

Evangelism or Evangelism?

A sermon by Larry Kirkpatrick

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The Cat

It was a hot summer day, 2006, San Bernardino. I was returning from a visit in Loma Linda, headed North on Tippecanoe, approaching East Base Line. Then, it happened. A cat shot out into the street, beneath the wheels of the van ahead of me. In a moment, it was under, hit a wheel, bounced off, then partially crushed by the opposite wheel. It rolled onto its back, right side legs twitching madly, uncontrollably, clawing the sky in hyper-motion. Then, stillness, death. In a one-second, real-life video, the carefree cat had suffered a miserable, painful death.

On the hot asphalt lay the victim; another casualty in the Great Controversy War. From air-conditioned comfort I saw it all.

Heaven never wanted this to happen. If stomach-turning for us, how did God feel? An innocent animal, born onto the battlefield between good and evil, lay dead. Jesus was sacrificed on the cross some 2,000 years ago to finish everything, to end all this. Did He?

Ask the cat.

Today, clarifying our purpose. When it comes to evangelism, how shall we proceed? And so, first, the message, and second, the question of winning or taking souls.

What is Evangelism?

Sin and suffering did not end two millennia ago; it was not even interrupted. Sorrow, mayhem, evil, transgression, continued, worse than before. Some time after Jesus had died on Calvary's tree, Paul wrote, "For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now" (Romans 8:22).

The cross was decisive; it ended the war. And yet, if that is true, and if changing people was not an inescapable part of what God was doing, this should have all been concluded after

Jesus was sacrificed for us. If the requirements for ending the conflict between good and evil were then accomplished, why permit the creation to continue a scene of suffering? Something remained; something large. And so, at the end of the book of Matthew, Jesus did not say, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations that six months from now this will be over once and for all.”

Rather, He then set forth a long term mission:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world (Matthew 28:19, 20).

He sent His people—all of them—forth on a project that we now know would be take them 2,000 years at least. They were to teach, baptize, make disciples of Christ, and to do so in the assurance of Jesus’ help and presence. They were to live and give the evangel.

Our word “evangelism” comes from the Greek *euangelion*. Taken down into its pieces, that word consists literally of the words “good” and “message.” The word first appears in Scripture at Matthew 4:23:

And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people.

Ah, but where is *euangelion*? Jesus went through Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel—the *euangelion*—the good message of the kingdom, and healing all manner of disease. From the first, then, the gospel was associated with a message of teaching and healing. And the gospel, the good message, needs what? Good messengers to live it and give it. That is where we come in. Among other things, every Christian is called to be a good messenger.

And so, at the end of the gospel of John, Jesus tells His followers, “as My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you” (John 20:21).

In the time of Christ, evangelism meant helping Jews accept Jesus as Messiah. Not long afterward, it meant bringing God’s truth into direct conflict with Greek and Roman culture and ideas. When, in the 16th century, the Protestant Reformation came, “soul winning” meant turning people back from bondage to a church which saw itself as the one and only door to heaven, and from a distorted teaching of salvation on the basis of human works. But Protestantism never finished reforming, and today, too many Protestants need to be saved from what poses as Protestantism. Evangelism is a constant; but across time the setting and the details of the outreach change.

No Compromise

What does soul-winning mean today? Targeting people with the “four spiritual laws”? Telling them that they are lost sinners, that they need Christ, that they have only to say the magic words, then heaven is theirs? Telling them that everything was settled at the cross? It wasn’t; people continue to die every day. Christianity, for all its bluster, is not growing so fast as it once did. There are reasons why.

Is evangelism our doing the same thing that the (apparently successful) mega-church down the street is doing? Remember, something may appear successful to our eyes, and yet mask methods that are spiritually deadly. Whatever others are doing, we must be clear-eyed and forthright. It was a word from above when Ellen White wrote,

We are not to cringe and beg pardon of the world for telling them the truth: we should scorn concealment. Unfurl your colors to meet the cause of men and angels. Let it be

understood that Seventh-day Adventists can make no compromise. In your opinions and faith there must not be the least appearance of waverings: the world has a right to know what to expect of us (*Evangelism*, p. 179).

