

# “Telling People the Truth in Love”

## A Reformed Approach to Evangelism

(Revised August 2004)

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### I. A bad rap—Why do the Reformed not evangelize?

Whether justified or not, Reformed Christians have a bad reputation for not being concerned about evangelism. While there are wonderful exceptions, such as *Evangelism Explosion*, some of the criticism is certainly valid. Some of it is not. Why is this? Some historical background would be useful.

#### A. A great past—A questionable present

Historically, the Reformed have a great history of evangelism and missions. Indeed, the Christianization of Europe and the New World as a result of the Reformation, with the militant stress upon *sola Fide*, *sola Scriptura*, is not to be taken lightly. Contrast the Protestant countries of Canada and the United States, with that of Catholic countries such as Mexico and Brazil.

The first “Great Awaking” with such central figures as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield was largely based upon historic Reformed distinctives, i.e., Whitefield’s famous sermon, “Christ Our Righteousness,” and Edward’s classic “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Yet, John Wesley was also an integral part of the First Great Awakening, and the stress upon a “conversion experience,” and evangelism center in preaching outside of the church even by Calvinists, such as Whitefield and Edwards, in many ways laid the groundwork for a Second Great Awakening, which largely undid the Calvinistic emphases of the first.

The Second Great Awakening, led by Charles Finney, self-consciously moved away from all Reformed Calvinistic emphases of the first. In Finney’s system, the stress was almost entirely upon a “conversion experience,” understood through perfectionistic categories—a dramatic ceasing from sin and a turning from the former way of living. The categories underlying the Great Commission to take the gospel to the nations were no longer those of Biblical Christianity, but were now those of Jacksonian democracy—the rugged American individual could, through a sheer act of the will, accomplish virtually anything to which they put their minds.

This lead to the employment of Finney’s new measures—protracted revival meetings, the use of entertainment and dramatic preaching stressing the charismatic preacher, revivalist hymnody, all carefully orchestrated to lead to the anxious bench and then the “altar call,” in which one demonstrated one’s faith in Christ and desire to cease from sinning by going forward to an “altar” at the preachers command. This, in turn, laid the groundwork for evangelism to take place apart from the sacramental and preaching ministry of the local church—something which historically, Protestants had insisted upon.

Thus the heirs of “Second Great Awakening” style evangelism are seen today in the “crusade evangelism” of Billy Graham and Greg Laurie, and in evangelism techniques such as Campus

Crusade's "Four Spiritual Laws." These approaches to evangelism now dominate the evangelical world. For evangelicals, largely ignorant of church history, if evangelistic efforts do not look like what they are used to—large gatherings, noisy, exciting and studded with musicians and Christian celebrities, and stressing a dramatic conversion experience—they don't think that genuine evangelism is taking place. Anything different doesn't feel right! This is very unfortunate.

Therefore, when evangelicals criticize Reformed Christians for not supporting Billy Graham, or Greg Laurie and the Harvest Crusades, or for not approving of the "Four-Spiritual Laws," they are, in effect, really criticizing the Reformed understanding sin and grace. Criticism of Reformed Christians by evangelicals is, in this regard, simply a fact of life. All one need do is read Dave Hunt's book, "What Love is This?" or the debate between Hunt and James White, "Debating Calvinism" to see how this can be the case. And for this difference of opinion, the Reformed need not be ashamed. A false gospel must be opposed!

That being said, it is too often the case that Reformed Christians are much more concerned with not repeating the errors of the evangelicals than they are with seeing people come to faith in Christ. In far too many Reformed circles it is far easier to find a discussion about *how* and *why* the evangelicals are wrong in the way they evangelize, than it is to find a conversation about how we *ought* to evangelize. Even worse, too many Reformed Christians are unwilling to put their theology into practice. It is common-place for Reformed Christians to speak of evangelism as converting an evangelical to the Reformed faith, and not as a non-Christian coming to faith in Christ. It is hard to find Reformed Christians who are actually doing evangelism instead of talking about it or criticizing others for doing it improperly!

There are reasons why this is the case—

### **B. A cultural, rather than a theological problem**

One main reason for this is simply to be found in the history of the Reformed churches, especially that of the continental Reformed Churches. These groups are largely dominated by distinctively ethnic and immigrant cultures, especially in the case of the Dutch and Germans who saw the church and the confessional tradition, in part, as a means of preserving their own culture in the New World. It is vitally important in such groups to preserve the clan, the national heritage and traditions, and outsiders only contribute to what was perceived as an undo Americanization which overturns old ways of thinking and doing. Furthermore, they bring all of the old doctrinal disputes and issues with them.

