitation.

5) Lloyd-Jones also says that no sinner ever really "decides for ." The sinner "flies" to Christ in utter helplessness and despair saying, "Foul, I to the fountain fly, wash me Savior, or I die." Lloyd-Jones comments, "No man truly comes to Christ unless he flies to Him as his only refuge and hope, his only way of escape from the accusations of conscience and the condemnation of God's holy law. Nothing else is satisfactory. . . . The convicted sinner no more "decides" for Christ than the poor drowning man "decides" to take hold of that rope that is thrown to him and suddenly provides him with the only means of escape. The term is entirely inappropriate." It does not begin to reflect the full movement of mind, affections, and will that takes place when true faith is expressed.

In summary, such methods which promise assurance of salvation to those who walk, often find that their "converts" keep on walking, right out of the church! (See Jn. 6:66 which describes many so-called "disciples" who walked to Christ, and then walked away from Him, following Him no more.) The gospel that essentially says, "Walk and thou shalt be saved," is but a page out of the "broad way leading to destruction".

CONCLUSION

On the whole, when the invitation system is used in evangelism it produces many false conversions. Those few who are genuinely saved are not saved by this system. In fact, it adds nothing positive at all to their conversion, but rather is a distortion of the true invitation of the gospel. It is a liability which the Spirit must overcome in the few who are truly redeemed.

Such a public call to come down to the altar, or to come forward to Christ, has no support whatsoever in the Scriptures. When Christ called his disciples to "Come, follow Me," He was not giving an invitation for

salvation but for life-long discipleship. Far more than merely taking a few steps, they were called to go with Him wherever He went for the rest of His earthly life. He was physically present then, but not now. We should also remember that often when Christ talked about coming to Him, he was not talking about a coming with the feet but a coming in faith (Jn. 5:40; 6:44). Christ is not now commanding anyone to go down to the front of a church or auditorium to meet Him there in order for them to get saved.

Reformed [Biblical*] evangelism takes a different approach. It sends the sinner to the Savior and nowhere else. It depends on God for results. We are not to manipulate sinners into a faulty confession. We are not interested in numbers for numbers sake. We are interested in being faithful to God and His gospel. [*not that all things titled 'Reformed' are Biblical but in the context of evangelism it is]

What Should I NOT Say? Things that confuse the gospel

INTRODUCTION

If you were looking for a fine diamond, would you go to a flea market or to a well establish jeweler? Many gospel presentations are like trying to find the “pearl of great price” in a flea market of great junk. We should try to be jewelers of the gospel, not junkers. The language we use will make the difference.

Here are some expressions often used by many but which confuse the gospel message.

I. “Ask Jesus into your heart”

Search the Bible and see, there is no place where an invitation like this is given to unbelievers as a means of salvation. Inviting Jesus to come into the sinner’s heart is NOT the invitation of the gospel message. It is not the crux issue of the gospel either. The crux of the gospel is not Jesus coming inside the sinner’s heart, but the sinner’s heart going out to Jesus in saving faith.

Let’s examine the passage found in Rev. 3:20 where this faulty concept is derived. Consider the following observations which show that this verse is usually misused in evangelism:

1) The context. Rev. 3:14-22 is our Lord’s letter to the church at Laodicea. This church is guilty of being lukewarm and in danger of being spewed out of Christ’s mouth (vv. 15-16). They need to repent and Christ is reproofing them because of His love for them as His church (vv. 18-19). Thus, this is not exactly an evangelistic message to the unconverted per se, but one of repentance to an existing church that has fallen into sin. True, there may be some who prove to be unbelievers in this church, but at this point Christ is addressing them as “the church in Laodicea”. The message to repent is given to a church in sin.

2) The text. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me” (Rev. 3:20). Let’s examine this text from the following perspectives:

Exegetically - This verse is talking about Christ coming to a person, not into a person. Please observe the “space” between the “in” and the “to”.

The Greek phrase makes it clear that Christ IS NOT coming into a person. The Greek for this phrase “come in to” is *eiseleusomai pros*. This expression is used 9 times in the NT and everytime it means to come into a building up to a person (cf. Mk. 6:25; 15:43; Lk. 1:28; Acts 10:3; 11:3; 16:40; 17:2; 28:8; Rev. 3:20). The idea of something or someone “indwelling” a person is never expressed.

