

Reformation
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A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

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1. To encourage *reformation* in the local Christian churches worldwide,
 2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.
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Information

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The conviction of the staff and editors of the *Reformation & Revival Journal* is that awakening, of the kind seen in the First Great Awakening in this country, wedded to the doctrinal concerns of the historic Protestant Reformation as expressed in the terms *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide*, is needed in our generation.

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Editor's Introduction

Is there any subject which more interests those who are vitally related to Jesus Christ than evangelism? Indeed, even those from the more liberal traditions and mainline denominations have taken increasing interest in the subject in recent decades, what with the decline of membership in their respective churches.

Interest in evangelism has concerned the Christian church from its inception. Did not Jesus teach His disciples that after the Holy Spirit came upon them, “you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8)? We read in Acts 8:4, “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” When the Holy Spirit came upon the infant church the promise of Acts 1:8 was applied to all, not just to the apostles. The task of evangelism has always been the concern of the whole church, and especially so in times of Spirit-given awakening and reformation. Though evangelism is not the same as revival—a mistaken assumption of the past 50 years or so in the evangelical movement of the West—one can not pray for spiritual awakening and remain disobedient to the task of evangelism and mission. As John Blanchard has written, “No church is obedient that is not evangelistic.” Evangelism of the best and most effective sort will be a major evidence of any genuine revival that we might experience in our generation.

But what is evangelism? Why should we engage in it? What methods does Scripture warrant us to use in reaching men and women with the message of Christ? What does theology have to do with evangelism?

Evangelism for well over a generation has been done in a doctrinal vacuum in the West. And much of what has been exported to other fields of Christian mission has reflected this same doctrinal fuzziness and shallowness. Time has come to reflect seriously upon much of what is being done today in the name of evangelism. If what we are doing is truly

evangelism, well and good, but if it is busy activity only, or, worse yet, harmful activity, then we must call it into question on the basis of *sola scriptura*.

The result of this doctrinal vacuum can be seen in our preoccupation with methods of evangelism; to the virtual exclusion of understanding and concentrating on the question of "What is the evangel itself?" Are the messages being preached, the tracts handed out, the patterns of presentation memorized, and the booklets distributed *genuinely faithful* to the gospel *message* itself? Mass campaigns, radio and television outreach ministries and parachurch agencies by the dozens have sought to win the multitudes to Christ. What is the result of nearly a century of such well-intentioned efforts?

What then is *evangelism*? I answer, "It is to preach the gospel with the intention of gaining true followers of Jesus Christ." The gospel is the evangel. The Greek word for gospel is the word from which we get our English word evangel. The verb for the preaching of the gospel is the same as that used of the activity of evangelism. The noun, *euangelion*, occurs more than 75 times in the New Testament writings. The verb, *euangelidzomai*, occurs more than 50 times. It is quite often translated as "to preach." J. I. Packer expands this short definition on evangelism by saying that to evangelize is:

To present Jesus Christ to sinful men, in order that they may come to put their trust in God, through Him to receive Him as their Savior and serve Him as their King in the fellowship of His church.¹

This helpful definition makes it quite clear that evangelism is not appealing for decisions in some specialized way, or gaining response to our invitations. Nor is it putting family life back together, or saving marriages with new counseling techniques. (One megachurch actually insists

that the "Twelve Steps" are the best evangelistic preparatory tool they've ever used!) No, evangelism may well end some marriages, and will often divide families, as will be more and more apparent as our culture becomes increasingly hostile to its Christian roots. Did not our Lord come to bring a sword of division? (Cf. Matt. 10:34-39; Luke 14:25-27.)

Evangelism, then, must have a proper evangel. This is theology. It must also have a proper method. This is what we call practical theology. This proper practice is revealed in the words and work of the apostles and Christ Himself. We are not free to make up our own methods willy nilly. Does not the proper understanding of the *sufficiency of written Scripture* compel us to work from Scripture as we labor for the conversion of men and women? Personally I am convinced that this is the issue of our age among evangelicals, who have a conservative political and social agenda built on a kind of popular Christian practice of recent decades. This practice often looks nothing like that of the New Testament. The result is a spurious kind of evangelism that has done much harm in our age. We need not only a revival of power to see conversions multiplied both within the visible church community as well as in the culture at large, but also a thorough going reformation of method and manner in evangelism.

Ernest Reisinger is right to add to all of this that we need a proper motive. He writes:

What is the right motive in God-centered evangelism? There are two proper motives: 1) Love to God and concern for His glory. 2) Love to man and concern for his good. . . . How do we glorify God? . . . by doing His will—and it is His will that we spread His name and His message of His salvation. . . . He has given us the work of taking His message to all the world, thus our first motive must be love to God and concern for His glory. This is expressed in obedience to His revealed will. Therefore, if we are obedient to spreading God's message,

He will be glorified regardless of the results. The results are past our reach, past our ability, and thank God, past our responsibility.²

As to the second motive, John Blanchard is surely correct when he writes, "Evangelism is morally right—it is the payment of a debt." A debt of love we owe, to God and to man. If we love our neighbor then we must seek to bring the light of the evangel to him in every possible way. As Vance Havner succinctly put it, "Every Christian is a postmaster for God. His duty is to pass out good news from above."

This issue of the **Journal** is devoted to a study of some of the issues that touch on this most vital theme. May God use it to quicken our pulse for obedience as well as our understanding of the evangel itself. May abuses be corrected and glory brought to God through His gospel. It is, as always, still "the power of God to salvation."

Editor

End Notes

- 1 J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961), pp.37-38.
- 2 Ernest C. Reisinger, *Today's Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Craig Press, 1982), pp. 2-4.