As English-speakers, the Presbyterians did not have such baggage, and as a result, capitulated to theological liberalism and revivalism much faster. As a result, there are American Presbyterians of virtually every stripe—from theological liberals, to cultural conservatives, to the confessionally orthodox. The Reformed orthodox, on the other hand, tend to be strongly ethnic, and react against the encroachment of liberalism and revivalism through a fortress mentality. The continental Reformed have suffered deeply from repeated church splits, the painful process of Americanization and so on, and as a result, have rarely been enthusiastic about seeing outsiders come into their churches. This is understandable, but tragic. For the theology of the Continental Reformed churches is a theological treasure!

### C. Criticism leads to cynicism

But the problem many of us face, as former evangelicals, is that our churches are not dominated by issues of ethnicity and problems of Americanization. As former evangelicals, we have been burned by shoddy and unbiblical theology. Many of us are angry, wounded by years of perfectionistic sanctification, and muddled-headed theology. We are angry at those who taught us and we have every right to be! But it is very easy to react in a rage against what is wrong with evangelicalism, and to become overly cynical in the process. While rightly criticizing evangelical theology and its unbiblical Pelagianism, if we are not careful, we risk becoming critical, rude, proud and obnoxious. When that happens, ironically, *we* become a stumbling block to non-Christians who need to hear the gospel as well as to those dissatisfied evangelicals seeking a more biblical way of thinking and doing. If not careful, we have nothing good to say about anything or anybody. Too often, we are far more concerned with pointing out the errors of evangelicalism, than we are with seeing men and women come to faith in Christ. This is sin and we must repent of it!

It seems to me that one of the best ways to deal with this, is to make a concerted effort to go back to our own roots as Reformed Christians—the Scriptures and our confessions—and simply ask, what is Biblical evangelism? What are the necessary theological presuppositions we must have in place before we seek to tell others about Christ? How do we go about evangelizing others?

There is a difficult balancing act here. We need to be very clear that Biblical and Reformed evangelism will look much different than the Pelagian-inspired varieties of American evangelicalism. Yet, we as Reformed Christians also need to stop talking about evangelism and starting doing it!

### D. Greater clarity and a prayerful desire to do better:

It seems to me that there are several issues about which we must be clear.

1. Let us be very clear about what we believe and why we believe it! We must be self-consciously Reformed without compromise. This means we cannot adopt unbiblical methods of evangelism. We cannot become functional Arminians because we earnestly desire to see people come to faith in Jesus Christ. The end does not justify the means, nor can we become pragmatists like Rick Warren and the Purpose Driven Church.
2. But as we are self-consciously Reformed, we must do so with great charity, and with an eye to the fact that people are watching us. Evangelism is not about winning a theological argument! It is about wrestling with eternity! This is why Reformed evangelism should be understood as “telling the truth in love.”
3. Let us also re-double our efforts to take the Biblical command to make disciples seriously once again. It is our Biblical duty to see to it that Jesus Christ is proclaimed throughout our sphere of influence. It is time to both talk about evangelism and to do evangelism.
4. We also need to make a concerted effort to pray for two things: one is a renewed desire to see men and women come to faith in Jesus Christ, and the other is that God will

bless our efforts in doing so.

The presence of non-Christians in our midst, struggling with the claims of Christianity, will do much to keep us from spending our precious time and energy from needlessly criticizing evangelicals. The best way to get out of the overly-critical rut is to get back to the task of evangelizing. Let us candidly face facts. At present, our Biblical and valid criticism of evangelicalism sounds hollow and will not get much of a hearing if we are not putting our own theology into practice. But if we are making a concerted effort to actually engage in biblical evangelism, we will be faithful to our own confessions and theology, and our evangelical critics will be silenced.

## **II. What is Evangelism?**

For many, the very essence of the Christian life is “telling others about Jesus,” which, in far too many instances, translates into telling others about ourselves and recounting how Christianity has impacted our own lives. This is evident when we simply ask people to define evangelism, and discover they are very often confused about the relationship between their own testimony and personal experience and that of the Biblical witness to Jesus Christ. This also explains why people are so apt to talk about themselves when trying to convert someone, rather than simply recounting the facts of the gospel. Too many people think the essence of evangelism is personal testimony rather than biblical witness.

