REFORMING EVANGELISM: FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

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Introduction

My first day at college was a memorable one. I met one of my roommates as I was unloading and we began to talk about where we were from, what our majors were, what churches we attended, and so on. When I told him I was a Bible Presbyterian, he remarked, “Oh! So you don’t believe in evangelism then.” He was suffering under the common, yet mistaken, idea that Reformed theology kills evangelical zeal. Sometimes, I think Reformed people themselves are under the same delusion, not realizing that truly Reformed theology is the greatest incentive to evangelism ever!

Years later, my friend and I conducted a large youth rally in my home town of Grants Pass, Oregon. His techniques and strategy were far different from mine. His Arminian background dictated his emotional appeals to the will of man as the deciding factor in one’s salvation. My appeals were for submission to a sovereign, merciful God. What would your appeals be like? Would you make any appeals at all? Historically, the greatest missionaries and evangelists have been predominantly Reformed--why do we have a problem with evangelism then? This article will examine [1] our motivation for evangelism, as well as [2] some principles that will guide us as we set out to reform evangelism.

Definition of Evangelism

A good place to start is to define what we mean by evangelism. The word has taken on a great deal of excess baggage over the years until many now equate evangelism with certain types of activities within the church. That is, one is evangelizing when he or she is asking people to come to church, or when he or she happens to mention God’s name favorably in conversation, or if he or she participates in an evangelistically oriented meeting, to mention a few examples. However good these activities are, they are not evangelism per se. Our method must be determined by what evangelism is, rather than defining evangelism in terms of method. Just last year I filled out an application to work with a Christian organization that oversees all ministries in Remann Hall, a juvenile detention center in Tacoma. On the application they asked me to describe how I would lead a soul to Christ, outlining verses I would use, etc. It puzzled me, because I hardly ever use the same approach twice. People’s hearts offer different barriers that guard their essential sinfulness. Therefore, different “demolition tools” are needed from situation to situation. I came to realize that this organization had fallen into the same salesmanship trap that many believers and their ministers have—that is, all one has to do is use a set package of verses and appeals and God is sure to honor and bless because “we’re doing evangelism!” J. I. Packer writes, “There is only one method of evangelism: namely, the faithful explanation and
application of the gospel message.”

I would add to this definition by referring to Proverbs 24:11, 12, which reads, “Deliver those who are drawn toward death, and hold back those stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, ‘Surely we did not know this,’ does not He who weighs the hearts consider it? He who keeps your soul, does He not know it? And will He not render to each man according to his deeds?” Evangelism is the urgent, compassionate, and faithful (obedient to command and content) explanation and application of the gospel wherever and whenever the Lord leads us to engage a soul.

**Motivation - Why we must evangelize**

Matthew 9:37,38 reads, “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers in the His harvest.” Everyone recognizes that the need is great, but few believe it strongly enough to do something about it. If folks do pray as Christ instructs them, they often think only in terms of others going besides themselves. (This is what I call the “my-ministry-is-as-a-prayer-warrior” syndrome.) As Reformed people, we pride ourselves on paying attention to the full counsel of God. Very well, what do the Scriptures say about why we all should be telling others about the gospel?

*We must evangelize to glorify God.* I Corinthians 10:31 tells us that whatever we do must be for God’s glory. All of us are familiar with the Shorter Catechism’s first question and answer as well; glorifying and enjoying God are man’s principle duties here on earth and for eternity. A person’s glory is simply the manifestation of his perfections; and evangelism is an essential part of directing men to see (and bow before) God’s perfections. Moreover, evangelism demonstrates God’s perfections in our own lives as we carry out his work.

For one thing, our testimony reflects the light of God. Jesus states in Matthew 5:16, “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” From where does our light come? John 8:12 has the answer: “Jesus spoke to them again, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.’” Our lives and our words reflect the light of Christ that is in us. When Christ reveals Himself, there is always glory, for His perfections shine forth, not ours.

That truth leads us to the second aspect of glorifying God, which is that our testimony directs praise to Him. Only God can create a new person, and the world knows it. Psalm 40:2,3 describes God’s act of re-creation and the effect it has upon men: “He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps. He has put a new song in my mouth—praise to our God; many will see and fear, and will trust in the LORD.” Do you want to glorify God? Then spend your life praising and testifying of the God who redeemed you!