So Rev. 3:20 says that if any one in the church of Laodicea repents and “opens the door” to Christ, then He will come in the church, approach that believer, and eat dinner with him. There is nothing here about Christ entering into the heart of the person.

The concept of “indwelling” or coming into a person requires a different Greek expression, *eiseleusomai eis*. This phrase is used 136 times in the NT and in 4 of those uses it refers to entrance into a person. Interestingly, these uses refer to demon possession (Mk. 9:25; Lk. 8:30; 22:3; Jn. 13:27). Everytime *eiserchomai* (the lexical form of the future tense *eiseleusomai*) means entrance into a person, it is always followed by *eis* and never *pros*.

Theologically - Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone. The indwelling of Christ in the heart is the result of saving faith, it is not the request of saving faith. It happens automatically once a sinner believes in Christ. Other results of saving faith are, for example, the sealing of the Holy Spirit, adoption into God’s family, etc. None of these, however, are a part of saving faith. They all are blessings which result from saving faith. The sinner is admonished to “call upon the name of the Lord” (Rom. 10:13), but this is not in order to ask Jesus to come into their heart but rather to ask Christ to forgive them of their sins. Salvation is based upon faith in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, not the blessings which flow from being saved. For example, if someone asked Jesus to seal him with the Spirit, would he be saved? Of course not. Saving faith is not based on the desire to be sealed with the Spirit but the desire to have Christ forgive them of their sins. Similarly, asking Jesus to come into one’s heart IS NOT saving faith either. Remember that salvation is through repentance and faith, and not based simply on a prayer anyway, much less a prayer based on a faulty understanding of Rev. 3:20.

[For clarification: Christ indwelling the heart of the believer is not the same thing as regeneration. Regeneration precedes faith, Christ indwelling the heart comes as the result of faith.]

Practically - Telling someone they need to ask Jesus to come into their heart gives a confusing and inaccurate presentation of the gospel. What is at stake is the question: what is true saving faith? Asking Jesus into one’s heart can be done without any conviction of sin and without any trusting in Jesus for salvation from sin. It is a concept which has nothing to do with true saving faith, and only confuses the gospel. Many are told that if they pray a pray asking Jesus into their hearts then they are saved. Many, in fact, do pray such a prayer but are not regenerated and do not have genuine faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross.

Children often do not understand such a request and are left wondering how in the world Jesus gets into their heart any way. Does he enter through the mouth, slide down on the tongue?

Conclusion - The language of asking Jesus into one’s heart for salvation is unbiblical, it distorts the gospel, and produces many so-called converts who are still lost in their sins. Bottom line: never, never use this language.

II. “God loves you.” [often adding “...and has a wonderful plan for your life”]

Consider the following reasons for avoiding this language:

- 1) There is never a single place anywhere in the Bible where an evangelist (or similar) tells an unbeliever that “God loves you”. Search and see!
- 2) The love of God is not really an essential element in a gospel presentation. Do you see it mentioned in Acts in any of the gospel messages given by the apostles? The love of God explains why He sent His Son into the world to save sinners (Jn. 3:16), but saving faith rests in the promise of forgiveness through Christ’s death, not in the specific assertion that “God loves me”.
- 3) It is not accurate to tell every sinner that God loves them. We do not know the extent of the love of God. For example, if you came up to Esau and told him, “God loves you,” would you not be misrepresenting God in light of Rom. 9:13? Is it biblical to tell someone that God loves them when they might spend eternity in hell? What does this say about the love of God?
- 4) The prevalent Arminian notion is that God loves all men equally, and that He desires to save all men equally. It goes on to believe that God, even though He dearly loves all sinners without exception, will not force a sinner to choose Him, but gives the sinner the freedom to decide for himself whether or not he will be saved. This kind of divine love is not only unbiblical, it actually shrinks God’s love down to a level of being weaker than human love. Human love is deeper and stronger than this kind of divine love for it will go to greater lengths to save someone from harm that will God’s love. Example.
- 5) Jn. 3:16 - “For God so loved the world” is not convincingly a reference to the “world” as every individual without exception (see Jn. 7:4; 12:19; 17:9; 18:20, etc.).

The word “world” is used for a general reference [to his love expressed within creation by the redemption of some (those who believe/are given the gift of faith Eph. 2:8-9)] or to all “kinds” of men: Jews and Gentiles, without intending to refer to every individual Jew and Gentile (Rom. 3:9 and 19). [and certainly not to every individual since it Christ is given for the eternal life of believers not unbelievers.]