According to Will Metzger in his very helpful book, Tell the Truth, there is a clear distinction to be drawn between the Biblical “witness” to Christ and our own “testimony” about our journey to faith. Says Metzger, “the content [of the Biblical witness] is Christ and God, not our journey to faith. Our personal testimony may be included, but witnessing is more than reciting our spiritual autobiography. Specific truths about a specific person are the subject of our proclamation. A message has been committed to us—a word of reconciliation to the world (2 Corinthians 5:19).”<sup>1</sup> This is vital to grasp. Evangelism by its very essence is talking about the biblical witness to Christ, and includes a very specific set of Biblical facts.

This means that before we can even talk about telling others about Jesus Christ, we need to be very clear about who Jesus is and understand something of the nature of his saving work. This is why we must be very clear in our own minds about the theological categories and presuppositions which frame our understanding of evangelism, and why it is so important to “get it right, before getting it out.”

Thus, our working definition for evangelism is “telling people the truth in love,” and we now turn our attention to what it means to “tell people the truth.”

## **III. Coherence and Contingency—“Truth Before Telling!”**

Obviously, the place to begin any discussion of the biblical and theological basis of evangelism is at the beginning—but that is easier said than done. As Francis Schaeffer correctly reminds us, “Christianity begins with the existence of the infinite-personal God, man’s creation in God’s image and a space-time

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<sup>1</sup> Will Metzger, Tell the Truth, 24.

Fall.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there are a number of Biblical and theological presuppositions which must be kept clearly in our minds before we begin the task of taking the gospel to those in our own sphere of influence.

Before we turn to specifics, we cannot ignore the fact that the question of a “biblical starting point” for evangelism and apologetics has been hotly debated and frequently discussed by Reformed theologians. As Christians, the question we must face is “do we start with God or do we start with humanity?” Calvin himself opens his famed *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with the words “nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: The knowledge of God and our ourselves,”<sup>3</sup> clearly indicating that in his mind the two are necessarily related and that one certainly leads to the other. The whole evidentialist-presuppositionalist debate about apologetic methodology is indicative of the complexity of the issues involved here.

Rather than digress into a philosophical debate the proper starting point—“God or man,” let me simply “presuppose” what I think is a very workable and common-sense approach to these matters, namely, what is known as the coherence-contingency model, in which it is acknowledged that there is a fixed body of doctrinal truth [coherence] which is then applied to very diverse individual evangelistic situations [contingency]. The fixed body of truth to be presupposed is that data found in the Holy Scriptures as summarized for us in the Reformed confessions, which, in turn, we are to bring to bear in specific evangelistic situations.

Simply stated, in order to tell people the truth in love, we must first know what that truth is! In this sense, coherence, precedes contingency!

#### **IV. Coherence—The Biblical and Theological Presuppositions of Evangelism**

If knowing the truth is a prerequisite to “telling it to people in love,” this means that one of the best ways to prepare for evangelism is with a study of the Reformed confessions or a basic text in Biblical doctrine. While that is true, it is important to point out that you do not need to be a theologian to engage in evangelism. But you do need a good grasp of basic Biblical doctrines! Let me emphasize as clearly as I possibly can, that time spent studying the confessions will bear great fruit when you begin to witness to others about Jesus Christ.

The following, then, is simply a “bare bones” catalogue of things with which we need to be familiar before we began to look in the Scriptures for models to use in contingent situations.

##### **A. Regarding the God “Who Is There”**

1. God is eternal and uncreated—this means that everything that is created was created

<sup>2</sup> Francis Schaeffer, The God Who Is There, Vol. 1 The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer [Westchester: Crossway, 1982], 122.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, Institutes, I.i.1.

by God and depends upon him for its existence [creation] and preservation [providence]. This lends great support to apologetic arguments from contingency.

2. God is alone immutable, infinite, simple, omniscient and omnipresent—creation is mutable, finite, composite and necessarily constrained by the limits of time and space. This explains human limitations in terms of both knowing and being.
3. God is utterly transcendent, incomprehensible and hidden to us, unless he chooses to reveal himself through general and special revelation. This means that nothing can be known about God apart from his self-revelation.
4. Creation stems from God’s eternal decree—meaning that nothing that now is, is outside of God’s will and authority. This means that there is no such thing as “chance” or “fate,” or “freewill” in an absolute sense.
5. God is described in the Scriptures as possessing in absolute and infinite measure the attributes of holiness, love, truth, righteousness, mercy, long-suffering, etc. Thus we are creatures possess these attributes in conditional and finite measure. This explains the fact that humanity possesses all of the so-called communicable attributes of God, and that God communicates to us verbally, that is, through the word of God written, the Holy Scriptures.

