

Evangelism - Puritan or Modern?

Two distinct types of evangelism have evolved in church history - the *Puritan* type and the *Modern* type. Arguably most Christians today only know the latter form. The modern type has increasingly minimised the *preparation* of a mind for understanding the Gospel - ie. as to sin and its consequences; the judgement of God; and thus the *reason* for the Gospel. It is characterised by arranged public gatherings with special preachers - to get people to make 'decisions' or demonstrate an act of faith in Christ. People are usually asked to come to the front or declare their allegiance to Christ in some way.

This type of evangelism traces its roots to Charles Finney in the 1820's. He introduced the '*protracted meeting*' and the '*anxious seat*'. At the end of the sermon he would say: '*There is the anxious seat; come out, and avow determination to be on the Lord's side*'. (1) These were Finneys much opposed '*new measures*'. He also initiated '*enquiry rooms*' for after-meetings. His '*anxious bench*' led to the '*altar call*' of today. Emotionalism at his meetings also led to faintings, weeping and other manifestations.

Finney's understanding of the salvation process was that a person became a Christian when his or her will took action. If the person made a decision, they became a Christian. Finney believed it was his own will that determined his salvation. One of Finney's most famous sermons was titled '*Sinners Bound To Change Their Own Hearts*'.

Finney was a self confessed Pelagian. Pelagius taught that man could earn God's grace in salvation by his ability to use his 'free will' or his own merit. His views were unanimously condemned as *heresy* in the Council of Carthage in the year 418. Like *Pelagius*, Finney developed the view that unsaved man was capable of obedience, could will to do good and could use his own 'free will' to be saved. He denied much of the depravity of man; rejected original sin; and denied that fallen man is unable to repent or believe of himself. Finney's theology and methods characterise much of Modern Evangelism.

Most of Finneys converts fell away as testified by Finney's co-workers and by Finney himself in his later life, (see *Diakrisis* July/Aug., 2004). This same fallaway rate is well documented in Modern Evangelism. Evidence shows more than an 80% 'fall away' rate amongst those Americans making 'professions' for Christ. Statistics reveal most of these people attend a church assembly for *less than a few months*. Billy Graham, in an interview for *Time Magazine*, admitted his reluctance to label half his converts as 'Christians'. (2)

This huge mass of false professions is seen in the broad spectrum of modern Christianity, from the Pentecostal/Charismatic side of the church through to the Fundamentalists. Prominent Fundamentalists such as Jack Hyles, Curtis Hutson and John R. Rice, although fine Bible scholars in many areas, displayed unbiblical understandings of evangelism. These men claimed large numbers of souls saved but the aftermath show the figures were grossly exaggerated with large 'fallaway' rates as previously mentioned.

Puritan Evangelism was remarkably different to that described above. *It was different in method because it was different in doctrine.*

The Puritans were a group that became prominent in the mid 17th Century. They would not conform to the existing Church of England. They believed after the Great Reformation that the church needed further reforming, especially from the left over

rituals and extra-Biblical traditions of Roman Catholicism.

It was the Puritans who invented evangelistic literature. Richard Baxter, Hugh Clark, John Cotton and many others were all great evangelists. Baxter's classic '*Call to the Unconverted*' or Alleine's '*Alarm to the Unconverted*' showed the evangelistic heart of the Puritans.

In contrast to Finney, the Puritans believed that by nature we are at enmity with God and need to be regenerated, and that regeneration is not in our own power. The Puritan type of evangelism was an expression of their doctrine - that the conversion of a sinner is a gracious sovereign work of God alone.

The Puritans did not in general use words such as '*conversion*' and '*regeneration*' but rather used phrases such as '*effectual calling*' - this process they described using various scriptures: Rom.8:30: '***Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified***'; 2Thess 2:14: '***Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ***'; 2Tim.1:9: '***Who hath saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began***'.