Today, many emphasize diversity. There is substantial diversity across time, yet in each time and place there is something of a uniformity. In the time of Christ the message was, Jesus is Messiah. There could be no compromise on that point. In the time of the Protestant Reformation, the main thrust was that we are not saved by our own works. There could be no compromise on that point. Today, in the time of the Third Angel's Message, the message is that we are to live godly in Christ Jesus because His Second Coming is imminent. There can be no compromise on that point.

When Jesus went to the cross, He refused to compromise. Satan tried over and over. He tried it sneaky, out in the wilderness. Then, when he saw he was exposed, he tried it openly, offering Jesus a way around the cross:

The devil taketh Him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth Him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and saith unto Him, All these things will I give Thee, if Thou wilt fall down and worship me (Matthew 4:8, 9).

He tried deception, bribery, and, at last, torture. Our Lord would not yield. The fight was on and it was a fight to the utter end. Jesus would die before He would compromise with Satan, He would expire before He would stoop to wrong methods. And as the father sent Him, so He sends us. None of that has changed.

One of the big compromises set before us today is that each church can continue to exist and teach its message, so long as it goes after the "unchurched." We do need to win the "unchurched," but that does not go far enough. In Jesus' day, most of the Jews were, we would say, "churched" (synagogued at least).

But the issues of truth and error do not end at the door of the church; they come right inside. Jesus angered the Jews by living and giving truth to the unchurched and the churched. We cannot consent to limit our work to the unchurched. God calls His people out of Babylon, false religion (Revelation 18:1-4). Babylon is about to be judged, destroyed with all who remain voluntarily lodged in that house of devils. Thus the call, “Come out of her My people.”

“Win” Them or “Take” Them?

Would that Seventh-day Adventists were this clear about the gospel message. There are a thousand tangents to run onto in time’s end. Jesus warned us that there would come persons claiming that Jesus was in the desert; that Jesus was in the secret place (Matthew 24:23, 26). In other words, that His Present Truth has led us here, or that His Present Truth has led us there—when it hasn’t.

But there is another point for concern. We may have misunderstood the soul-winning mission.

Consider a text we have seen before:

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise (Proverbs 11:30 KJV).

We are an evangelistic people, and have been since the beginning. We agree that one who engages in soul winning is wise. We have seen and admitted that the way we do evangelism can look very different in different phases of the Great Controversy War. This idea, “winning souls” is crucial. And yet, is Proverbs 11:30 asking us to “win souls” by changing people’s theological opinions? Is that what is going on in the life and surroundings of the Book of Proverbs?

How is this verse in the Hebrew? The JPS (Jewish Publication Society) translation offers, “A wise man captivates people.” The English Standard Version gives, “Whoever captures souls is wise.” The literal Hebrew reads, “He who takes souls is wise.” Proverbs 11 offers a long string of contrasts, mostly between the righteous and the wicked, the wise man and the fool. In verse 30, both lines are about the righteous. The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life. And the manifestation of the fruit of the righteous is that he takes souls captive. Verse 31 says that if the righteous is repaid in the earth, it is yet more certain that the wicked is here repaid.

All of which helps us understand the meaning of the taking of souls in v. 30. It is not that the righteous takes the wicked prisoner, but that—if there is no intervention; if the wicked continues on his course of evil—he will harm others and himself; he will be recompensed for his behavior. But if the righteous intervenes, if he “takes souls”—if he persuades so that the self-serving see the error of his ways, he can escape the inevitable consequence of doing evil. James captures the idea:

Whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (James 5:20 ESV).

And so, a contrast: two kinds of “evangelism”: one, rescue from false doctrine, from a faith and practice misguided. The other, all that and to change people, to bring healing to their lives, to bring them back from the deadly results of evil-doing. The first is important, but the second brings even more abundant life through Christ here and now. The first kind can be criticized as one group pressing that its views are more right than the other group. In the second kind, the righteous understands that he is sent to “take” souls. We are to rescue the perishing. We are not sent to “win” souls, but to “take” them.

Compelled or Persuaded?