*We must evangelize out of obedience to God.* The command and urging to evangelize is an important part of the message and ministry of Christ (for examples, the sending out of the 12

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2All Scripture quotations taken from the New King James Version of the Bible.
and the 70). Both Matthew 28:19,20 and Acts 1:8 strongly emphasize the commissioning by Christ of the disciples to the task. Paul follows up in II Cor 5:18-21 with the insistence that we all fulfill our role as Christ’s ambassadors, following Paul’s example. Peter writes with similar thinking behind his discussion of the priesthood of all believers. Of course, the Old Testament is full of calls to declare God’s glory and dominion to all nations: a duty sorely neglected by Israel out of pride and self-service. We dare not follow their example. God gives us strong warning in Ezekiel 3:18 that as watchmen we must be faithful to proclaim what God has said to whom He has said it, for their sakes as well as ours. We do have an obligation to others. Paul was able to declare in Acts 20:26, “I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all.” He could say this because he had testified faithfully out of obedience to God and commitment to his fellow creatures.3

We must evangelize out of compassion for others. This third motivating factor arises naturally out of the one that precedes it. We have just seen that Paul was concerned more about souls than a head count. He didn’t travel throughout the Mediterranean world just so he could carve notches in his gospel gun. He was aware of God’s command that we love our neighbors as ourselves. I met a Baptist preacher in Columbia, South Carolina, who had gotten a hold of just enough Reformed theology to make him dangerous. He was truly a hyper-Calvinist who went about deciding on his own initiative who were the elect and who weren’t. We were talking about a rebellious student that attended the little Christian school his church operated. This preacher told me, “God doesn’t love that kid and never will.” (He had decided that since he didn’t love Johnny, God must not either.) When I objected, he jumped down my throat: “The idea that God loves the sinner but hates his sin is a lie from hell!” Now, I understand the doctrine of reprobation, but it is not up to us to decide who is reprobated so that we can excuse ourselves from loving souls.

We need to follow Christ’s example. In Luke 15:1, 2 the evangelist tells us of the complaints of the Pharisees about Christ’s habit of fellowshipping with traitors (which was the prevailing view of tax collectors) and sinners. We often have the same repugnance toward the lost, forgetting that apart from God’s grace we would be as they are. The lost gathered around Christ because He loved them more than himself. We are not told that Christ only received the elect around Him. The word received is an interesting word. It comes from the verb προσδέχομαι and means to welcome, take up, or receive. Paul uses the same word elsewhere (Romans 16:2; Philippians 2:29) of welcoming someone in the Lord. Following Christ’s example, we will welcome sinners rather than shun them as we seek to obediently proclaim to them the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If, however, we seek to follow Christ’s example using our capacity to love, we will sorely fail. Christ’s love must be the driving force behind our labors for souls. Paul writes in II Cor. 5:14 that “the love of Christ compels us.” Paul’s recognition of the condition of man was only the beginning: it had to be coupled with the love of Christ.

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3For Paul’s feelings about the souls of men, a brief look at Romans 1 and 9:1-3 makes it clear that Paul was driven more than just fear of reprisal from God. He keenly felt an obligation to others. See also II Corinthians 5:10 and 11.
As we show Christ’s love in our testimony to others we are also acting out Christ’s mercy. Jude 21-23 expresses this thought vividly: “Keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garments defiled by the flesh.”

Paul T. Murphy summarizes the necessity of compassion well:

After all, what is a Calvinist? A Calvinist is one who has looked into the fires of Hell and seen its terror. A Calvinist is one who knows that he is a Hell-deserving sinner. A Calvinist is one who has been drawn to the foot of the cross and seen Christ in all His glory as a Savior for sinners. A Calvinist is one who knows that Hell is where, but for the sovereign grace of God and no other reason, he belongs. A Calvinist is one who has experienced compassion and thus should be one who is filled with compassion.4

I hope that by now you are convinced that evangelizing is not an option, or just something that only a privileged few are supposed to do. If so, great—but now you very well may be one of the millions who say “Yes, I need to witness more” but never do because they don’t know HOW. Every situation is different. But there are some basic principles that will help you get started down, and stay on, the right track.

**Guiding Principles - How we should evangelize**

The first principle is that Reformed theology is not your enemy! (or, Tulip or not Tulip?) Some Reformed people almost seem apologetic about referring to the truths of Scripture. It is a tacit admission that while these things are true, we don’t want to talk about them because they will drive men away. I am glad our Savior did not take such a timid approach to His evangelism. He declared the truth, no matter how hard it was to hear, and the Holy Spirit applied the Word to whomever He willed. With that in mind, a brief look at the so-called Five Points of Calvinism is in order, since these are often the points of issue in evangelism.

1. **Total Depravity**

Understanding this keeps you focused on what the Bible emphasizes—God’s mercy, not man’s ability. Most unregenerate men want to believe that there is some corner of their hearts that is capable of reaching out to God on their own initiative. Challenge such belief with the Scriptures. Man has to approach God on God’s terms and no other. Learn what the Scriptures say about man’s ability, and that knowledge will change your entire “strategy” of evangelism. You will not be content to let men blissfully plunge ahead into darkness thinking they have no need to humble themselves before God. Remember the first Beatitude? “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall see God.”

2. **Unconditional Election**

Understanding this keeps you from despair in hard places and actually is a great source of confidence. Because Jesus says in John 10:14, “I am the good shepherd; and I know my sheep, and and known by my own,” we can proceed confidently knowing that the work of regeneration is completely in God’s hands. Christ will certainly gather in His sheep as He wills!

Furthermore, preaching about election is certainly appropriate: Jesus, after all, made it clear that that Father had given Him a particular flock. Those whom the Holy Spirit regenerates will respond to the message of God’s love. Worrying about a person’s response to this doctrine is inconsistent with a biblical understanding of man’s depravity. If a person is not humbled before God when confronted with the gospel, the Holy Spirit is not at work! Don’t cast pearls before swine!

Again, the Bible’s emphasis is on God’s mercy, not man’s deserving or twisted ideas of “fairness.” If one’s concept of depravity is wanting, his view of election will also suffer. Rather than accepting that none deserve salvation, unregenerate men think that God should make an exception in their case. Challenge such thinking from Scripture! Paul explains forcefully in Romans 9:14-24 that God’s election demonstrates his glorious mercy against a backdrop of deserved reprobation. We must not apologize for the glory of our God.

3. Limited Atonement

Understanding this keeps you consistently Trinitarian. The operations of the Persons of the Trinity are equal in extent. See I John 5:6,8; Rom. 8:28-31; Eph. 1:3-14; and I Pet. 1:2. The Father’s election, the Son’s redemption, and the Spirit’s sanctification are all particular. We must point men to the God of the Scriptures, not an Arminian interpretation of the Living God. Theirs is a God of confusion, for what the Father has desired the Son only partially accomplished, and the Spirit’s stirrings in men’s hearts are hit-and-miss.

Regarding especially the work of the Son, we must understand that He is not greater or lesser than the Father (does not accomplish more or less than the Father). The Son has equal honor with the Father. (John 5:23) The Son redeems only those given Him by the Father. (John 17:6,9,10) In other words, He cannot redeem more than the Father elects. The “Lamb’s book of life” demonstrates that the number of the Father’s elect is identical with the number that Christ redeems. Finally, Christ redeems no more than the Spirit sanctifies. (IJohn 5:6,7) “Christ’s oblation is not of larger extent than the Spirit’s operation.”

The Bible’s emphasis is on the completeness and sufficiency of Christ’s atoning work, not man’s deciding vote. The universalistic, Arminian position makes a mockery of sovereign

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5Ezekiel 18:19-29 is an excellent discussion of the Lord’s justice as opposed to man’s ideas of fairness. There, Israel was of the opinion that God should reward them for the righteousness of their fathers regardless of their own actions. Inconsistently, they then also felt that the wicked should get what was coming to them (just as long as it wasn’t themselves!) God’s answer was that every man would answer for his own conduct before God: “The soul that sins shall die.” (vs. 4, 20)

grace and manipulators out of evangelists. Preaching with understanding of God’s particular atonement will overflow with joy in the God who accomplishes surely what He sets out to do!

4. Irresistible Grace

Understanding this helps preach a full gospel. “The Holy Spirit never fails to bring to salvation those sinners whom He personally calls to Christ.” The first implication of this statement is that faith and repentance are divine gifts. Secondly it implies that the Gospel is not an option but a command. (Acts 17:30) Once again, the biblical emphasis is upon the work of the Spirit, not the work of man’s will. “It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:13) The calling of the Spirit is not plaintive and timid but bold and confident. When He regenerates, man’s will is truly free to return to his God! Far from violating the will, God’s irresistible grace restores it to genuine ability, led by the Spirit to gain the narrow way. Never hesitate to preach God’s grace—there is no salvation without it.

5. Perseverance of the Saints

Understanding this prevents “easy-believism.” There is no distinction between being saved and being a disciple in the Scriptures. That is, there is no salvation w/o submission. Titus 3:7 says that “being justified by His grace we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” Such hope implies the necessity of preaching repentance. Perseverance does not mean that once saved, a person can then live unto himself and yet claim the blood and name of Christ with the full expectation of being eagerly received by the Savior in glory. To such persons, Christ has other words to say, “Depart from Me, I never knew you.” Our witness will be one that seeks to turn men to righteousness from evil. We will not water down the gospel so that it is easier for the wicked to swallow.

Further, understanding and properly employing the doctrine of perseverance will keep us from decisional evangelism. We know if people are of God by their actions, not their decisions. (“By their fruits you shall know them...”)

To summarize our first principle then, I assert that without Reformed theology, evangelism is DE-formed! Do not fear to take up the standard and hold your ground. All too many believers approach evangelism letting what the world wants to hear call the shots. As a result, many who claim the name of Christ are no disciples at all. They are like the seed which fell on stony or thorny ground: they spring up quickly with only shallow roots, only to whither away into nothing when the Adversary comes.

