

The Use of Prepared Evangelism Presentations: An Evaluation

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Is evangelism *the* work of the church? It appears that this question is one of the hottest subjects of debate as we approach the 21st Century of the New Testament era. The debate, however, seems to be over the definition of evangelism rather than the propriety of the question. Certainly evangelism is a going and making disciples of all nations (Mt 28:20). Certainly evangelism is a going into all the world and a preaching of the good news to all creation (Mk 16:15). These definitions of evangelism come from the Savior himself; they are his commissioning of our gospel ministry. As such, evangelism may be rightly defined as a *going out* with the good news, an *outreach* to the unregenerate with the regenerating power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But would this definition of evangelism suffice as the work of the church? Should the church strive only to go out, to reach out with the gospel? The same gospel we use to teach the unbelieving is used to prepare God's people for works of service (Eph 4:12). The same gospel we use in reaching out to the unchurched is used in being shepherds of the church of God (Ac 20:28). In short, the gospel ministry not only reaches out, but it also reaches in. This broader definition of evangelism is indeed *the* work of the church. With this broader concept in mind, Schuetze and Habeck comment: "The purpose of a Christian congregation is to put God's gifts to use in preaching the gospel so that those who hear may be strengthened and preserved in their Christian faith unto life eternal and that the message of salvation may be shared ... with the entire world." ¹ Indeed, the Lord has presented his people with a noble calling!

If, then, evangelism is *the* work of the church, one would expect a system of methodology to have been developed for this task. Our expectations are proved correct. Every day future pastors are being trained in the "how to" of effectively evangelizing their flock. They are instructed in sermonizing methods, teaching techniques, and counseling methodology so that the sweet gospel of Christ may permeate all their dealings with a body of believers. For this "reaching in" side of evangelism, the use of planned or prepared methodology is heralded as both scripturally and humanly wise. Yet when we speak of the "reaching out" side of evangelism, the word "methodology" seems to fall under the most severe scrutiny. In this writing we shall attempt to portray accurately that scrutiny in order to evaluate the use of prepared evangelism presentations within our church body. As we might suspect, equally consecrated Christians have both criticized and praised the use of prepared evangelism methods—therefore this treatment of the subject will also take a "con and pro" approach to some degree.

One of the most compelling arguments against using a prepared format in evangelism is the Bible's deafening silence on the practice. In fact, the testimony of Christ and other evangelists of the New Testament almost seems to militate against any preparation at all as far as the spreading of the gospel is concerned. When Christ described the signs of the end of the age for four of his disciples in Mark 13, he made it clear that gospel preaching would be going on during these times. In fact gospel preaching on the part of the disciples would lead to their being arrested and put on trial. Yet when these disciples were to witness to Christ before heathen authorities, they were not to worry about preparation: "Do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking but the Holy Spirit" (Mk 13:11).

When our Savior sent out the twelve disciples in Matthew 10, he made clear that the message they were to preach was a simple one, it would require no pre-planned methodology: "As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near'" (Mt 10:7). As simple as that message sounds, it is the very essence of all our evangelistic efforts. The divine urgency of that simple message is a strong motivator for laboring in the world field, for telling others of the relationship with God that Christ has established for us before he comes again. Thus Christ affirms that the simple, unprepared preaching of the gospel is an effective preaching indeed.

Even as Christ downplayed the use of prepared evangelistic messages, so his disciples referred to the preaching of the gospel as a natural act rather than a learned "technique." "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Ac 4:20) is the way Peter and John described their preaching of the gospel. This

description makes a huge point about spreading the gospel—evangelism—in the life of the Christian. Peter and John tell us of the gospel’s “bubbling over” effect. When a Christian solemnly considers God’s tremendous act of grace through our Savior Jesus Christ, he simply cannot help but share that message of grace with others. Witnessing about Christ, therefore, becomes both natural and spontaneous. In describing this aspect of the evangelistic spirit, Richard C. Halverson writes: “Evangelism in the New Testament was not optional ... Nor on the other hand was evangelism coercive ... Rather, evangelism was inescapable! ... (Christians) did not witness because they had to but because they could not help it.”² If we are to mimic the evangelism of the New Testament church, we must first realize that the desire to share the gospel should be a natural overflowing of God’s grace in the heart of the Christian. We have seen. We have heard. Shall we not speak?!?