## B. The “Mannishness of Man”—Creation and the Fall

1. God created all things and pronounced them to be “good.” Thus Christianity is necessarily incompatible with all forms of dualism between “spirit/matter.”
2. The fact of creation validates the importance of ordinary history as God acts in time and space, though he transcends time and space. As we will see, Christianity is necessarily an “historical” religion and its truth claims are anchored in both God’s redemptive word and God’s redemptive acts.
3. The high point of creation is that God has created man and woman in his image, meaning as Cornelius Van Til has said, that man is like God in every way that a creature can be like God,<sup>4</sup> since we possess all of the so-called communicable attributes of God. This explains things like, human dignity and the Biblical prohibitions against murder [Genesis 9:6] and cursing others [James 3:9], human rationality and why, apart from the curse upon the human race at Babel, “nothing would be impossible for them.” For the Christian, man is much more than a mere beast.
4. General revelation, through that which God has made, tells us that he is, that he is eternal, all-powerful and that he will punish sin, which is defined as any infraction of his revealed will in natural revelation and codified in the decalogue. General revelation is

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<sup>4</sup> Cornelius Van Til, Defense of the Faith, 14.

intended to provide us with a natural knowledge of God, while special revelation, including both God's redemptive word and redemptive act, reveals to us the plan and purpose of redemption, without which we cannot be saved. Thus any Biblical approach to evangelism will be thoroughly grounded in the Holy Scriptures, the very word of God written.

5. God gave Adam dominion over the earth and gave to him the so-called "cultural mandate" which established the family as the basic unit of human existence with the command to be fruitful and multiply. Adam was to rule and subdue the earth, through the creation of "Godly culture." This demonstrates humanity's need of social structure and culture.
6. Christianity does not presuppose any particular theory of the "age of the earth," but it does demand the existence of the historical Adam. Indeed, Christianity not only presupposes an historical Adam, Christianity presupposes a fallen human race. Adam did indeed plunge the human race into sin and death through his rebellion in the Garden. Thus the many difficult problems faced by the human race come not from defect or limitations inherent in God's "good" creation, but in the corruption of that creation because of human sinfulness.
7. Thus, as Christians, we not only presuppose the dignity of all men and women by virtue of being created in God's image, we must take equally seriously the effects of the Fall which place humanity under God's curse. This includes:
  - a. Imputed guilt for Adam's sin extending to the whole of the human race. No one is "innocent" before God.
  - b. The wages of sin, which is death. Everyone ever born will die.
  - c. Inherited corruption of the race, which itself eternally punishable and passed on to all of Adam's children by means of natural procreation, leads to actual sin. Thus we are born with a "sinful nature," which makes us naturally hostile to God, unwilling and unable to do his will. This is what Luther speaks of as "being curved in on ourselves," and what Van Til has spoken of as "autonomy."
  - d. Total depravity, in the sense that sin effects the entire person, physically, mentally and emotionally. There is no part of the Image of God in us that is not tainted, effaced or damaged by human sin. Though the Imago remains, it is as Calvin declared, a frightful deformity.
  - e. Loss of original righteousness, holiness and knowledge. The Fall did great damage to essential human nature, which can only be restored through regeneration.
  - f. The noetic effects of sin—a darkened understanding and ability to understand the things of God. As Paul says, we now inevitably suppress the truth about God in unrighteousness.

- g. Total inability—because of our sinful orientation, we will not come to God in faith if left to ourselves.
- h. We are by nature “children of wrath,” enslaved to sinful desires and affections. Our thoughts are evil all the time.

