

Calvinism and Evangelism

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

“Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.”

—Mark 16:15

Introduction

One of the most frequent attacks against the belief in God’s sovereignty in the salvation of sinners concerns evangelism. It is asserted that one cannot believe in the doctrines of grace (so-called *Calvinism* [1](#)) and be evangelistic. Seldom are Calvinists blatantly charged with this failure. The attack is usually couched in implications and insinuations while John Calvin is praised for his brilliance and godliness. With a sigh, a cluck of the tongue, and a slow shake of the bowed head, Calvin is pitied because his followers have taken his doctrines too far. Calvin, they allege, never intended to go that far and is, no doubt, spinning in his grave with grief and lament.

Other critics openly impeach Calvinism. Evangelist R. L. Sumner pontificates, “Five-point Calvinism curtails missions, wrecks revivalism and destroys personal soul-winning!”[2](#) And what is the evidence for this conclusion? The size of one’s church seems to be the main criterion. A Calvinistic pastor of a small church is always the best evidence that Calvinism “destroys personal soul-winning.” Of course, a large church with a Calvinistic pastor is an anomaly to be ignored. Obviously, such a church could not be taking the pastor’s theology seriously.

Writing about how he corrected a seminary student on election and evangelism, Sumner related to him the difference between two imaginary churches designated by spots on the cover of his Bible:

“Isn’t it strange,” I concluded, pointing again to the spot which represented the evangelistic church, “how many souls God is ‘electing’ over here and how few,” pointing to the spot representing the non-evangelistic [Calvinistic] church, “God is ‘electing’ over here?”[3](#)

These remarks make it clearly evident that Sumner considers numbers of converts and church size as the measure of evangelism and theology. He continues:

I will never forget the dumbfounded, amazed expression on that young seminarian’s face! His mouth dropped open, and then he stammered, “I . . . , I . . . , I never thought about that!” [4](#)

Well, we have thought about that, but how does one respond to such charges? Do Calvinists really fear that they might accidentally save one of the non-elect? Are their churches small because they refuse to evangelize or because they are hard pressed to identify which sinners might be elect?

Calvinists, in the main, are obedient Bible-believing Christians who take very seriously Christ’s command to “preach the gospel to every creature.” I submit that the real issue is not that Calvinists are not evangelistic but that they do not employ their critics’ methods in evangelism.

I. Calvinists believe the *message* of evangelism.

1. What the gospel is

First, we must define *evangelism*. The word comes from the Greek word *euaggelion*, which is a compound of two words, *good* and *news*—“good news.” We call this *good news* the “gospel.” *Gospel* comes from the Anglo-Saxon *godspell*, meaning “good tidings.” Paul calls it “*the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation*” in Ephesians 1:13. In our text Christ commands his disciples to go into the whole world and preach the *gospel*—the good news of His salvation—to every creature.

Second, we must understand what constitutes the *good news* Christ commands us to preach. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, “*I declare unto you the gospel . . . how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.*” In other words, the gospel is the story of Christ’s coming into this world to save sinners from their sins—from the guilt, the condemnation, and the power of their sins. The fact is, both Calvinists and their evangelistic critics believe the gospel and usually define it the same way, as we have above.

Third, we must understand the purpose of the gospel—bringing sinners to faith in Jesus Christ, who is the only Savior from sins. Paul declared to the Philippian jailor, “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house*” (Acts 16:31). “*Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12). The purpose of evangelism and missions is to take the gospel of Christ and salvation to every person, summoning them to repentance and faith in him. However, telling people to come to Jesus is not the gospel.

2. What the gospel is not

Modern evangelism confuses the gospel with its purpose. Thus, modern evangelists focus on the sinner and ways to get the sinner to respond to the gospel, often obscuring the message.

The error of many “gospel preachers” is to turn away from the message of Christ to the exhortation that one must be born again. The necessity of the new birth in salvation is a biblical fact (John 3), but it is not the gospel. The new birth is falsely preached as the responsibility of the sinner. Jesus made it clear that the new birth was the work of God’s Spirit alone (John 3:8). One can search John 3 in vain for instruction on *how* to be born again. Jesus was merely informing Nicodemus that if he was even to see the kingdom of God, he must be born again. Preaching that “ye must be born again” is not the gospel.

