

Gospel-Induced Evangelism

I plan to provoke people, through preaching the gospel and by doing the work of an evangelist, to be evangelistic-minded and -hearted. Therefore, my definition of personal evangelism is this—an overflowing happiness in the mercy of the crucified Christ that spills over into other people's lives.

In order to better define what this definition of personal evangelism means, I first want to talk about what personal evangelism is not before I talk about what personal evangelism is. Personal evangelism is not an action. This is why in my definition I wrote in terms of a desire or "want." If personal evangelism is simply an action, the result is that personal evangelism becomes a mental reminder that quickly jabs and kicks the will until the person is forced to "evangelize." The result is that the person who is "evangelizing" attempts to prove that he or she is right and tries to find how the other person is wrong. This act of "evangelism"—this act that is devoid of any concept of joy or desire or pleasure or zeal or privilege or love—is totally abhorred by God. He hates that kind of obedience, and he hates that kind of evangelism. How do I know?

Let me give a personal example. I have found previously in my own life that I personally "evangelized" in exactly the way described above. When I met somebody whom I perceived to be non-Christian, the reminder to evangelize came to mind. The reminder to evangelize then quickly jabbed and kicked my will until I forced myself to ignore my desire not to evangelize. I then proceeded to find out where the person "needing evangelism" was wrong and told them how they were doctrinally wrong. My act of "evangelizing" was simply based upon a got to, have to mentality. I was not taking pleasure in evangelizing in order to please my Savior, and I was not giving them Jesus' hope of forgiveness. I wanted me to be right and them to be wrong, even if that meant imposing what I wanted Scripture to say in order to justify my own ideas. God hated this kind of evangelism because my act was not based on love for him and love for my neighbor. God could say of this evangelistic act that, "This Stefan draws near to me with his mouth, and honors me with his lips; but his heart is far from me. In vain does he worship me and in vain he speaks!" (Matt. 15:8-9). Why? Because Stefan's heart was far from him! I was far from having the heart of Jesus for people! "Evangelism" that is done without feelings of love and joy and happiness because of Christ, and without a notion of privileged opportunity, is not pleasing to him! This is why Biblical personal evangelism is not an act—it is not an act that is produced by a reminder that kicks and prods the will in order to force the will to "evangelize." If the Lord wants me become a pastor some day, I will do everything I can, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to make this a clear reality to myself and to God's people.

At the beginning of the paper, I said that the preaching of the gospel would move and induce people to personally evangelize. Am I just mixing the gospel in at this point because I have to and because saying “gospel” sounds nice to Reformed believers and to people who may read this paper? No. Then why do I think the preaching of the gospel is so necessary? I believe that the gospel is necessary because I believe in its power to change peoples’ lives through the Spirit of Christ, and I believe that the gospel is the well-spring from which all evangelistic desires flow. How does the gospel do this? The gospel provokes strong, passionate, can’t-get-over-it evangelistic desires within believers because of Christ’s merciful rescue (O precious mercy!) of them. He absorbed all the wrath of God for me, so that I can be free to enjoy God as my treasure forever! He crushed the sin that enslaved me and told me what to do! This gospel frees people from their fear of the earth-shaking wrath of God! (Ps. 18:7-8). This gospel sweeps away the cruel accusations of the devil upon their conscience! This gospel takes smelly, festering little sinners and gives them absolutely every treasure and pleasure that Christ has on his throne in heaven! (Ps. 16:11). This gospel gives every reason for joy and happiness in God when before there was no reason for joy and happiness in God! Christ Jesus sets free helpless and hopeless little birds from the fowler’s net of entrapping sin! (Ps. 124:7).

When people truly believe in this gospel and really feel Christ’s blood-bought mercy for themselves, I say, upon the basis of the Bible, that no sinner-Christian can help but display their feeling of joy in response to God’s mercy. (Ps. 30:11-12) When a Christian displays that feeling of joy, others will desire the sweet joy of knowing the Lord Jesus! The gospel is the source of an overflowing happiness in the mercy of Christ crucified that spills over into other peoples’ lives. There’s something wrong if there is no feeling of joy and happiness in God for that merciful rescue from eternal death in response to the gospel, and there is something profoundly wrong if that joy and happiness is not communicated in the gospel. Let there be joy in every Christian heart so that this rescuing gospel spreads for the joy of all peoples!