### **C. The Grace of God in Jesus Christ—Faith and Justification**

1. The Scriptures clearly teach that God elects a multitude of Adam’s fallen children to be saved, and that he passes over others, leaving them to face the consequences for original and actual sins [cf Canons of Dort, I. 1-5]. Thus the reason any fallen sinners are saved from God’s wrath is to be found solely in the goodness of God and not in the natural abilities of the sinner to come to faith.
2. The Scriptures [as well as the Reformed confessions which summarize them] teach that God has connected the divine purpose [end]—the salvation of the elect—to a divinely appointed means, namely, the preaching/teaching and communication of the gospel. This means that God has not only determined who will be saved, but how they will be saved. This means that we are to concern ourselves with God’s appointed means—taking the gospel to the ends of the earth—and not with the mystery of who is elect and who is not. Any Reformed approach to evangelism must be based upon these divinely appointed means.
3. The only ground of salvation is the finished work of Jesus Christ—both in his active and passive obedience. In Christ, God satisfies the demands of the law. And in Christ’s sacrificial death, God removes the guilt of our sin. The death of Christ is sufficient to save all who come to him, and is intended by God to save the elect. The death of Christ does not make the whole world hypothetically “savable.”
4. Faith is not the one work we must do to be saved. Rather, faith is the reception of the saving benefits of Jesus Christ. Faith is not merely assent to the truth of the Christian religion, but is defined as trust in Jesus Christ, who alone can save sinners from the wrath to come. According to B. B. Warfield, “it is solely from its *object* that faith derives its value....The saving power of faith resides thus not in itself, but in the almighty savior on whom it rests....It is not, strictly speaking, even faith in Christ that saves, but Christ that saves through faith.”<sup>5</sup>
5. The Scriptures clearly teach that sinners come to faith in Christ through the means of the gospel—God’s elect are effectually called, regenerated and converted, that is, exercise faith in Christ and repentance—only through the power of the Holy Spirit [Ephesians 1:3-14; 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16]. Thus evangelism, Biblically defined, is the communication of the gospel to non-Christians with the expectation that the Spirit works

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<sup>5</sup> B. B. Warfield, “The Biblical Doctrine of Faith,” in Biblical Doctrines (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 502-504.

powerfully through the divinely appointed means—the message of reconciliation [Romans 10:14-17; 2 Corinthians 5:16-6:2].

6. The gospel, narrowly defined, is the saving work of Christ as summarized in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8. Communicating the gospel is communicating the facts of Christ's life, death, burial and resurrection, complete with the gospel imperative to repent and believe [cf. my article in *modernReformation*, "For the Sake of the Gospel: Paul's Apologetic Speeches," Vol. 7, No. 2 March/April 1997]. It is through this message that God's creates faith and enables sinners to believe.

This “bare bones” outline constitutes the basic presuppositions about God, creation, man, sin and salvation, that we must have clearly before our minds before we engage in evangelism. This constitutes the “truth” we must tell non-Christians in love.

**D. As Dr. Lloyd-Jones points out, these theological presuppositions translate into certain fundamental principles for Reformed evangelism:**

1. The supreme object of the work of evangelism is to glorify God, not save souls.
2. The only power that can do this work is the Holy Spirit, not our own strength.
3. The one and only medium through which the Spirit works, is the Scriptures; therefore, we “reason out of the Scriptures,” like Paul did.
4. These preceding principles give us the true motivation for evangelism—a zeal for God and a love for others.
5. There is a constant danger of heresy through a false zeal and employment of unscriptural methods.<sup>6</sup>

**E. A man-centered vs. a God-centered approach to Evangelism<sup>7</sup>**

Man-Centered Approach	God-Centered Approach
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<sup>6</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, The Presentation of the Gospel, 6-7, and cited in Metzger, Tell the Truth, 26.

<sup>7</sup> The following is taken from Metzger, Tell the Truth, 32-33.

<b>View of God</b>	<b>View of God</b>
<p>Point of contact with non-Christians is love (God loves you). Therefore, God's authority is secondary</p> <p>Love is God's chief attribute.</p> <p>God is impotent before the sinner's will.</p> <p>The persons of the Trinity have different goals in accomplishing and applying salvation.</p> <p>God is a friend who will help you.</p>	<p>Point of contact with non-Christians is creation (God made you). Therefore, God has authority over your destiny.</p> <p>Holiness and love are equally important attributes of God.</p> <p>God is able to empower the sinner's will.</p> <p>The persons of the Trinity work in harmony—salvation accomplished for and applied to the same people.</p> <p>God is a king who will save you.</p>
<b>View of Humanity</b>	<b>View of Humanity</b>
<p>Fallen, yet has the ability (or potential) to choose the good.</p> <p>Seeks truth but lacks correct facts.</p> <p>Needs love, help and friendship.</p> <p>Makes mistakes, is imperfect, needs forgiveness.</p> <p>Needs salvation from the consequences of sin—unhappiness, hell.</p> <p>Humanity is sick and ignorant.</p>	<p>Fallen, and will not come to God by own will power.</p> <p>Mind at enmity with God; none seek God.</p> <p>Needs new nature (mind, heart, will), regeneration.</p> <p>Rebels against God, has a sinful nature, needs reconciliation.</p> <p>Needs salvation from guilt and the power of sin.</p> <p>Humanity is dead and lost.</p>