The gospel is not something a sinner experiences. Urging people to ask Jesus Christ to come into their hearts is not the gospel. Getting people to come forward in a meeting is not the gospel. Asking people if they want to go to heaven is not preaching the gospel. The gospel is what Jesus Christ did. Our duty is to tell people clearly the gospel and depend upon God’s power to save them. The gospel is the power of *God* unto salvation (Romans 1:16). It is not the power of the evangelist or the soul-winner.

II. Calvinists use biblical *means* for evangelism.

1. Calvinists believe that the gospel must be *preached*, for Jesus commands us to “*preach the gospel to every creature.*”

Paul asks an important question, “*How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?*” (Rom. 10:14). Paul took this task very seriously: “*For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel! For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me*” (1 Cor. 9:16, 17).

The gospel is *preached* using three particular means: (1) public proclamation by a preacher preaching sermons. This is a very powerful and important means of declaring the gospel. The Calvinistic “prince of preachers,” Charles H. Spurgeon, argued that preachers must work at making sermons interesting and compelling. He thought it “less a crime to cause a momentary laughter than a half hour’s profound slumber.” The gospel is such that it requires careful preparation and lively, impassioned, and clear delivery. It is not enhanced by the theologically shallow, manipulative, and emotional story-telling with sparse Bible reference that characterizes many modern pulpits.

The gospel is also preached through (2) the private witness of God’s people—personal soul-winning. This is the area that the critics seem to focus on most. Evangelist Robert Sumner expressed this unsubstantiated opinion: “The whole idea of individual responsibility in soul sinning is annihilated in the ‘tulip’ view.”⁵

Evangelist John R. Rice (now deceased) went further to declare the wrong motives of Calvinists. He wrote:

The hyper-Calvinistic heresy is particularly appealing to the carnal nature, unwilling to have the heart-break, the burden for soul winning, unwilling to pay the price of separation and perhaps ostracism which goes with all-out soul winning, unwilling to pay the price for the fullness of the Spirit in continual self-crucifixion and waiting on God.⁶

It is my experience of nearly forty years in the ministry that most non-Calvinists fail in soul-winning. Their failure is certainly not blamed on the “deadening” effect of their theology. The fact is, most Christians are “nervous” about witnessing, due to timidity, lack of training, and/or fear of rejection. Many simply neglect their duty. Some have even expressed that they dread the responsibility of someone’s rejecting the gospel due to their failure to present it adequately. Whatever the cause, the percentage of consistent soul-winners in the average evangelical church is very small in comparison to the obligation they put on themselves.

Every true Christian realizes the importance of witnessing to the lost. It is only false professors who have no heart to see others saved. I would argue that the “tulip” view, rather than “annihilating” soul-winning responsibility, enhances it because it relieves the soul-winner of the pressure to “get results.” He can focus on the message and leave the persuasion to God’s Spirit.

The gospel is preached through (3) the distribution of printed literature, such as gospel tracts.

Every legitimate means should be used to gain the hearing of sinners in order to present to them the claims of Christ, encouraging them to turn from their sins and to trust Christ for their salvation.

2. Calvinists believe in global missions.

In order to preach the gospel to “*every creature,*” Christ intends for His servants to preach the gospel in all parts of the world. Jesus told His disciples, “*Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth*” (Acts 1:8). Paul asks, “*How shall they preach, except they be sent? As it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!*” (Rom. 10:15).

Obviously, no one believer can fulfill Christ’s commission all by himself; so God calls and commissions His servants and sends them to specific localities. Thus, the church appoints and supports on various fields those whom God calls to their “Jerusalem” in “*the uttermost part of the earth.*” Calvinists believe in world-wide missions. Indeed, the father of modern missions, William Carey, was a Calvinist.

3. Calvinists believe that converts must be added to the church and *discipled*.

Evangelism involves far more than merely getting decisions. Jesus commanded us *to make disciples* out of every nation, baptizing them and teaching them all things He commanded (Matt. 28:19, 20). Those whom Christ saves must be nurtured and helped to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord, which requires teaching them sound doctrine. With prophetic insight and a clear understanding of the carnal tendency of man, Paul warned Timothy, “*Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears*” (2 Tim. 4:2, 3). It is evident in this age, oriented to entertainment, that sound doctrine is considered less important than the top “Christian” pop tunes to attract crowds to church. However, Paul discharged his responsibility before God by not shunning to declare “*the whole counsel of God*” (Acts 20:26, 27).

Many problems in our churches and in evangelism in particular stem from the lack of solid doctrinal teaching, the kind of teaching that characterized the apostles and the early church (Acts 2:42). The heart of evangelism is not zeal but sound doctrine. Paul lamented that the Jews had “*a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge*” (Rom. 10:2)—knowledge of right doctrine. Sadly, the same is true in many fundamental Baptist churches, where little of the Bible is ever taught because preaching is usually topical with brief support texts.

To sum up then, on the message of the gospel and on the means of getting the gospel out we basically agree. So, on what do we not agree? Calvinists do not agree with their evangelistic critics on the methods employed to get sinners to make decisions.

III. Calvinists reject humanistic *methodology* in evangelism.

1. Methodology is based on *philosophy*—how we view things.

The philosophy that affects the typical methodology in evangelism comes from a higher view of the sinner’s ability to respond to God than the Bible allows. Many teach that God cannot hold a person responsible to obey the gospel unless he has the freedom and ability to obey. This philosophy has produced a *synergistic* gospel, one in which the sinner can freely cooperate with God in his own salvation.

This view is as old as Christianity itself but was never the prominent position until the nineteenth century. History reveals that evangelism and missions flourished under the biblical, sovereign-grace gospel of post-Reformation Christian expansion. The shift away from Calvinistic evangelism came under the ministry of American evangelist Charles G. Finney (1792-1875). Finney was “converted” under Calvinistic preaching. A lawyer by trade, he soon sought ordination as a Presbyterian preacher. He was never trained in theology, but in order to be ordained, he subscribed to the Calvinistic Westminster Confession of Faith. Later, as he testified in his own words, he read the document and then determined to devote the rest of his life to opposing its theology. Of course, he never resigned his ordination for lying at his ordination, failing to adhere to Presbyterian standards, and, for worse, opposing those standards. Finney, though, is modern evangelism’s hero.

Rejecting God’s sovereignty in salvation, Finney asserted that all revival (by which he meant evangelism) was achieved by the right use of constituted means. He argued that revival was no more a miracle than a crop of wheat. In other words, it really does not require anything supernatural to accomplish gospel work. If one plants, he harvests. So, one must focus on the best methods of cultivation for the greatest harvest. Finney’s pragmatic model of evangelism made use of gimmicks, emotional manipulation, and high-pressure sales techniques—whatever got the best results, which was increased numbers of professing converts.

This pragmatic model underlies the methodology of modern evangelism. Finney’s legacy is the public invitation system and protracted meetings, often optimistically but falsely called “revival” meetings. “Revivals” became arenas to “work” sinners, pressuring them into making decisions. These methods got plenty of results. The excitement of revivals does attract attention, but it is difficult to sustain. Excitement is like a drug that requires ever-increasing doses just to maintain a certain level.

What happened to those results? What became of the converts? Sadly, many “converts” who get caught up in the excitement of success are carried along until problems develop; then many fall away, often worse off than they were before.

This can be demonstrated by Finney’s own ministry. James Boyle, Finney’s friend and co-laborer, wrote to Finney in 1834:

Let us look over the fields where you and others and myself have labored as revival ministers, and what is now their moral state? What was their state within three months after we left them? I have visited and revisited many of these fields, and groaned in spirit to see the sad, frigid, carnal, contentious state into which the churches had fallen—and fallen very soon after our first departure from among them.⁷

My own experience in the field of evangelism led me to conclude that success in evangelism and church building is often only apparent. Instead of happy, growing, faithful, spiritually minded believers, churches are filled with unfaithful, discontented, and worldly people. Frustrated pastors wring their hands over efforts to motivate members to do even the most basic

Christian duties. They schedule “revival” meetings in hopes that the evangelist performs a miracle to jump-start people to action. People can persuade people to do almost anything, but only God can bring about real spiritual fruit.

Humanistic evangelism has filled fundamental Bible-believing churches with “carnal” Christians. Church splits are common. Church hopping is a regular activity. Rarely can significant church growth be attributed to the addition of new converts. One church grows from the migration of members from other churches who seek more exciting shows. The right church-growth program is coveted more than prayer and dependence upon God.

2. Philosophy comes from *doctrine*—what we believe.

Finney’s model of evangelism rests on the belief that God only *offers* salvation to sinners. They are free to choose or reject the offer. God cannot override the will; thus, His desire that all sinners should be saved is frustrated if any sinner refuses God’s offer. This evangelism, then, depends on two things: (1) the sinner’s ability to be persuaded to receive the offer, and (2) the soul-winner’s skill to persuade him to receive it.

Evangelism is redefined, not in terms of the message proclaimed, but in terms of its effect upon the hearer. Soul-winning becomes a skill to be learned and measured by rising levels of success. Thus, success dictates theology.

While the Bible declares sinners to be “*dead in trespasses and sins*” (Eph. 2:1), they must not really be dead, otherwise the evangelist and soul-winner are out of a job. Therefore, Finney believed that men are *voluntarily*, not *constitutionally*, depraved. Voluntary depravity is pure Pelagianism, teaching that people are not sinners by nature but become sinners by voluntarily following Adam’s example. Independent Baptist Evangelist John R. Rice’s writings indicate that he also believed in voluntary depravity, although most fundamental, independent Baptists give at least lip service to constitutional or total depravity.⁸ Rice wrote, commenting on 1 Corinthians 15:22:

This Scripture plainly teaches that *all men potentially became sinners by Adam’s sin*. . . . That means that no one ever went to Hell because of Adam’s sin. . . . In both cases, death and salvation are potential, for the race of sinners was not yet born when Adam sinned, but his sin potentially made all sinners [emphasis added].⁹

By using the word *potential*, Rice seems to teach that men are not sinners by nature but by choice. If no one goes to hell for Adam’s sin, then did Adam not pass his sinful nature to his offspring? He argues that both death and salvation are only potential. As sinners may potentially choose for Christ and salvation, so they may choose to sin, which, apparently, most choose to do. His statement leads one to ask whether anyone has ever chosen not to sin?

On the other hand, Rice’s long-time friend and former associate, Evangelist Robert Sumner, who is also an independent, fundamental Baptist, took a different road. He wrote, “To the fact of man’s total and complete depravity, as stated in Sacred Scripture, we heartily concur.”¹⁰ Total depravity, however, makes free choice in salvation impossible without new life being first imparted in regeneration. This fact requires Sumner to find a way around total or constitutional depravity in order to make it possible for sinners to cooperate with God. This he does:

The Word of God teaches that, while man is totally depraved and totally unable to help himself, our Lord draws every man sufficiently and enlightens every man as much as necessary for that individual to make a decision of his own free will.¹¹

In other words, while in theory holding to constitutional depravity (because he cannot deny that the Bible teaches it), Sumner believes that at least some divine intervention is necessary for men to cooperate in their own salvation. Because they are “totally unable” to help themselves, God must help them “sufficiently” and enlightens them as much as “necessary” for each to decide of his own free will. Sumner actually teaches that God does save every sinner from his total depravity but not from sin and hell. If this is so, men are no longer dead in trespasses and sins? Must we believe in *total depravity* if God has taken the *total* out of *depravity*? Would the Bible not say that? This is very sloppy theology. The Arminian John Wesley at least made an effort to make his depravity-denying “prevenient grace” theologically tenable.

Regardless of these attempts, depravity remains a roadblock to a synergistic gospel. By nature, sinners are “*dead in trespasses and sins*.” The only way to help dead sinners “sufficiently” is to convey to them spiritual life, which God does in the new birth (John 3:3). Otherwise, “*the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned*” (1 Cor. 2:14). Spiritual desire is found only where God sovereignly imparts spiritual life (James 1:18).