To the Puritans the effectual calling was the work of God's Spirit convincing us of sin and renewing or *freeing our wills*. Man could not do this with anything within himself. It is wholly a work of the divine power of the Holy Spirit. One Puritan wrote: '*Ministers knock at the door of mens hearts (persuasion), the Spirit comes with a key and opens the door*'.(3)

The great Puritan, John Owen, said this work is irresistible, not because it drags men to Christ against their will but because it *changes mens hearts* so that they will come freely being made willing to come by His grace. The Puritans believed this was the greatest miracle of God. Where Finney taught plenary *ability*, the Puritans taught *total inability*.

The great revivalist and Puritan evangelist, Jonathan Edwards, placed great emphasis on the sovereignty of God and the effectual calling, as well as the depravity or inability of man. *He was one of the most successful evangelist in history.* After revival swept through his church he said: '*I think I have found that no discourses have been more remarkably blessed, than those in which the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty, with regard to the salvation of sinners, and His just liberty, with regard to answering prayer...*' (4)

The Puritans taught that conviction of sin by the preaching of the law, must precede faith, since no man can or will come to Christ to be saved from sin until he knows what he needs saving from. The first step was knowledge, the second step conviction...then this leads to contrition. The Puritans urged ministers not to short circuit the *preparation process* but to plow up the ground of the heart by exposing sin and its consequences.

The Puritans did not see evangelistic preaching as being separate from other preaching or teaching. Yet Owen wrote that minister's were '*diligently to labour for the conversion of souls to God*'. The faithful Puritan preacher, Richard Greenham, worked 20 years in Cambridge Shire County with only *one* family converted. Yet the same faith honoured Richard Baxter's Kidderminster ministry where in 17 years there were

600 converts of which he claimed none fell away.

The Puritans did not pander to *pragmatic methods* in an effort to secure souls. Pragmatism says that results prove truth, or *if it gets results it works and must be of the Holy Spirit*. In this, Puritan Evangelism differed greatly from Modern Evangelism. It did not employ the use of sports clubs to interest outsiders, child minding centres to create friends within the community, meetings designed to attract the godless. They did not hold witnessing classes and send people to knock on doors, witnessing and inviting people to Church. Although some of these things may have value in and of themselves in a modern age, the Puritans used no entertainment and did not try to sell the church to the disinterested. They rather were motivated by, and well aware of, the power of Scripture. They knew the truth of Acts 2:42,47: ***‘And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers...And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved’***.

The use of a ‘medium’ through which to better present the Gospel has become an art form in Modern Evangelism. Stage plays, drama, clowning, testimonies, ‘Christian’ rock music, sport, unbiblical manifestations and other methods from the world are increasingly being used. But these dilute and lower the *intellectual understanding* of the message. When something is added to basic truth it always pollutes and subtracts from it. When these mixtures are used as ‘baits’, the following is often true: *the bait you catch them with may well be the food you will have to continue to feed them with*.

Peter Masters in ‘Stand For The Truth’ refutes the pragmatic thinking in modern evangelism that *‘results count more than the purity of the methods we use’*. He writes: *‘This is the reasoning of an ungodly and immoral age, and it often taints the thinking of Christian people...the Bible condemns the attitude which says ‘Let us do evil, that good may come’, (Romans 3.8). Christians must never ignore the rules of the Bible because compromise seems to lead to success...’*

One author writes: *‘The typical presentation today starts exactly opposite where Paul started. He wrote of ‘the wrath of God...against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men’. But modern evangelism begins with ‘God loves you and wants to make you happy’...(Paul’s) approach was a directly confronting evangelism. He did not do a Community Survey. He did not conduct any special research. He did not try to put together an Evangelism Committee. He just went to the synagogue and the marketplace and preached to whoever was there.’ (5)*

God requires us to deliver the Gospel to all. But how shall they *understand* it without *preparation of the heart*, (Matt.13:1-9; 18-23; Lk.8:5-15)? How shall they truly ‘confess with the mouth’ and ‘believe in the heart’ without being shown *the reason as to why they need the Gospel?* - ie. the depravity of man; his inability to keep and fulfil the law; his sin nature and its consequences.

