

# Evangelism 101: Laying the Foundation

By Matt Waymeyer

*If we forget that it is God's prerogative to give results when the gospel is preached, we shall start to think that it is our responsibility to secure them. And if we forget that only God can give faith, we shall start to think that the making of converts depends, in the last analysis, not on God, but on us, and that the decisive factor is the way in which we evangelize.*

—J.I. Packer

## The Evangelist's Dilemma

The scenario is a familiar one. You present the gospel to an unbelieving friend or family member and he or she rejects it. That which is most precious in your sight is dismissed as irrelevant or discarded as untrue. Why is that? How can that be? Who could possibly reject so great a salvation?

The Bible has the answer. Scripture teaches that unbelievers are *totally depraved*. This means that even though man does not always act as wickedly as possible, depravity so permeates his entire being that he is enslaved to his sin and inherently unable to respond to the gospel in faith and repentance. The depravity of the unbeliever can be broken down into three areas: his mind, his heart, and his will.

### His Mind

The unbeliever's inability to respond to the gospel stems partly from the depravity of his mind. No matter how intelligent he may be, the unbeliever cannot

understand or accept the things of God. He simply is not able, for his mind is depraved (Rom. 1:21, 28; 3:11) and defiled (Titus 1:15), and his understanding is darkened (Eph. 4:17-18; 2 Cor. 4:4).

The message of the gospel, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, is foolishness to those who are perishing (1:18), for "a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them..." (2:14). He is unable to understand and accept the gospel of Christ, and therefore he is unable to respond to it.

### **His Heart**

At the core of the unbeliever's inability to respond to the gospel is the depravity of his heart, which is full of evil (Eccl. 9:3). During the time of Noah, God "saw that the wickedness of man was great...and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). Time has not improved the condition of man's heart—it is still *continually* and *exclusively* evil.

The very desire of the unbeliever's heart is to carry out the desires of the devil (John 8:44), for he is by nature a hater of God and a lover of wickedness (John 3:19-20). He is hostile toward God (Rom. 8:7; Col. 1:21) and is, in fact, the very enemy of God (Rom. 5:10). The unbeliever is unable to respond to the gospel because he does not *want* to turn to Christ (John 5:40) and is neither able to change his heart nor desirous of doing so (John 8:44).

### **His Will**

The unbeliever's inability to respond to the gospel is most overtly seen in the depravity of his will—that faculty by which a man chooses or makes decisions. Simply stated, his will is enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:17, 20; John 8:34). The unbeliever does not submit to God's law, for he is "not even able to do so; and [he] cannot please God" (Rom. 8:7-8). He is unable to choose to do *anything* that is truly good (Rom. 3:12), for his only capacity is to do evil.

The depravity of the unbeliever's will flows from the evil of his heart (Mark 7:21-23). Not only is his heart full of evil, but he is also *enslaved* to his various lusts and pleasures (Titus 3:3). Just as an apple tree can produce nothing but apples, a man with an evil heart can produce nothing but evil (Matt. 7:16-18). He cannot produce what is good, not even a positive response to the gospel. "There is none who seeks for God" (Rom. 3:11).

If all this is true, how can an unbeliever choose Christ? How can he respond to the gospel? He cannot, for just as a leopard cannot change his spots nor a man the color of his skin, neither can a man change—or even improve upon—the condition of his heart (Jer. 13:23). His will is enslaved to the evil desires of his heart. He is not able to conjure up enough goodness within himself to choose

Christ, for there is none there (Rom. 3:12). He is spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1; Col. 2:13) and has no more ability to respond spiritually than a corpse has to respond physically.

The unbeliever cannot understand or accept the gospel, for it is foolishness to him; how then can he respond to it and believe in Christ as his Savior? Every intent of his heart is evil, and he seeks not after God; how then can he turn to Christ for salvation and embrace Him as his righteousness? He is enslaved to sin; how then can he turn from his wickedness to Christ and bow before Him as Lord?