<p><b>View of Christ</b></p> <p>Savior from mistakes, selfishness, hell.</p> <p>He exists for our benefit.</p> <p>His death was more important than his life.</p> <p>Emphasizing his priestly office—Savior.</p> <p>An attitude of submission to Christ's lordship is optional for salvation.</p>	<p><b>View of Christ</b></p> <p>Savior from sin and sinful nature.</p> <p>He exists to gather a kingdom and receive honor and glory.</p> <p>His death and his life of obedience equally important.</p> <p>Emphasizing his priestly, kingly, and prophetic offices.</p> <p>An attitude of submission to Christ's lordship is necessary for salvation.</p>
<p><b>View of Response to Christ</b></p> <p>Invitation waiting to be accepted now.</p> <p>Our choice is the basis for salvation—God responds to our decision.</p> <p>Will give mental assent to truths of gospel—decision.</p> <p>Appeal is made to the desires of the sinner.</p> <p>Saved by faith alone—repentance omitted for it is thought of as “works.”</p> <p>Assurance of salvation comes from a counselor using the promises of God and pronouncing the new believer saved.</p> <p>Sinners have the key in their hands.</p>	<p><b>View to Response of Christ</b></p> <p>Loving command to be obeyed now.</p> <p>God's choice is the basis for salvation—we respond to God's initiative.</p> <p>We respond with our whole person (mind, heart, will)—conversion.</p> <p>Truth is driven home into the conscience of the sinner.</p> <p>Saved by faith alone—saving faith is always accompanied by repentance.</p> <p>Assurance of salvation comes from the Holy Spirit applying biblical promises to the conscience and effecting a changed life.</p> <p>God has the key in his hand.</p>

## V. Contingency—“Telling the Truth in Love”

Now that the basic Biblical and theological presuppositions regarding God, creation, sin and grace have been identified [coherence], we need to move on to a discussion of contingency— “How, then, do we apply this fixed body of truth in dynamic situations?” “How do we tell non-Christians the truth in love?”

### A. The Practice of Pre-Evangelism

As Francis Schaeffer once put it, “prevangelism is no soft option.” In his book, The God Who Is There,<sup>8</sup> Schaeffer makes the following points about what we may call “pre-evangelism,” which is, in a sense, doing the prep work enabling people to understand the Christian gospel. Pre-evangelism is communicating the basic categories people need to understand the claims of Christianity, as well as removing potential intellectual objections. According to Schaeffer:

1. Pre-evangelism entails two-way communication between the Christian and the non-Christian: “If we wish to communicate, then, we must take the time and the trouble to learn our hearer’s use of language so that they understand what we intend to convey [p. 130].” Thus pre-evangelism entails understanding what the non-Christian is saying. It means listening to them and then communicating to them in terms they can understand. This is what we call finding and establishing “common ground.”<sup>9</sup>
2. Pre-evangelism entails a proper understanding of the meaning of love: “Each person must be dealt with as an individual, not as a case or statistic or machine [p. 130].” “We must remember that the person to whom we are talking, however far from the Christian faith he may be, is an image-bearer of God. He has great value, and our communication with him must be in genuine Love. Love is not an easy thing; it is not just an emotional urge, but an attempt to move over and sit in the other person’s place and see how his problems look to him. Love is a genuine concern for the individual....Therefore, to be engaged in personal ‘witness’ as a duty or because our Christian circle exerts a social pressure on us, is to miss the whole point. The reason we do it is that the person before us is an image-bearer of God, and he is an individual who is unique in the world. This kind of communication is not cheap” [pp. 130-131]. Thus while our motive to evangelize is the glory of God, love for neighbor, ultimately brings God glory.
3. Pre-Evangelism entails getting a non-Christian to see the futility of unbelief and leaving him in the tension between the real world and his own set of beliefs: “Every person we speak to, whether shop girl or university student, has a set of presuppositions, whether he or she has analyzed them or not....But, in fact, no non-Christian can be

<sup>8</sup> Schaeffer, The God Who Is There, 129-160.

<sup>9</sup> This is not a “**neutral**” common ground, but simply a place, says Schaeffer, “where you can talk,” with the non-Christian [ p. 137]. While there is common ground between a Christian and a non-Christian in terms of communication, there is no such thing as “neutral” common ground, where Christian and non-Christian can meet apart from their presuppositions.

consistent to the logic of his presuppositions. The reason for this is simply that a man must live in reality, and reality consists of two parts: The external world and its form, and man's `mannishness,' including his own `mannishness.' No matter what a man may believe, he cannot change the reality of what is. As Christianity is the truth of what is there, to deny this, on the basis of another system, is to stray from the real world....Non-Christian presuppositions simply do not fit into what God has made, including what man is. This being so, every man is in a place of tension. Man cannot make his own universe and then live in it" [p. 132].