The Biblical principle is clear: evangelism should be a natural act. It should be the Christian’s spontaneous reaction to the good news God has implanted in his heart through faith. It should be the very essence of Christian living. But the question remains: Does the Biblical principle of spontaneity exclude using prepared evangelism methodology? Before we cry out that the Scripture sets forth no organization or method as far as evangelism is concerned, we should remember that the same Scripture says nothing of many of the organizations and methods we gladly accept within our church body. Consider these words of Daniel W. Malchow in defense of general methodology being used in the church’s work:

“The use of methods or procedures in witnessing to the Truth is hardly out of place in the work of the Church. Seminary students receive a considerable amount of training in the art of preparing and delivering a sermon. They become familiar with methods and styles to aid them in their pulpit work. Students preparing to serve as teachers in our Christian day schools enroll in courses, which are aptly designated as courses in methods. Again, the purpose of such courses is to enable these teachers to communicate the message of the Scriptures as effectively as possible.”³

Malchow goes on to include Sunday School and Vacation Bible School teachers in the list of evidence that methodology and prepared presentations have their place within the work of the church.

The last sentence in Malchow’s quotation should be remembered. The only reason we should allow for any type of methodology is just this: that the Word of God may be communicated more effectively. Surely this is the goal of all our evangelism committees, including on the congregational level. But can we honestly expect our laypeople to evangelize “more effectively” when they have not been prepared in a witness presentation? Ronald D. Roth puts it bluntly: “When it comes to telling someone about Jesus Christ, confessing one’s faith in Christ, and inviting people to trust in Christ, our members are often at a complete loss for words.”⁴ We are all familiar with the formidable roadblocks which stand between our members (and ourselves!) and witnessing. Fear of failure, fear of ridicule and lack of experience are only a few of the prevailing mindsets that afflict potential witnesses of Christ.

While the roadblocks are clear, so is Peter’s exhortation: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have “ (Pe 3:15). It is that sacred preparedness which is the object of instructing evangelists in evangelism presentations. Presentations like *Talk About the Savior, God’s Great Exchange* and *The Simple Truth* are geared not only to offer a clear law-gospel presentation. These prepared presentations also serve to build confidence in lay evangelists so that they might attain the “always be prepared” state Peter refers to. Acquaintance with methods such as the ones listed above will allow the Christian to more comfortably witness in whatever station he finds himself. Certainly prepared evangelism presentations have their place as we strive to communicate the Word of God more effectively to the world around us.

Yet, prepared presentations do not have the power of the Word. Prepared presentations are not a Means of Grace. As elementary as these statements seem, the perception that the excellence of methodology will guarantee results in our evangelistic efforts is something that must be constantly guarded against. What God does guarantee is his Word: “My word will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire

and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isa 55:11). The Lord himself has promised that his Word “is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb 4:12). Even more, Christ has assured us that when we use his Word to testify to the Savior, “the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father will also testify about me” (Jn 15:26). The message is clear. God, in his grace, works the conversion of unbelievers. And he does this by the inherent power of his Holy Word. In short, the gospel needs no help.

Yet, as mentioned earlier, sometimes methodology (like planned evangelism presentations) fosters trust in itself rather than in the regenerating power of the Word of God. It should be stressed at the outset that misplaced trust such as this is actually the fault of us evangelists, not the fault of the methods themselves. But whenever we strive to “Package” the Word of God effectively, the temptation exists for us to think in terms of the power of a presentation rather than the power of the Word. In the collection of evangelism essays entitled *One Race, One Gospel, One Task*, Ian Rennie writes of this misplaced trust in the methods of the frontier evangelists of early 19th century America: “Just as God would bless the right message, they felt, so God would accompany the right methods with his power. Method guaranteed success.”⁵ The consequences of a “method guarantees success” mentality can be tragic indeed. If instant success is not apparent, we blame the method. If the method has not produced fruit, we wonder whether God is being faithful by empowering the method. As our sinful minds jump to these conclusions, invariably we forget the Lord’s promise: It is the Word that is the power, and that Word never returns to God empty!

Our misplaced trust in a method of presentation rather than in the power of the gospel is all too natural for us. Perhaps such a condition results from the stress on method in the world around us. Too often we think of the gospel as something we must “sell” in an evangelism call. Our thoughts turn to the successes and failures of a salesman, for whom method means the difference between making a sale and standing in the unemployment line. We may even recall an occasion when a salesman came to our door making a very noble presentation for a product we felt was inferior. We may have marveled at how this salesman could make us feel as if we desperately needed something which in fact we had no need for whatsoever.

