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Reformation
& Revival



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You know this already, but let's just remind ourselves again at the beginning of this article: Evangelism is difficult and unpredictable work.

Where there are brave and far-reaching efforts to win men to Christ, two problems arise. First, the results are always less than we hoped for. Second, they are usually less than they seemed to be at the outset. These two problems sometimes dampen our zeal to point men to Christ. They shouldn't, but they do.

I think it will help us to see that the Lord Jesus faced these same problems. After He fed five thousand the crowds dogged His footsteps. Listen to what happened between Him and them, from John 6:

When they found Him on the other side of the lake, they asked Him, "Rabbi, when did You get here? (v. 25).

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for Me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On Him God the Father has placed His seal of approval" (vv. 26-27).

They asked Him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" (v. 28).

To begin with, most teachers would be pleased to have others follow them around. Isn't that what teaching and preaching are all about, having people to speak to? And the more the better!

The Lord, however, looked for godly motives. He knew that these men had failed to understand Him. They had had their bellies filled. To them, that was more important than His teaching, and much more important than His person. That, in turn, must have tempted our Lord to be discouraged.

Was all His incomparable teaching in vain? It might have seemed that way. Jesus had to tell these men that there is other food to seek beyond the food that feeds our flesh.

Let's look back to see how bleak the situation was. Verse 28 looks as if it contains a ray of light. We would be glad to have someone ask us, "What must I do to do the works God requires?" When we keep on reading, however, we find that the ray of light was more apparent than real.

Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the One He has sent" (v. 29).

So they asked Him, "What miraculous sign then will You give that we may see it and believe You? What will You do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'" (vv. 30-31).

Jesus answered these men graciously. He told them that they must believe in Him. They understood what He said, but they wanted to quibble. "How about a sign from heaven?" they say. And they imply more: "Just give us that sign and we'll be ready to believe in You."

It is hard not to feel that their answer is impudent. They may have expected the manna to come from heaven again when the Messiah came. Many in that day did think so. But in speaking of the Lord's miracle as nothing, they treated Him very rudely. More than that, the fact that they went after Him across the lake shows the value they attached to it. When it came to their bellies, they were willing enough to follow Him. Once more the Lord might have been greatly discouraged.

When we read on, we see that things did not get better.

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (vv. 32-33).

"Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread" (v. 34).

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me will never go hungry, and he who believes in Me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen Me and still do not believe" (vv. 35-36).

Jesus explained that He Himself was the bread for men's souls. Verse 34 looks promising, but it seems to mean no more than this: "We want bread! Give us bread!" Their denseness was as great as their impudence. This part of the discussion ends with Jesus telling them plainly that they are unbelievers: "You have seen Me and still do not believe."

Now is the time for us to stop and to ask the Lord some key questions: "Lord, if You with all Your gifts were unable to bring these men to faith, what hope is there for us when we set out to evangelize? Can we make You more attractive than You were when You walked here in the flesh?" The story to the point where we quit reading seems to require questions like these.

That's not all.

At this point we might suppose that the Lord Himself would have been fully discouraged. After all, if we met that kind of opposition we might remind ourselves that we are mere men. But this is the Lord Jesus. If He can do nothing, how can any man be saved? So we might ask two more questions: "Lord, what hope do You have of doing anything with men like these? Aren't You ready to give up?"

He gives His answer as we read on:

All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do My will but to do the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that I shall lose none of all that He has given Me, but raise them up at the last day. For My Father's will is that everyone who looks to

the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day (vv. 37-40).

How does Jesus answer our questions? Why is He sure that His ministry will not be in vain? Here is His answer: "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me!" The God who promised the Lord Jesus kinsmen whom no one could number will be as good as His word. The answer to the wickedness of human nature is not found in human eloquence or attractiveness. It is not found even in the miraculous. The answer is found in God! God will see to it. The sovereign, almighty God!

It is important now to see that this is not an isolated experience on Jesus' part. What He says and does here is typical of His words and actions elsewhere.

Let us take His words first, the short and powerful statement in Matthew 11:25-30 in which the Lord speaks to both God and man. Here is the record:

At that time Jesus said, "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was Your good pleasure.

"All things have been committed to Me by My Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him."

"Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

What we have here is this: evangelism brought into the closest possible relation to the sovereignty of God. Verses

25-26 tell us that the Father controls the revelation of His truth. From some—the wise and learned—He hides it. To others—little children—He reveals it. On what basis? His good pleasure!

Nor is that all. To remove all doubt from Jesus' meaning, verse 27 repeats how much the whole process of coming to know God and Christ are under their control. "No one knows the Son . . . and no one knows the Father . . ." except by direct revelation from one of these two persons.