"Every person is somewhere along the line between the real world and the logical conclusion of his or her non-Christian presuppositions. Every person has the pull of two consistencies, the pulls towards the real world and the pull of the logic of his system....The more logical a man who holds a non-Christian position is to his own presuppositions, the further he is from the real world; and the nearer he is to the real world, the more illogical he is to his own presuppositions" [pp 133-134].

Schaeffer calls the exploiting of this intellectual tension, "taking the roof off" [p. 140], by allowing the weight of these non-Christian presuppositions to come crashing down on the non-Christian. It is like preaching the law—since it exposes a non-Christian's intellectual weakness. Schaeffer cautions us not to exploit this tension any more than is necessary because by destroying a non-Christian's presuppositions, we may leave them in despair. This would be like preaching the law to someone, without preaching the gospel afterwards—leaving them under condemnation with no hope of forgiveness.

4. Prevangelism entails making sure that the non-Christian understands that these issues are about objective facts of history and not subjective feelings or opinions of individuals: "we must make sure that the individual understands that we are talking about real truth, and not about something vaguely religious which seems to work psychologically. We must make sure that he understands that we are talking about real guilt before God, and we are not offering him merely relief for his guilt feelings. We must make sure that he understands that we are talking to him about history, and that the death of Jesus was not just an ideal or a symbol but a fact of time and space. If we are talking to a person who would not understand the term `space time history' we can say: 'Do you believe that Jesus died in the sense that if you had been there that day, you could have rubbed your finger on the cross and got a splinter in it?' Until he understands the importance of these things, he is not yet ready to become a Christian [p. 139]."

"The invitation to act comes only after an adequate base of knowledge has been given....Knowledge precedes faith" [p. 153-154].

Thus pre-evangelism is vital. It is to be seen as the communication of both the categories and truths that someone needs in order to understand the gospel itself. This is where apologetics enters the picture, as pre-evangelism also entails the removal of intellectual objections [real or imagined] that non-Christians may have to the gospel. Here, the task is preparing the way for the subsequent communication of gospel in terms the non-Christian can understand!

## B. Different Evangelistic Contexts

Before we speak of the “how to’s” of Evangelism it would be helpful to realize that there are distinctly different evangelistic contexts. Taking a brief look at these different contexts, and analyzing them is important because what may be applicable in one context, may not be to another. There are some evangelistic situations which are more effective than others and in which individual Christians can be every effective.

1. Preaching: Even a quick survey of the Book of Acts demonstrates that the church grew through the proclamation of the word. When those in the audience were Jews, the preaching was from the text of the Old Testament, designed to show how Jesus was the one spoken of in the Old Testament. When Paul preached before pagans, the content for the preaching was adopted accordingly, and tailored for a Gentile audience. This is what I have elsewhere called the “Proclamation—Defense” model.<sup>10</sup>

In our present situation, however, not all sermons lend themselves to the evangelization of non-Christians, and the purpose of worship and the proclamation of the word and administration of the sacraments is for the glory of God and the edification of his people—not evangelism, as the “church growth” types argue. This means that preaching will have a role to play, but perhaps not the sole, nor even the most important role in evangelism, even though truly Biblical evangelism will take place within the context of the ministry of the church.

Today’s “crusade evangelism” of American evangelicalism, rightly acknowledges the centrality of the proclamation of the word, but has gutted the word of its content because of Arminian/Semi-Pelagian theological categories. The evangelistic “crusade” is not a churchly function, but a function of an entertainment model now used by the church.

2. Personal conversation—most evangelism takes place within the context of people talking with non-Christian friends and neighbors on an individual basis. Every one has non-Christian friends, family, neighbors and co-workers. Here is where pre-evangelism should ideally take place as non-Christians can be given the basic categories and proper information about Christianity before they are brought to church and sit under the ministry of the word. This is also one of the most effective means of evangelism. The key here is instructing church members so that they can evangelize on their own and is very effective if such people are quickly plugged into a local church for discipleship and catechesis. In this case the personal conversation does not simply lead to the “praying of the sinner’s prayer in private,” but to the public profession of faith, baptism and membership which takes place in the local church.