People whom I might get to serve as a pastor may ask, “So is this type of mercy-led evangelism found in the Bible?” I believe it is found in the confession of Paul in Romans 1:14. Paul expressed that he was “debtor both to the Greeks and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise.” The important word there is “debtor.” Paul owed something to the Greeks and the Barbarians, to the wise and the unwise. He owed it to every kind of person—to fools on the street, to his neurosurgeon neighbor, to the homeless, to people who cursed and swore at the bowling alley. He owed it to people who shamed him and scoffed at his “foolish” lifestyle. What did he feel he owed them? No, it was not a profound “Yuck!” at their sin. Instead, he felt he owed those people God-centered, Christ-exalting love in speaking the gospel! “So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel....”

Why? “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto *salvation to every one that believes*” (Rom. 1:15-16). [emphasis mine] Paul did not feel in his heart, “Ugh, those people and their sin is so sick—I can’t even talk to them.” Rather, he thought, “O these poor sin-ridden people—they’re hopeless, just like I was. I owe them the gospel that changed my life!”

Paul is not confessing here only as an apostle, as if he believed that only apostles and pastors are debtors to speak the gospel to everybody. He is confessing as a Christian! How do we know that he is confessing that as a Christian? How do we know that Christians really want to tell others about what Jesus has done for them? Let’s look at I Thessalonians 1, one of the most amazing passages describing the evangelistic desires of God’s people. In verse 6, Paul wrote how the Thessalonian people received the gospel, “the word.” But what is so amazing is that these Thessalonians received the gospel “*in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost.*” [emphasis mine] How did these Christians respond? They spread that Word of the gospel! (vs. 8) That verb “sounded” in the English in verse 8 means “to sound forth” or “ring out.” The Thessalonians let the gospel ring out to everybody so that the gospel tones resounded all over the country!

I intend to teach others to implement this practice in their daily lives by preaching a Christ-exalting, mercy-magnifying, joy-provoking gospel. Yet people may ask, “But how do I evangelize? You need to show me how—I feel inadequate.” I would probably reply, “Good! The more inadequate we feel, the more we will rely on God for wisdom and boldness.” I do believe that examples and how-to’s can be helpful. I would really like to show by example, Lord-willing as a pastor, how to let desirous evangelism flow freely to people in the neighborhood lead or attend Bible studies and seminars and prayer groups that focus on evangelism. I am very excited to establish my own home so that I can, everywhere I go, be hospitable and love people who need Jesus. But I do not believe that the Church needs examples and how-to’s to evangelize in their daily lives nearly as much as they need the pure gospel so that they can have boldness and mercy to evangelize in their daily lives. Every single example and how-to will achieve nothing if there is no mercy-produced desire to evangelize in response to the gospel. Once the Christian understands the meaning of the gospel within his or her heart they will not only be able to but also want to spread the gospel. It will almost come naturally! They have found such joy in Jesus! Humility and compassion will come from the lips! God’s answer of sweet mercy will flow to needy people from Christian hearts spilling with living water! (John 7:38).

There is one last thing that I believe will provide even more zeal for evangelism. I will try to make plain to people whom I might someday get to serve that “there be many that say, Who will show us any good?” (Ps. 4:6a). There be many who live on this planet earth who truly doubt that there is any good or any good God. I have talked to

many people who, as it were, voiced this question to me: “I am experiencing a living hell—Why?” In other words, from a Christian’s perspective, these people whom we see every day are doubting whether there is anything better for them than having a guilty conscience, knowing that the judgment of God is coming, and being tyrannized by Satan. The Psalmist’s prayer rings out to us, telling us that we (yes, we Christians!) hold the linking answer to these people’s question. The answer is a prayer—”Lord, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us!”” (vs. 6b). That is, after hearing these people, we pray: “Lord, rain showers of manifold grace upon us so that we can show people Thy countenance that holds ten thousand oceans of mercy and love for them!” We Christians are the link between God and non-Christians—how else will they know who God is?

If I were to sum up what evangelism is without using my definition, I would say that evangelism is love in action. Let God’s people have joy-filled, mercy-led evangelistic desires, founded upon Christ’s merciful rescue from imminent death, that result in bold and active love. I pray that God gives to me, not only now but also Lord-willing as a pastor, a vision and zeal for doing the work of an evangelist through the power of the gospel so that others are led by the Spirit of Christ to have bold, self-sacrificing, evangelistic desires.