This sounds quite aggressive. We should be wary of Augustine's misinterpretation of Luke 14:23: "And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled." Augustine took this as demonstration that the use of force in matters of conscience is appropriate (seen in Augustine Letter 93, to Vincentius in AD 408).

The actual story (Luke 14:16-24) is about respect, not force. A rich man plans a special feast but those invited are too busy to come. And so, the king sends his servants into the highways and byways and compel others to come to the feast. That this is not about force is apparent; the king never forces those whom he had first invited to attend. Rather, he changes plans; he now asks that the common people come to the feast—something that might be difficult to convince them of without strong attempts to persuade.

We must not forget that all who have sinned have been taken captive by Satan. Isaiah 14:17, where the judgment and final demise of Satan is described, includes in the divine complaint that Satan refused to open the house of his prisoners. He refuses to open, so Jesus pries it open! The gospel is about releasing Satan's prisoners.

David prayed,

Attend unto my cry; for I am brought very low: deliver me from my persecutors; for they are stronger than I. Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise Thy name: the righteous shall compass me about; for Thou shalt deal bountifully with me (Psalm 142:6, 7).

Evangelism is bringing the lost soul out of prison. The gospel is such that a person who is freed need not carry ball and chain with them for the rest of their life. Jesus delivers us from bondage, He removes every fetter.

True Evangelism is the True Fast

Isaiah has been called the gospel prophet (a misnomer really, for all of God's prophets were gospel prophets). Still, Isaiah's prose is some of the most beautiful of all the ages. Hear him in Isaiah 58:

Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? (Isaiah 58:6, 7).

True evangelism is the fast that God has chosen. Our text offers two aspects: personal deliverance and service toward those in need. In Proverbs 11:30 the wise takes souls; it sounds exactly opposite, doesn't it? But our mission *is* to take them—from the clutches of Satan.

On the personal deliverance side, we have Isaiah 58:6. The mission of the church and thus of you, the church member? To loose the bands of wickedness, undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke. Who? You. You are called of God to do these things. You are to be walking close to Him yourself, and to stand ready for the opportunities Heaven makes. This is a spiritual call. Each one of us is to be so living, so experiencing God's things, that we are available to help Him help others experience them. If we are not at this place, certainly, then, we do not have time or energy to go chasing off on sidetracks.

But then there is verse seven: "Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?" Here is practical ministry, helping the needy, giving food, offering shelter, clothing the homeless. Theory must be enfolded; ideas must enter

the world via our actual actions. The church is not to hover above the world; it is to reach out into it with deliverance.

The last line of Isaiah's text especially brings clarification. It calls us to refuse to hide ourselves from our own flesh. Each individual Christian remains part of the wider humanity. We are each part of one and the same human family. Satan would have us deny that one way or the other. He would have us think ourselves superior to them, or that we could pay someone else to get their hands dirty ministering to them. We will have the state feed them, the state clothe them, we will contribute dollars to this or that ministry and pay them to serve others in our behalf. But how can we become like Jesus from a distance? We must ourselves touch the world. Our hands are to be the hands of the gospel. *That*, is genuine evangelism.

Conclusion

And so, what is our work? It is to offer, with clarity and without compromise the full truth entrusted to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Praise be to God, He has given us a message. He has delivered to us the insight at the core of the war, the reason why sin and suffering remain, why godly people still die, and why a cat is crushed into the pavement in San Bernardino.

He has also shown us that we are not merely here to win people over to our understanding, but to "take" souls for the kingdom. Yes, they have free will, but our arguments and our lives are to be so persuasive that people are captivated, even captured by the revelation of God's goodness.

Thus, we face a question: Shall we do evangelism, or evangelism? Our call is to take souls for the kingdom. Are our lives that persuasive? And do we understand the plan of

redemption sufficiently well that we can make it easy to be understood by those who are ready to consider whether these things are so?

Jesus is making His atonement fully effectual. He sent us on this mission. We are not to hide ourselves from our own flesh. We are to feed and clothe the needy, but this means even more. We are to take the good message, the Third Angel's Message, the everlasting gospel, to every burdened heart. What use temporal clothing if these are not clothed with the garments of salvation? The message must go, God's blessing be unleashed into the world. Ask God to use you.

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.