However, when we allow our thoughts to equate the task of the evangelist with the task of the salesman, we would do well to remember the Apostle Paul’s words against using cunning devices to spread the Word of God: “We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the Word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Co 4:2). God does not depend on our methods for the spreading of the gospel anymore than he depends on our offerings for the expansion of his church on earth. Indeed, the gospel does not depend on forms and presentations; rather the gospel furnishes the various forms and presentations we use. Only the gospel is the “power of God,” and to think that its power is somehow fueled by the methods we use is a grave error.

Since the possibility exists for evangelists to de-emphasize the Word because of the method being used, we need to evaluate exactly what our purposes are in using prepared evangelism presentations like *Talk About the Savior*, *God’s Great Exchange* or *The Simple Truth*. If we take a sincere look at why evangelism presentations like these are being employed around our church body, it is doubtful that their purposes can be called into question. The purpose of these methods, along with the purpose of every evangelism committee across our Synod, has always been the same: to bring souls to Christ. The fact that only the power of the Word can bring these souls to Christ is self-evident by the prominence of Scripture in the presentations themselves. When using a prepared presentation with a prospect, for example, the primary idea is that the message the prospect will hear from the evangelist is only what the Bible says. Therefore, an evangelist may never be accused of using his own clever philosophy for persuading the prospect into a commitment. On the contrary, by using a prepared presentation the evangelist is only trying to make clear God’s message of sin and grace.

The argument may be advanced: God’s Word on sin and grace is clear all by itself; we cannot make it any clearer. This is a true statement but not a valid argument against the use of prepared evangelism presentations. It is true that we cannot make the law and gospel any more clear than they already are. But we certainly do have the ability to make the law and gospel unclear by the way we present them. Earlier this year

the nation's attention was drawn to a South Carolinian boy of about 10. What made this boy the subject of national news reports were his "evangelizing" efforts at the local grade school. Every morning this boy would take his spot outside of school and scream various Scripture passages at the top of his lungs. When asked to attend classes, the boy refused. When asked to stop screaming, the boy refused. Eventually he was expelled from his school and generally regarded as a youthful fanatic. Here was a boy who was "preaching" repentance and the forgiveness of sins, but the method he used cast aspersions upon the word he and his parents held in such high esteem.

This extreme example only serves to prove a point. In our sinfulness, we are all very much capable of hindering the Word. Even devout, ordained pastors who have been out in the field for decades will relate stories of how they wrestled with the presentation of the law and gospel in a sermon, for example, only to find themselves stumbling and losing their hearers. While the Word of God is certainly being preached, we still feel frustrated at the prospect of hindering the Word in some way at times like these. Now consider the presentation of the law and gospel during an evangelism call. Is there not an even greater chance of hindering the Word during these important occasions?

First of all, let us always remember that the laypeople we desire to go out and be evangelists in their own environments are probably not as comfortable with using the Word of God as pastors are. That this is the condition is hardly a condemnation of laypeople's devoutness, but it is merely a fact of life. In fact, there are probably very few laypeople who have not felt motivated to witness to Christ at one time or another. They know testimony is a God-pleasing evidence of the faith that burns in their hearts. Yet, because these same laypeople may not have been trained in how to present God's message of salvation as the Bible teaches it, their efforts at evangelism may be more of a hindrance than a bold witness to sin and grace. It is just this type of hindrance that a prepared evangelism presentation seeks to remedy. When comfortable with God's Great Exchange, for example, the lay evangelist will smoothly and confidently be able to present God's law and gospel just as we have these two doctrines in the Bible. No, no power has been added to the Word. But what has been taken away is a potential hindrance to the Word.

Secondly, we must also remember who these lay evangelists will be coming into contact with. They are to touch lost sheep, people who desperately need to hear about their sin and God's remedy of their sin—Jesus Christ. On the other hand, these same lost sheep usually will not afford the evangelist too much time or too many cracks at bringing him the message of sin and grace. The lost sheep's Old Adam, at complete control within him, will not graciously receive either the message of sin or Savior without a fight. This being the state of affairs during an evangelism call, can we afford to send untrained and unconfident lay evangelists into the field? Surely an evangelist thoroughly equipped with *The Simple Truth*, for example, will be able to make the most of the time God grants him in the presence of an unbeliever. No the presentation itself will not convert the lost sheep. That only the Holy Spirit through the Word can do. But the presentation has allowed the evangelist to offer God's powerful message in its truth and purity. What is more, the presentation offered an orderly expression of the Bible's divine order in the plan of salvation.

