

# Why Evangelize?

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## Introduction

The question that forms the title of this workshop is something of a two-edged sword. Historically, those whose sympathies lie with an Arminian explanation of the gospel have wielded it against those who have championed a Calvinistic soteriology. Without subtlety, the question imposes an accusation of fatalism. Those in the opposite camp (Calvinists) have parried the accusation and returned the question to their Arminian brothers as a thrust to the theological underpinnings of pragmatic evangelistic method.

Today, we live and minister in strange times. There is a resurgence of interest in Reformed soteriology, yet many who preach this theology eagerly embrace methods once found only among Arminians. They hold theology and methodology in an uneasy tension. Perhaps as never before, we need clear and consistent theological answers to the question, why evangelize? This workshop cannot answer all the pertinent questions, but it is presented as a preliminary step toward a sound theology of evangelism.

### I. