

Bible-thumpers or Bread-bringers?

A sermon by Larry Kirkpatrick

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Our message today concerns evangelism. I'm not sure what your picture of Bible-thumpers is. We'll return to that. First, let's consider two problems. The challenges of evangelism are radical. Yes, we need to understand the Fall of man, and have spoken to that. Today we focus on certain behavioral impacts. How hopeless if God does not intervene! How necessary that we do our part intelligently, and that He does His. The more we feel our need of Him, the more we anticipate His intervention.

Explore now, (1) freedom and its illusion, and (2) The role of time preference.

Desire for Freedom—or Illusion?

Man desires to be free, but he settles for the illusion of freedom. In Genesis, we see Eve, who is led to think that in disobeying God she will be made free (Genesis 3:1-5). In the next chapter, Cain claims that he is not responsible for his brother—he theorizes that freedom is found in refusing to treat other people as creatures made in God's image (Genesis 4:1-7). Eve, Cain, and everyone coming after, have found that such ideas mere illusion. Freedom is found neither in dodging self control nor in disregarding the good of our neighbors.

We see this in the Exodus. First, Moses has difficulty even convincing the people of the possibility of escape (Exodus 3:13; 4:29-31; 5:20, 21). God delivers anyway. Finally free, after only a few miles the grumbling begins. Soon the call goes up to “return to Egypt” (Exodus 14:12; 15:24; 16:2, 3; Numbers 11:4-6). Why? The answer is obvious. It was for the pizza! OK, it was for the leeks and onions, and those great fish dinners. Ellul nails it:

It is not true that people want to be free. They want the advantages of independence without the duties or difficulties of freedom. Freedom is hard to live with. It is terrible. It is a venture. It devours and demands. It is a constant battle, for around there are always traps to rob us of it. But in particular, freedom itself allows us no rest. It requires incessant

emulation and questioning. It presupposes alert attention, ruling out habit or institution. It demands that I always be fresh, always ready, never hiding behind precedents or past defeats. It brings breaks and conflicts. It yields to no constraint and exercises no constraint. For there is freedom only in permanent self-control and in love of neighbor (Jacques Ellul, *The Seduction of Christianity*, p. 167).

Freedom calls us to humanity; anything less is only living. Freedom means choosing between good and evil. People prefer to remain in bondage. It is easier to be a slave. The rich young ruler came to Jesus and asked what single thing he lacked. When Jesus told him, he went away sad, for he had great possessions (Luke 18:18-30). But the great possessions had him! He was a slave, and when Jesus offered him freedom, actual manhood, he choose slavery.

There is a slavery that is forced upon someone. It is evil, dehumanizing, but it can be resisted; a man can remain free in spirit. But a slavery that is chosen, that is unspeakably demeaning, for it is a man's choice to become less than a man.

Slaves have no liberty. They are subject to the whims of their owners . . . In exchange, they are fed, lodged, and supported. They are sure of their food. Above all, they are freed from having to take charge of their own lives, which is worse than obeying someone else.

What people want when they talk about freedom is not being subject to others, being able to have their own dreams or go where they want to go. Hardly more. They definitely do not want to have to take charge of their own lives and be responsible for what they do. This means that they do not really want freedom We moderns seek above all to be responsible for nothing. Yet we want an air of freedom, an appearance of liberty What we want is a semblance of freedom, not its reality (Ellul, *Seduction*, pp. 168, 169).

So there is a terrible problem in winning souls. People long for freedom. Deep inside they know that they are called to liberty. And yet, they prefer what they are used to, and what they are used to, is slavery.

You recall, I mentioned Bible-thumpers. The popular conception of the Bible-thumper is one who comes along with a list of “Thou shalt nots,” and tells you that unless you comply with his particular list, and say the magic words that Jesus is your personal Savior, you will burn in hell for eternity.

Many actually try to comply. They say the magic words, they come to the front in answer to a call. When Billy Graham’s pre-positioned minions “respond” to the call and head for the front of the stadium, they come too. (You understand that Graham positions his people throughout the stadium, ready to “respond,” thus to appear to be spontaneously “answering” the “call” to the front.)

It is more of an exercise in social pressure than in soul winning. Graham has them fill out contact information, and then sends the “Protestant” background responders back to “Protestant” churches for spiritual growth. He takes the “Catholic” contacts and sends those respondents back to the “Catholic” Church for spiritual growth. Everyone goes home and sleeps snugly in their beds. They have done some serious soul-winning!

Yes, we should follow the Bible. Yes, there will be a problem, lost people, if His Word is not followed. No, Jesus did nothing remotely like Billy Graham nor like the Bible-thumper in His soul-winning.

What you have, then, is a carefully orchestrated illusion. The participants themselves believe in what they are doing. An illusion is being pitched. People who are ripe for illusion are being granted the illusion. Ellul has it right again:

The uncertainty of fluctuating things like love and grace horrifies us. Saying that God loves us grants us no reassurance. We would prefer it if He gave us fifty things to do, so that when we had done them we could be at peace. We do not want an ongoing relationship with God. We prefer a rule. It does not satisfy us that God shows grace to us or frees us.

We prefer to bind Him by our virtues and to be sure that He has no freedom to do with us as He chooses. Thus we have unceasingly tried to objectify our relationship with God (Ellul, *Seduction*, p. 152).

Our task is much like that to which God called Moses. We are to be agents of God to deliver His people from bondage. And they have very mixed feelings about being delivered. And so, it is a process of education, a growing, changing experience, when one becomes a Christian.

There will be things which we are to do and not to do, because there is a moral and ethical difference between good and evil. There is a conflict between Christ and Satan. Satan offers an illusion of freedom in which the need for change is non-existent. Christ offers a freedom that is genuine, and only possible for those who will shed their past lives as slaves.

Jesus wants more from us than our fearful compliance and standing trembling at a distance. He longs to embrace us. He would have us come close enough to feel the scars His love for us earned Him.

Time Preference

Along with the illusion, we face another severe problem. It is called time preference.

Murray Rothbard helps:

Man prefers his end to be achieved in the shortest possible time . . . This is the universal fact of time preference. At any point of time, and for any action, the actor most prefers his end attained in the immediate present (Murray Rothbard, *Man, Economy, and State*, p. 13).

After Adam sinned there was an abrupt change in human tendencies. Whereas Adam before could look to an eternity, after his fall, we want what we want now. Later is not soon enough. The flesh must be satisfied now. We want to respond to the clammers of our fallen nature with a “Yes.” The strengthened habits of sin seductively call us. Then we must decide

what we value. Are we more than instinct-following animals and insects? Are we ready to weigh the value of a present moment against the value of eternity?

Ellen White pointed out the challenge:

The servant of God will have to arm himself with the same mind that was in Christ Jesus; and if he walks humbly with his God, he will recognize in every soul for whom he has labored that they are the purchase of the blood of Christ; that our precious Saviour considered them of such value that He did not withhold Himself, but gave up His life in order that they might have a provision, a trial, a time when they should consider the things of eternal interest, and that they should weigh them carefully, attentively, and see if they do not consider whether or not it is to their advantage and profit to build into eternal life (Ellen G. White, *Sermons and Talks*, vol. 1, pp. 61, 62).

Really, Jesus grants us an opportunity to “build into” eternal life. A man does not become a Christian in a moment but in many steps. There comes a time when we first make our decision for Christ, but that is after long work by the Holy Spirit has prepared the way. We do not change, in a moment, the way we think and live.

One cannot annul in an instant a prior mental structure, basic ideological theses, or the grid within which life and the world are interpreted (Ellul, *Seduction*, p. 61).

It takes time to change, to shed thinking long integrated with the flesh. It takes intentionality, effort, resistance to our old ideas of time preference, to wanting what we want now, in order to become like Christ. It is easy to become more like the image of a beast, but it is difficult to become more like the image of God because one must resist self.

The time it takes to create something is its period of production. How long does it take to become more holy? How long to become more sinful? Sin offers us the opportunity to have what we desire right now. It means to engage in a process of decivilizing ourselves. Holiness,

righteousness, in contrast, calls us to think not only of the present but of tomorrow and tomorrow's tomorrow. It calls us to take into account also how long something is useful.

Sin is useful for a moment, but it leaves behind a lingering sense of judgment and condemnation. This is part of the cost of sin—the part we do not take into account. But the Christian thinks not only of the present, but of the future. He makes provision not just for the present but for eternity. He is building for the long term. But Christians are taught that the time it takes to make a Christian is very short.

The Bible discusses this question in Hebrews.

By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season (Hebrews 11:24, 25 KJV).

The English Standard Version gives for verse 26: "He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward." Moses looked to the reward; he kept his eye on the long term.

As evangelists, part of our task is to help people turn to long term thinking, to see the benefits of the gospel, the beauty of genuine liberty, actual humanity; to the realization of the image of God.

The Only Source of Freedom

There is only one source for freedom: The Creator, Recreator, the Deliverer, the Victor over death and the grave, the God who came down into His own creation and let sinners nail Him to the cross, and died for them.

Ellul:

In breaking with God we acquire independence or autonomy but never freedom, for God alone is free and a relationship with Him grants the only possibility of becoming free (Ellul, *Seduction*, p.169).

Only as we permit God to establish connection with us do we ally ourselves with a being who can deliver to us freedom.

We are called to be signs in this world of God's work—former slaves, now free. Some will never answer such a call; they have become content to live and die like insects. They aspire to nothing better. They have joined themselves to the world and the connection is permanent.

But we do not know who those people are; we cannot read hearts or minds. We see them mired in the cares of life, pressing buttons, seemingly fully engaged in materialism. They are making bricks out of mud, wearily carting to and fro, erecting a tower to nowhere, a pyramid pointing to nothing, a giant tombstone. God calls us to show them something better.

Water of Life

We recall the discussion of Jesus with the woman at the well. After demonstrating to her that there was more to Him than met the eye, He moved the discussion to thirst. Piquing her interest, He contrasted the water which she came to draw, which cannot satisfy, with that which He has to offer: “But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:14).

The desire to always move to the next gratification, to live as an insect, to be seeking bare subsistence, is contrasted with what only Jesus can give. He offers the water of life. The water that Jesus gives is Christ's presence within, perpetually renewing, continuously life-giving. As

Paul described it: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Jesus gives not an illusion of freedom but the genuine article.

We may not feel that we are in bondage. So long as we have some mask of religion we think we are not in bondage, not to ourselves, not to any other person, government, organization, or entity. This was the very claim made by Jesus’ opponents in John 8:33-36, 37, 44. They claimed to be free, but Jesus pointed out that they were not free—just murderers in religious drag!

Bread of Life

Now, time for the bread. Turn a few pages back to one more text: John 6:30-34:

They said therefore unto Him, What sign shewest Thou then, that we may see, and believe Thee? what dost Thou work? Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat. Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but My Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world. Then said they unto Him, Lord, evermore give us this bread. And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to Me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst.

Here they are, Jesus’ hecklers. They ask for a miracle so that they (supposedly) will have a basis for belief in Him. “Give us the evidence,” they harp, “then we will believe.”

What had Jesus been doing all of that time, anyway! By living the kingdom every day He had been giving them evidence. Often, evidence is not the question; it is whether there is an

actual willingness to believe. And that is predetermined by whether there is willingness to change.

Unambiguously they hint to Jesus they want Him to make bread for them. Bring some manna down for us, and we will believe you; that is the gist. Jesus gets it. But look at His reply.

First, He denies that Moses gave them bread. God gave them the bread, but they were so fixed to their own mythology about Moses that it had swallowed up their vision of God. Jesus clarifies to them that God gave the bread. Furthermore, while God gave them manna, miraculous sustenance, that was but temporal food. It was something to eat until they died. But Jesus could say, “My Father giveth you the true Bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world.”

The original manna was a type; Jesus was the antitype. That bread, that sustenance, manna for Israel, pointed forward to Jesus who would give life to the world.

What happens next is very interesting. They turn to Jesus and ask, “Lord, evermore give us this bread.” They seem to be getting it. Almost involuntarily, they admit the desire of the heart, the craving for something better. Jesus is ready: “I am the bread of life.” If you come to Me, says Jesus, you will never hunger, if you believe on Me, you will never thirst. In 38 He clearly identifies Himself as He who came down from heaven. In 41 they resist His answer. In 47-58 He presses His point to the full. There is a crisis. Many back out, and retreat from following Jesus (John 6:66).

How could Jesus deny what He was? And yet, they had asked for bread. They wanted to stop at the manna, the type, the temporal. They were content to see Israel fed. But Jesus’ plan was to feed the world, to give eternal life to everyone willing to come to the meal. He wants to

give something better than mere manna; sweeter, more nutritious, more lasting. Jesus is the bread. We are to get to know Him, to taste, and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8).

Conclusion

Beside the other problems we experience because of our fallen humanity, two more loom large. One is a longing for freedom but with a strong inclination to settle for, even to especially seek out, the illusion of freedom. Beside this is the tendency to make immediate satisfaction our measure of utility. If I can do it now, if I can have it now, then I am interested. If it is too far off in the future, then it is uninteresting. This gives sin the glitter of attractiveness, so long as we mask the deadlier, sneaking riders that come with it—death, moral condemnation, eternal destruction.

Bible-thumpers come and appeal to both of these traps, offering the illusion of freedom and also the instant gratification of (supposed) salvation now, in a moment, apart from genuine change. They bring a list of rules for us so that we need not come too close to Him. Just fill out the contract and be His—from a distance.

In contrast, Jesus offers us the water of life, which we may drink and never thirst. He is also the bread of life, which we may eat, and never hunger. Instead of freedom's illusion, He offers the genuine. Instead of the supposed instant salvation, instant gratification, leaving us always wanting more, He offers us an actually fulfilling relationship. He will satisfy His own. His yoke is easy, His burden is light. In Him we find rest—actual rest—for our souls (Matthew 11:28-30). He is the bread of life; sweet, healthful, appealing bread.

When we approach others, we can come as Bible-thumpers, or so that we are perceived as Bible-thumpers. Or, we can come as bringers of the bread of life, something truly satisfying. Our success in genuinely leading others to Christ will be seen in what we choose to be.

Biographical Note: Pastor Larry Kirkpatrick is a convert to the Adventist faith. Since 1994 he has served in the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He holds degrees from Southern Adventist University and the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. His work has included research assistant for the Ellen G. White Estate, pioneering Adventist internet ministry, involvement in GYC, and presenter at the 50th Anniversary *Questions on Doctrine* Conference. He is author of the books *Real Grace for Real People* and *Cleanse and Close*. For many years his sermons and papers have been published on the internet. Larry and wife Pamela have served churches in Nevada, Utah, and California. The Kirkpatricks presently serve at the [Mentone church](#) near Loma Linda, California.