3. Hospitality/Small Groups—many churches provide “non-threatening” opportunities for people to bring non-Christian friends into contact with the gospel through the use of small groups and Bible studies where the basic truths of Christianity can be presented and discussed. Again, these groups can be used with profit, if they are church-sponsored and sanctioned, and if they are give the proper oversight by the local consistory. In too many circles, hospitality groups and home Bible studies replace the centrality of Word

<sup>10</sup> See my essay, “For the Sake of the Gospel: Paul’s Apologetic Speeches,” in modernReformation, Vol. 7, No. 2 (March/April 1997), 24-31.

and Sacrament on the Lord's day. If they are a means to bring people into the life of a local church, they can be very effective. But the degree to which these groups usurp this role—by becoming an end in themselves—is the degree to which they cause more harm than good. People don't join a particular “group” when they become Christians, rather they are to be baptized into Christ's church.

4. Literature—Let us not forget, that getting the right book, the right information, to someone wrestling with the claims of Christianity is simply vital. Christianity is a religion of the book. Thus it is simply essential the those being evangelized read the Bible, and that they are given basic written instruction. Depending upon the circumstances, there are many good books on virtually every topic with which non-Christians might struggle. Don't forget that the Heidelberg Catechism is a great place for an enquirer to begin. Many, many people have been brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ through good Christian literature. Again, they key here, is using literature to supplement these other methods.

## **VI. “Do’s and Don’ts” of Evangelism**

1. Be clear about what you believe and why you believe it. Know the Scriptures and know the confessions and catechisms. The more you know about your faith, the easier it is to talk with non-Christians.
2. The essence of evangelism is communicating the correct information about sin and grace, simply and clearly. Talk about the law and the gospel, not about infralapsarianism and divine simplicity! That comes later!
3. Avoid the use of Christian jargon. Speak about real sin, real guilt, real shed blood!
4. Use tact and be charitable! Don't talk about reprobation with someone who has just lost an unbelieving family member. Be kind and courteous! Many non-Christians act and speak out of ignorance, not malice.
5. Be sensitive to someone's past—if they've had a bad experience in church, struggle with a particular sin etc., be understanding and compassionate! Non-Christians hate self-righteousness, and they have a right to do so! Do not soft-peddle the law and the guilt of sin, but make sure they understand that you are a justified sinner, not a self-righteous “know it all,” who is here to correct them!
6. Stick with the subject—don't get side-tracked. When the conversation wanders, pull it back to center stage—the law and the gospel.
7. Evangelism is not about winning an argument, but leading people to Christ. Discussions may get heated and intense at time—that's okay. But the purpose of evangelism is not to show why you are right and they are wrong. It is to communicate the truth of the gospel! The message is to be the offence! Not you!
8. When people are apathetic about sin—use the law. When people have doubts or are

skeptical—use basic apologetic arguments. When people express guilt for sin—present the gospel.

9. Evangelism is about leading non-Christians to Christ. Convincing Evangelicals that Reformed theology is true, falls under the heading of polemics. Don't confuse the two.

10. Stick with what all Christians hold in common wherever possible. Leave the internecine fighting among Christians aside when talking to non-Christians. A non-Christian will not care much about why the Lutheran view of the Lord's Supper is in error, or why Baptists are wrong about infant baptism! That will come during catechesis!

11. Wherever possible, speak about Christianity as factually true—“Jesus did this,” “Jesus said this,” “people heard and saw him,” etc. Keep away from the subjective line of approach—“it works for me.”

12. Pray for wisdom.

13. Trust in the power of God the Holy Spirit working through the word! Cite texts directly from the Scriptures with attribution. Jesus says, Paul says...Not, “I think,” or “it seems to me.”

14. Don't rush things. Just because someone is not ready to trust in Christ after one encounter does not mean that effective evangelism has not taken place. Pre-evangelism is equally vital. You may plant, but someone else may have to water!

15. Treat people as objects of concern, not notches in your belt! Establish relationships and friendships whenever possible.

16. Don't forget that a prophet is without honor in his own home. The chances of you leading your own unbelieving family members [or someone close to you] to Christ are remote. Pray for someone else to come and evangelize your family!

17. Don't force things. If people balk, ridicule and otherwise are not interested, back off. Find another time and place. If after repeated attempts to communicate the gospel, and someone still shows an unwillingness to hear what you have to say, “shake the dust off your feet and move on to a new town!”

18. Be willing to get people the resources they need: be willing to provide them with a Bible, the right book to read, and certainly an invitation to attend your church or Bible study, etc.

19. Pray for opportunities to evangelize. Pray for your church—that God would bless the preaching of his word, that he would bring non-Christians into our midst, and that he would bless the church with growth.

20. You don't have to become a practical Arminian to be a faithful evangelist! A Reformed approach to evangelism simply means telling people the truth in love.