The unbeliever is not able to please God, obey God, or do anything at all that is good; how then can he respond to God's command to believe? There is no fear of God before his eyes; how then can he humble himself before God and trust in Him for salvation? He hates God, loves sin, and is unwilling and undesirous of coming to Christ; how then can he repent and do so? He is spiritually blind; how then can he make himself see? He is spiritually dead; how then can he make himself live?

In light of these truths, the evangelist finds himself left with the desperate question that the disciples themselves asked Jesus: "Then who can be saved?" (Luke 18:26) In other words, if the only way to be saved is to turn to Christ, but unbelievers are *unable* to turn to Christ, who then can be saved? What, if *anything*, can the evangelist do to bring people to the Savior? Isn't he being asked to communicate a message to which his audience has no ability to respond?

This is the evangelist's dilemma.

### **Our Heart-Opening God**

Have you ever seen a camel walk through the eye of a needle? *Of course not. That would be impossible.* And that is precisely why Jesus told his disciples it would be "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:25). He wanted them to understand it was impossible.

Recognizing the implications of Jesus' startling statement, the disciples responded with the obvious question: "Then who can be saved?" (Luke 18:26) This, of course, was an appropriate inquiry. If it is impossible for even a rich man to be saved, then who *can* be saved? It would seem that no one can.

But listen instead the reply that Jesus gave to the disciples: "The things impossible with men are possible with God" (Luke 18:27). In this verse, Jesus

revealed two elementary truths about salvation: (1) It is *impossible* with man, and yet (2) it is *possible* with God. The first half of this equation was covered in chapter one—man is not able to do anything to save himself. But what did Jesus mean in saying that salvation was possible with God? How *can* a man be saved?

The key to answering this question is simple, yet profound: Although man is inherently unable to respond to the gospel (impossible with man), God is able to open his heart to respond (possible with God). In Acts 16, Paul was preaching to a number of women in Philippi. As Paul preached that the women should repent of their sins and believe in Christ, a woman named Lydia was listening. Because of her spiritually depraved condition, however, Lydia was inherently unable to respond to Paul's message. And yet we know from verse 14 that she *did* respond. How did this happen? How was she saved? The answer to this question is that "the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul" (Acts 16:14). God intervened and demonstrated that what was impossible with her was possible with Him.

When a person repents and believes in Christ, it is because God has opened his or her heart to respond to the gospel. What is impossible with man is possible with God. This same pattern can be seen clearly in Jesus' teaching: "No one can come to me [impossible with man], unless the Father who sent me draws him [possible with God]; and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:44). In this verse Jesus teaches that although no man is able to come to Christ, God the Father is able to *draw* men to Christ and does so when he calls them unto salvation. This is commonly known as effectual calling.

For this reason Scripture teaches that faith and repentance are *gifts from God*. When an unbeliever repents of his sins and believes in Christ, it is not the fruit of his inherent ability to repent and believe but rather the result of God opening his heart and *granting* him repentance (Acts 5:31; 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25) and faith (Acts 13:48; 18:27; Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29; 2 Pet. 1:1). Therefore, repentance and faith are not works that man performs in order to earn his salvation—they are the change of heart brought about by God Himself. Salvation is by grace from start to finish.

This work of God in changing men's hearts is reflected in the imagery used in several Old Testament prophecies. For example, God says in Jeremiah 24:7, "And *I will give them a heart to know me*, for I am the Lord; and they will return to Me with their whole heart." The sinner must turn to God with his whole heart in order to be saved, but it is God who opens his heart and enables him to do so. Prior to this, the unbeliever is hardened and unresponsive toward God—his heart is made of stone. Only when God works in his heart and effectually draws him to Christ does he respond to the gospel.

Left to himself, the unbeliever's heart will remain evil and enslaved to sin, neither able nor willing to repent of sin and believe in Christ. For him salvation is

impossible. But the things impossible with men are possible with God, for He is the One who takes the initiative in salvation by giving His chosen ones eyes to see, ears to hear, and the heart and ability to respond to the gospel in faith and repentance. Our heart-opening God is truly the God of all grace.

### The Master's Instruments

Since salvation is solely the work of our heart-opening God, where does that leave man? Does the believer assume any role *whatsoever* in the salvation of the lost?

In response to this question, some have insisted that the Christian must passively surrender to the sovereignty of God and simply sit back and wait for God to zap whomever He pleases. What such individuals fail to realize, however, is that just as a surgeon uses special instruments to perform a delicate surgery, so also does God use instruments of His choice to grant new life to a sinner.

The first instrument employed by the Master Surgeon is a *divine* instrument, namely the Word of God. James writes, "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth" (James 1:18). Notice that James first states that his readers were "brought forth"—or born again—in the exercise of God's will. In other words, it was the sovereign purpose of the Lord that they be made alive in Christ. And how was it that He brought them forth in keeping with His sovereign will? They were brought forth, James writes, "*by* the word of truth." James says the *instrument* or the *means* by which God granted them new life was the message of the gospel.

The Apostle Peter reminds his readers of this truth in similar fashion, writing, "you have been born again...*through* the living and abiding word of God...which was preached to you" (1 Pet 1:23, 25). Again, Scripture states clearly that God has caused His children to be born again through—or by *means* of—His word.

This same teaching is found in Paul's epistles as well: The apostle reminds Timothy that Scripture is "able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation" (2 Tim. 3:15); he writes to the church at Rome that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17); he tells the Ephesian believers that Jesus has cleansed the church "by the washing of water with the word" (Eph. 5:26); and he assures the Romans that the gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16; cf. 1 Cor. 1:18).

At this point some may object and say that the gospel is offensive to unbelievers, and that another means must be used in seeking their salvation. After all, it's so exclusive and intolerant, and not at all what people today are looking for. Preaching the pure, unadulterated gospel simply will not be effective.

The example of the Apostle Paul, however, points in the opposite direction: "For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom," the apostle writes, "but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a *stumbling block*, and to Gentiles *foolishness...*" (1 Cor. 1:22-23). In other words, Paul remained committed to the divine message regardless of its offense, for he knew that it was "to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (v. 24).

The bottom line is that any doubts regarding the gospel as the God-ordained means through which He saves sinners may be sufficiently put to rest with the simple and wonderful truth that "God was well-pleased *through the foolishness of the message preached* to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21).

The second of the Master's instruments is not a divine instrument, but rather a *human* one, for the gospel message needs a messenger. This simple truth can be seen clearly in Paul's epistle to Rome, where he writes, "How shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14)

Paul's point here is not difficult to grasp—sinners cannot believe in the One of whom they have not heard, and they cannot hear of Him without someone preaching to them. In other words, the preaching of the gospel is indispensable to the salvation of the lost.

God, in His infinite wisdom, was pleased to determine that sinners be saved through a message brought to them by human messengers (i.e. "the message *preached*" in 1 Cor. 1:21). It is for this reason that the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20). Therefore, while the evangelist is not a divine instrument per se, he *is* a divinely *ordained* instrument, and one that plays a vital role in God's plan to save His people.

Most simply stated, then, evangelism consists of the human messenger proclaiming the divine message to depraved sinners. God is indeed the One who saves, but the Master utilizes instruments of His choice to carry out His work. And these instruments—both the message and the messenger—play an indispensable role in the work whereby our life-giving God does what no human surgeon could ever hope to accomplish.

### **How Shall We Then Evangelize?**

Anyone who has been involved in a major building project knows that the foundation of a building is above all in significance. The architectural design may be incredible and the execution of those plans flawless, but if the foundation is weak or faulty, it's only a matter of time before the structure will suffer a collapse of some kind.

The same might be said of the foundation of one's approach to evangelism. As well-meaning and zealous as someone may be, if a biblical understanding of man, sin, and salvation does not form the foundation (and therefore determine the method) of his evangelistic efforts, these efforts are not only doomed to fail, but also to dishonor God and His Word in the process.

Some, for example, have at their foundation the belief that the unbeliever possesses within himself the ability to believe in Christ as an act of his own free will. For them, evangelism can become little more than seeking to woo (or argue, as the case may be) the potential convert into making a decision for Christ by praying "the sinner's prayer," raising a hand, or walking forward during an altar call.

However, when the evangelist comes to a right understanding of man's inherent inability to respond to the gospel, the heart-opening grace of God, and the instruments through which the Lord grants salvation to sinners, such man-centered approaches to reaching the lost ought to be abandoned. The question, however, still remains: *How, then, shall we evangelize?*

In his first epistle to the church at Corinth, the apostle Paul addresses this question and thereby outlines a properly God-centered approach to evangelism by reminding the Corinthians how he himself approached the task of proclaiming the gospel to them years earlier. In 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, Paul writes:

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

In this passage, Paul models for the believer the manner in which he is to introduce the gospel to an unbelieving world. Specifically, Paul outlines *four* ways the evangelist must approach this most significant privilege.

First, *the evangelist must not rely on his own eloquence or wisdom.* It can be tempting for the evangelist to believe that the unbeliever's response to the gospel will depend largely (or at least in part) on how articulate, eloquent or persuasive he is in his presentation of the gospel. "If I can only choose my words carefully

enough," the evangelist reasons in his heart, "then this person will be more likely to repent."

But Paul writes in verse 1 that when he brought the gospel to the Corinthians, he "did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom." In other words, Paul did not rely on his rhetorical ability to piece words together in a manner he thought might be more effective in converting the sinner. This is because he knew dependence on one's own eloquence or wisdom to be antithetical to a right understanding of the unbeliever's depravity and God's work of salvation.

Second, *the evangelist must rely instead on the power of the message of the gospel*. If the believer is not to depend on his own words as he seeks the salvation of the lost, on whose should he depend? In verse 2, Paul writes that instead of relying on his own eloquence or wisdom, he determined he would "know nothing among [the Corinthians] except Christ, and Him crucified." In other words, in his preaching, Paul would adhere exclusively to *God's Word*—the simple message of the gospel—and trust in its ability to do the Lord's work of salvation. Why? Because it is this message, not man's, that is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18, 24). The modern-day evangelist must follow in the apostle's footsteps, determining himself to remain committed to the message of the gospel as he calls sinners to faith in Christ.

Third, *the evangelist must possess a sober-minded sense of his own inadequacy*. In verse 3, Paul reminds the Corinthians that while he was with them, he was "in weakness and in fear and in much trembling." These are not the words of a man who had confidence in his own ability to "make the sale" or "lead the sinner to Christ." In fact, most prominent in Paul's thinking was his own weakness and inadequacy. He knew he lacked the ability to bring about the change of heart necessary for salvation, and therefore such a task would have to be undertaken by Another. It was in Him that Paul's faith would abide.

And fourth, *the evangelist must trust solely in the power of the Holy Spirit*. In verse 4, Paul writes that his message and his preaching "were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power." In other words, as Paul brought the gospel to unbelieving Corinth, his faith was not in his own message or ability to communicate in "cleverness of speech" (1:17), but rather in the power of the Holy Spirit who is able to do what no mere man can do. The key here is to understand that *God* is the Savior and that salvation is *His* work, and then to direct one's dependence in accordance with this understanding.

When the evangelist takes this kind of approach to proclaiming the good news to a Christ-less world, men's faith will rest—as Paul concludes in verse 5 of that chapter—not "on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God." In this the Lord is most delighted, for His glory is His highest priority and greatest pleasure. And if we, as the children of God, are to imitate our Father by regarding His glory as *our*

chief aim and affection, we must do so by building upon a truly biblical foundation of evangelism.