We are not required to dress up the Gospel or make it more ‘appealing’, for one cannot soften the cross! We are not ‘PR officers’ to bring goodwill between Christ and the world - to make Christ acceptable to businessmen, sportsmen or the Press. We are not mediators making the Gospel more palatable to man.

The power of the Gospel is in the message itself! It needs no outside influence to generate its power. Paul said: ***‘For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first,***

and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written. The just shall live by faith’, (Rom.1:16,17). The word ‘power’ here is ‘*dunamis*’, referring to intrinsic power, *power of itself*. We get the words ‘dynamite’ and ‘dynamo’ from this word. The Gospel message generates power of itself and needs no outside help. This reasoning is further extended in verse 17: ***‘For therein is the righteousness of God revealed...’*** The Gospel itself contains the revelation of the righteousness of God himself in the flesh through the message of the substitutionary death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Much of Modern Evangelism is preaching *another cross*. The old cross has nothing to do with the world; the old cross is not slanted to fit new fashions such as rap and rock music. The old cross is a place of a finished *sacrifice*, (Jn.19:30; Heb.9:25,26; 10:10-12); a place of *bearing of sin*, (Heb.9:28); a place of *reconciliation for enemies of God*, (Rom.5:10; Col.1:20); a place of *death*; a place of *submission*, (Lk.22:42); a place of *humiliation*. God does not improve our old life for it is *a place where we will be crucified*, (Gal.2:20). The old cross is an end to Adams journey in the flesh. We leave the old life at the cross.

There is no pride at Calvary! Modern Evangelism is in danger of taking the ‘*shame*’ and the ‘*offence*’ out of the cross, (Heb.12:2; Gal.5:11).

A.W. Tozer summarises: *‘The cross of popular evangelism is not the cross of the New Testament. It is rather a new bright ornament of a self-assured and carnal Christianity...The old cross slew men; the new cross entertains them. The old cross condemned; the new cross amuses. The old cross destroys confidence in the flesh; the new cross encourages it...The flesh, smiling and confident, preaches and sings about the cross; Before that cross it bows and towards that cross it points...but upon that cross it will not die, and the reproach of the cross it stubbornly refuses to bear’*.

Preachers are to declare Christ to all as the saviour from sin. But to expect immediate response ‘decisions’ today too often focuses on man using his ‘free will’ to ‘decide for Christ’ at any time. This is the result of rejection of the slavery of sin and the inability of man. Modern pragmatic methods are resulting in a huge fallaway rate with resultant hardening and hypocrisy.

The Puritans, although zealous, were never in any spirit of panic with their preaching to unconverted souls. They believed God’s Word does not return void to those who God will choose (Is.55:11). In the historic ‘Awakenings’ the enquiring sinners often read, prayed and *agonised* over their lost condition *for days* before peace descended upon them.

Modern Evangelism is big scale, short term campaigns calling for decisions; in contrast, the Puritans knew of no such thing as ‘crusades’ or ‘campaigns’. Puritan Evangelism was a broader long term effort and generally *local church based*. They understood well *God’s work* in contrast to *man’s work* in evangelism.

We preach God’s message undiluted; and *the sovereign Spirit calls, draws and saves* who He wills and in His time.

Which type of evangelism do you subscribe to - Puritan or Modern? The answer may well be determined by your doctrine.

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- (1) ‘*Revivals and Religions*’, Ch.14
- (2) David Frost, *Billy Graham in Conversation*, Oxford: Lion, 1998, P.65; *Aust. Beacon*, 8/97, P.5
- (3) ‘*Body of Divinity*’ by T. Watson, , 1869, P.154
- (4) ‘*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*’, Banner of Truth Vol.1 P.353
- (5) ‘*Ashamed of the Gospel*’ by John Macarthur, P.132, 141