We can cover our remaining principles in fairly short order. The second principle is to be flexible! Paul declared that he was “all things to all men” in his efforts to win others to Christ. (I Cor. 9:19-22) His discussion with the Athenians in Acts 17 on Mars Hill demonstrates forcefully that Paul was a master persuader. First, you have to know who your audience is, and Paul had them pegged perfectly as intellectuals, philosophers, and people of position in Athens. He addressed them respectfully, and approached them on their own terms. If you only think of

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the gospel in terms that are natural to you, you will never be able to be flexible when faced with an audience outside of your experience.

Second, you have to be familiar with what your audience knows. Paul established common ground by speaking of the gods he saw on the way into the city, and by quoting their own poets to confirm his point in their minds. It was not the only proof he offered for his thesis, but it was effective to demonstrate that even their own thinkers instinctively understood that what he was saying was true. Don’t be afraid to pull in current events, insights from pagans (pearls in sow’s snouts!), and other appeals to a person’s culture to demonstrate that what God has said is true and relevant to their hearts and lives.

Third, you have to be able to adjust to different people’s needs. Don’t operate from a script. If you only know one way to present the gospel, you’re in trouble, because hardly anyone ever lets you just walze them through your presentation without questions, objections, or comments that can throw you off-track. Operate rather from ideas that are firmly planted in your heart. If you are a genuine believer, you know what God can do in a person’s life. Talk about Christ from your heart, not a list, and when objections come you will respond from the truths within you. The knowledge in your head will follow. (These statements do imply that you are truly regenerated and that you have studied your Bible enough to have some knowledge.) If you think about it, you communicate this way every day. The way you explain an event you’ve experienced will vary from listener to listener, but the essentials are there and you don’t panic that you might not get it right. It’s the same in testifying of the good news of Jesus Christ.

The third principle is to remember Whom you represent! Imaging God is not just a quality of the believer, but an action. (Jer. 6:27; Acts 22:15; I Peter 2:9, 10) As His representative, your mouth must be filled with His message. It is God’s Word that saves, not yours. (I Tim.4:6, 7; Rom.1:16,17) We have authority because of Who God is, and only to the extent that we remain true to His Word. This principle acts as a check to going overboard on flexibility, a common problem among pragmatic religion. Being culturally relevant is no good if we lose sight of the good news!

The fourth principle is that the gospel must consume you! Aristotle wrote that there were three primary proofs for any given argument: logos, or factual information; pathos, or emotional appeals; and ethos, a person’s character. He insisted that ethos was the strongest of all appeals, because what a person says is less important than who he is perceived to be. (Which is why politicians can lie and get away with it.) What kind of person are you? I Corinthians 4:20 reads, “The kingdom of God is not in word by in power.” Do you talk a good line, but fail to back it up with depth of character? Are you an imitation, or a real Christian? People can spot a fake quickly. As soon as such a person is under pressure the veneer wears thin, and the real person shines through. Very simply, if you don’t really believe what you’re saying, neither will anyone else.

Also, what do you know? Another way of asking this question is, how much do you study? Just as a salt-water well can’t produce fresh water, neither can a dry well produce any water at all. Spurgeon used to speak of a water seller that he observed outside his hotel while on a preaching tour. On a daily basis the man took bucket after bucket of water from the town well
to fill his water wagon. The man would then leave, only to return a short while later to repeat the process. Others would come to fill a bucket or two for their own use, but this man came again and again as he emptied his wagon. It dawned on Spurgeon that, in principle, the evangelist must take the same course as that of the water seller. Not only must you fill up with the living water for your own use from day to day, but you must also fill up enough to distribute to others. That means coming to the well of life frequently. Do you care enough to do so?

Speaking of caring, what is your desire? Jonah was only interested in what served himself best. He wanted the wicked to get their just deserts, with no possibility of parole. Paul, on the other hand, held his own life in low esteem if he might be used of God to bring men to the Savior. Which example do you fit under?

Finally, who or what are you depending on? Do you pray? How? And how much? Does concern for the souls of others burn within you to the point that you pour out your heart before God for them? Augustine’s famous statement from a funeral sermon is appropriate here: “We weep for the body from which the soul has departed. How much more should we weep for the soul from whom God has departed?” You cannot do the work alone, nor can you depend upon men’s techniques or efforts to accomplish God’s task. Plead with Him, commune with Him, before you ever say a word about the gospel to others. Since we are to be ready to give an answer at any time of the hope that lies within us, that means “pray without ceasing!” Read again Paul Murphy’s view of the Calvinist’s compassion (above, p. 4) as an excellent summary of this fourth principle.

Conclusion

So what’s stopping you? Far from granting you an excuse not to evangelize, our theology provides the greatest of motivating forces and the most powerful of messages. By God’s grace, in His power, and with His Word, let’s get busy. ☝️