- 6) To say that God loves every individual equally runs into biblical difficulties. Did God love Pharaoh? Then why did He harden his heart (Ex. 4:21)? Did He stop loving Pharaoh at some point? Did God love the Amalekites and then destroy them (Ex. 17:14)? Did He love the Canaanites whom He had exterminated (Deut. 20:16)? Did He love the Ammonites and the Moabites whom He commanded not to be received into the congregation forever (Deut. 23:3)? Why did God say He hated the “workers of iniquity” if in fact He loves them (Ps. 5:5)? Does God love the “vessels of wrath fitted for destruction” which He endures with much long-suffering (Rom. 9:22)? Why did God say He hated Esau if He really loved him (Rom. 9:13)?
- 7) We may speak of God’s general benevolence [lovingkindness – an expression of the God’s attribute of ‘love’] to all men, the good and the evil, in which He provides sunshine and rain (Mt. 5:44-45). But, God’s redemptive love is selective and non-universal (Rom. 9:15-18). God savingly loves His church, those who believe in Him. This is the stress of divine redemptive love in the Bible (Rom. 8; Eph. 5, etc.). It is not universal but particular. [Unbelievers experience many practical benefits from God’s attribute of LOVE but they are NOT the objects of his love.]

Conclusion – Since we do not know upon whom God has set His redemptive love, it is wiser to speak of God’s love in general terms (God loves sinners) without stressing to an individual that “God loves you.”

The promises of the gospel are *conditional*. IF you repent and believe you will be saved; IF you call on the name of the Lord you will be forgiven; IF you turn to God you will know the love of God; etc.

II. “Jesus died for you.”

The problem with this assertion is very similar to the above. You never find this language used in an evangelistic message in the Bible.

The “unlimited atonement” viewpoint runs into severe problems with a proper understanding of the finished work of Christ on the cross. This view undermines the atonement of Christ as a *substitutionary, sacrificial, and penal satisfaction*. See John Owen’s dilemma.

It is better to speak of Christ’s death in general terms, “Christ died for sinners.” “You can know the forgiveness of Christ if you will repent and trust in Him for salvation.

On the judgment day, I would be hard pressed to give an answer to someone to whom I said, Christ died for you”, if they said to me, “I am being sentenced to hell and yet you told me that Christ died for me? If He died for me, then why are not my sins forgiven? Was He not my substitute if He died for me? Did He not satisfy the demands of God’s law if He died for me? Did He not die for all my sins, even my unbelief, if He died for me? Why am I going to hell if Jesus died for me? Personally, I would not want to have to answer such complaints.

IV. “Pray this prayer after me, . . .” [the “Sinner’s Prayer”]

As we have seen in other studies, this approach is manipulative. Nowhere in the Bible does an evangelist tell sinners to pray this prayer after me. The sinner’s prayer in Lk. 18:13 “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” were not the words of another being put in the publican’s mouth. They came genuinely from his own heart. He composed them and he prayed them sincerely. The problem with salvation prayers is that they lead people to do something which they think results in their salvation. But dead prayers will never save.

So how do we know when a sinner is really ready to trust Christ? We don’t. Therefore, it is never wise to lead a sinner in such prayers. What we are to do is to continue to exhort them to trust in Christ, believe in Christ, go to Christ and confess their sins to Him and seek His mercy and salvation. We often short-circuit [confuse] the process by interfering with our “pray this prayer for salvation”.

The desire to “see results” is so strong that many run ahead of the Spirit to try to produce converts by such methods. We must use self-restraint. Only God can save and surely God will save. Let us remain faithful to our responsibilities in pointing sinners to Christ and not try to drag them through the gospel door.

What if a sinner wants to pray? Then, pray for him by all means. Even if he does not suggest it, it is good if you pray for him. Pray for God to open his heart, convict him of sin and show him his need for Christ. If he wants to pray, let him pray, listen carefully to his prayer and try to discern whether there is genuine faith or not. Deal with any misconceptions or errors you might discern. But by all means, if he prays, do not give him assurance based on a mere prayer. We will deal with the assurance issue next.

CONCLUSION

We should try to make the gospel as clear as we can. Some language confuses the essential issues and should be avoided.