3. The *methodology* of Calvinistic evangelism.

The Bible nowhere teaches us to measure success in evangelism by the numbers of converts we can get to pray “the sinner’s prayer.” The Bible does not require the evangelist to get results at all, only to faithfully proclaim the gospel. If we measure evangelism only in terms of results, what of missionaries like Adoniram Judson who labor all their lives and see only a few converts? Rather, the Bible us to “*sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear*” (1 Peter 3:15). This does not mean that we are to witness only to those who ask us. We need wisdom to create opportunities to witness, but we must also be able to give doctrinally adequate answers to the reason of our hope.

However, fruit or success in soul-winning is not our responsibility. In John 15 Jesus told His disciples that He was the Vine and they were the branches. The branch bears the fruit but not of itself (v. 4). It is the vine that makes the fruit. In order to bear fruit, the branch must abide in the vine, as Jesus said: “*Without me [or severed from me] ye can do nothing*” (v. 5). Our responsibility is to abide in the Vine and let His Word abide in us (v.7). “[By this abiding] *is my Father glorified, [in order] that ye bear much fruit; [in this way you] shall be my disciples*” (John 15:8). Of course, we could decorate ourselves with all kinds of plastic fruit in order to impress others with our “fruitfulness,” but it is only the real fruit we bear that means anything to God.

It is the work of Christ to build His church (Matt. 16: 18). When Paul came to Corinth, the Lord encouraged him: “*I have much people in this city*” (Acts 18:10). Paul’s task was not making the Lord’s people but preaching the gospel. In order to do this, “*he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them*” (1 Cor. 18:11). Neither was it Paul’s task to determine who the elect were; he was simply to preach the gospel “*among them*”—to everyone. The Holy Spirit would call out His people, dividing the hearers into two groups: those who believed and those who did not believe. Paul would also make many enemies in the process. Therefore, the Lord told him, “*Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee*” (Acts 18:10).

Does this mean that Calvinists have no burden or desire to see sinners come to Christ? Does it mean that we must disobey Christ in order to be consistent in our theology? Does this doctrine appeal to us only because we are lazy and carnal? God forbid! The manifestation of the glory of God is at stake. Spurgeon wrote:

Once more, if we are to be robed in the power of the Lord, we must feel an intense longing for the glory of God, and the salvation of the sons of men. Even when we are most successful, we must long for more success. If God has given us many souls, we must pine for a thousand times as many. Satisfaction with results will be the knell of progress. No man is good who thinks that he cannot be better. He has no holiness who thinks that he is useful enough.¹²

We say, Amen! We must develop a tension between being satisfied with what God gives us and being dissatisfied at not bringing more glory to God. We need to preach, pray, witness, weep, and work for the salvation of souls in order that God may be more glorified in us, but “*Salvation is of the Lord*” (Jonah 2:9). Therefore, the quality of a church is not determined by its size but by the maturity of its saints—their knowledge of the Word, faithfulness to Lord, and obedience to all His commands, including His command to “*go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.*”

End Notes

- ¹ Using the term *Calvinism* does not mean that we advocate blind loyalty to John Calvin or that we endorse everything Calvin taught or practiced. The term simply distinguishes a theology that centers on God’s sovereignty and freedom as opposed to the man-centered approach of most modern theology.
- ² Robert L. Sumner, *An Examination of Tulip* (Murfreesboro, Tenn.: Biblical Evangelism Press, 1972), p. 11.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ⁶ John R. Rice, *Predestined for Hell? No!* (Wheaton, Ill.: Sword of the Lord Foundation, 1958), p. 6.
- ⁷ Quoted in B. B. Warfield, *Perfectionism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1931), 2:26.
- ⁸ *Total depravity* does not mean that sinners are as sinful as they can be but that by nature every part of their constitution is wicked. “*There is none good [constitutionally good] but one, that is, God*” (Matthew 19:17; See Romans 3:10-18).
- ⁹ Rice, pp. 47, 48.
- ¹⁰ Sumner, p. 4.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Charles Spurgeon, *An All-Round Ministry*, p. 352, quoted in Thomas K. Ascol, “A Lesson from Spurgeon on Evangelism,” *The Founders Journal*, Issue 33, Summer, 1998, p. 3.