Does that inhibit evangelism? Not at all! Verses 28-30 immediately launch into the most unfettered invitation: Come to Jesus Christ, and be saved! How can this be? The answer is clear: The power in verses 25-27 is exercised to make the invitation in verses 28-30 effective. Once we grasp that fact, the words of our Lord fit nicely together. Before we see that, we are bound to be uncomfortable with one side of this truth or the other.

We may also see the recognition of God's sovereignty in the things the Lord Jesus did. His actions as well as His words bear witness to the sovereignty of God in salvation.

Take, for example, Jesus' dealings with the rich young ruler who asked Him what good thing he would have to do to inherit eternal life. The next time you read the passage (Matt. 19:16ff), ask yourself this question: How did Jesus fail to win this man to Himself? See if the answer isn't this: Jesus seemed more eager to avoid false profession than to clinch a decision. Doesn't it seem that He keeps throwing stumbling blocks in the young man's way? First, Jesus tells him to keep the commandments. Would you tell a seeker that? Then Jesus tells him to sell everything that he has and give his money away. Would you tell a seeker that? The Lord Jesus did, and we might have predicted the result. The man turned away, never—so far as we know—to come back to Christ. Who would dare to do such a thing without confidence in the sovereignty of God?

But did I say that we might have predicted the result? Yes, I said that, but I was wrong, dead wrong. The fact is, the whole result was in the hands of God. No one could have predicted the outcome. As Jesus soon said to His disciples, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (v. 26). God can save anybody if He wills to do so. The hope of evangelistic preaching lies in this great truth: Jesus' actions, as well as His words, bear this out.

Let me give you one more example from the public preaching of the Lord Jesus, His discourse in Luke 14 on the cost of discipleship. We read:

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them He said: "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brother and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be My disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow after Me cannot be my disciple" (vv. 25-27).

"Any of you who does not give up everything that he has cannot be My disciple" (v. 33).

Is this the kind of evangelism that we feel comfortable with? Wouldn't we be tempted to say (if the speaker were not Jesus Christ!), "You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar?"

Someone may object, however, that this call is not to salvation but to something beyond salvation. Salvation, in that view, is a first step that many take, but discipleship is a higher step or a deeper commitment to the Lord Jesus.

I do not think it is possible to find that distinction in this text. Verse 25 says that Jesus spoke these words to the *large crowds* that traveled with Him. Such a distinction, even if it were true, would have been lost on them. These men and women could hear nothing in these words but a call for decision. Would they follow Him, or would they turn back?

That was the question.

Why would Jesus evangelize in such an apparently negative way? The answer is clear, isn't it? He was not leaning upon His personal attractiveness or the beauty of His words to gain His followers. Rather, He knew His dependence on a sovereign God, and He acted consistently with what He knew. It was indeed possible to gain false followers by the sheer power of His personality and His presentation. But real disciples could only come to Him if the Father brought them.

Finally, here is the lesson for us: discouragement in evangelism is both unnecessary and wrong. *Unnecessary?* Yes, because the Father has a plan that will be carried out. *Wrong?* Yes, because our only purpose is to carry out the Father's plan.

The Lord Jesus Himself is our grand example. "I have come down from heaven," He once said, "not to do My will but to do the will of Him who sent Me" (John 6:38). That's all, nothing less, but also nothing more.

That brings us back to the two problems I mentioned when we began. What were they? First, the results of our evangelism are always less than we hoped for. Second, they are usually less than they seemed to be at the outset.

As a man the Lord Jesus may have hoped to bring everyone He met to believe in Him. "Come to Me," He said to a multitude. The least we can say is this: Surely He would have been happy if all of them had really come. They did not all come, however. Most turned away from Him—forever!

He faced the other problem, too. Many seemed to come to Him at first who later proved to be untrue. But neither of these disheartened Him.

They should not dampen our spirits either. For the same God who held men in His hands in that day holds them today. More than that, He is still giving them into the hands of Christ. Not one of His elect will get away. They will *all*

come! Often one by one. Sometimes two by two. And sometimes, in seasons of wide-scale awakening, in great multitudes. The Father has a plan and He continues to pursue it. And it shall be done!

Go on, then, with your work of telling men and women and children about Christ. If you are a teacher, set forth the Lord Jesus to your pupils. If you are a parent, earnestly lay Christ before your children. If you are a preacher of the gospel, preach Christ and Him as crucified!

Many will not come; we know that. But we know something else also: Christ will get a people from every tribe, tongue, kindred, and nation. Many will later turn away, but our Lord Jesus will have His new nation after all. The work is the work of God.

With men this is impossible. But take heart, for with God all things are possible!

Author

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