We shall deal with one final objection to using prepared evangelism presentations and it is this: These methods tend to cloud the idea of evangelism being a natural way of life for the Christian and, on the other hand, they promote a feeling of elitism in the field of evangelism. Such a pitfall is keenly described by Halverson:

"Methods wrongly born may attract, indoctrinate, and regiment certain zealous persons in a way that produces self-conscious 'spiritually elite' individuals preoccupied with 'results,' who tend to think of themselves as superior to those not so inclined. This kind of situation militates against the fellowship and hence defeats witness; moreover it tends also to suggest to the rest of the Christian community the false view that apart from a special course in personal work and in mastering evangelistic methods, one is not qualified to bear witness to an outsider."⁶

Halverson's argument is a worthy one, and it should be addressed before we wholeheartedly approve of using prepared evangelism presentations in our mission of witnessing to the Savior. The situation he describes has a

painfully realistic twinge to it. Even with the best Christian intentions in mind, the establishment of evangelism training classes to study a specific method of evangelism is susceptible to an air of elitism. Since not all of the congregation will attend such classes, the group that does attend may be perceived as “real” Christians because, after all, “real” Christians want to evangelize. Whether this perception is made by the class members or non-class members, it really does not matter. Whatever the source, the perception is a damaging one.

As in most instances of potentially dangerous situations, the “spiritually elite” perception described above can be derailed before wreaking havoc within a Christian congregation. First of all, we must realize that the ability to be an evangelist *is* a spiritual gift (Eph 4:11). As such, this special ability may not exist within every member of a congregation. This point needs to be remembered before we begin measuring Christianity on the basis of the ability to evangelize. On the other hand, we must also stress that the Holy Spirit has gifted each of the believers in some way (1 Co 12:7,11). There is no such thing as a second-class Christian.

However, since attending an evangelism presentation class is a fairly visible acknowledgment of a spiritual gift, it may still lead to the elitist feelings we are trying to avoid. These feelings usually stem from an attitude such as this: “I may be spiritually gifted, but I’m not gifted in a way Pastor cares about because he doesn’t hold training sessions and special classes about my gift.” Such attitudes do prevail at times, and they have the strength to seriously damage the fellowship within a congregation. This is why extreme care must be exercised when a pastor refers to special training sessions as opposed to every Christian’s natural desire to witness to the grace God shows sinners through Jesus Christ. In reality, the two are never in opposition. When a pastor faithfully emphasizes the call to evangelism in his sermon text, for instance, his motivational efforts should be directed at the entire congregation. In the same way, a call to special evangelism training sessions may be directed at the entire congregation, not just the specially gifted. In fact, special training sessions are excellent ways to determine if a believer *is* spiritually gifted as an evangelist, and they should be promoted as such. When we effectively communicate to *all* our believers that attendance at a *Talk About the Savior* training session springs from every Christian’s faith-filled desire to witness, and not from some sort of super spirituality that not everyone has, then a special training session will go a long way in bringing about a more vital feeling of evangelism throughout the congregation.

Whether evangelism in the “reaching out to the unchurched” sense is the work of the church is debatable. What is not debatable, however, is the mission our Savior has given us. We are to go into the all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. In his grace, God has given us the wonderful gospel as the only means necessary in our evangelistic efforts. The gospel is divinely powerful; it alone can change hearts from unbelief to belief. With such a precious and powerful gospel, it would be eternally shameful to hinder that gospel by carelessly despising the methods we use to spread it. One of these methods is the prepared evangelism presentation. As consecrated children of God seeking to have God’s Son revealed in us (Gal 1:16), may we strive to clearly impart the living Savior to a dying world.

Endnotes:

1. Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd under Christ*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974), p. 312.
2. Carl Henry, ed., *One Race, One Gospel, One Task*. (Minneapolis: World Wide Publishing, 1967), quoted by Darvin Raddatz in “Pitfalls of the Modern Evangelistic Movement,” p. 8.
3. Daniel W. Malchow, “‘Therefore We Speak’—Evangelism in Practice,” p. 4.
4. Ronald D. Roth, “Promoting Practical Evangelism among Our Members.” Delivered to Central Conference of the Nebraska District, January, 1975, p. 7.
5. Raddatz, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

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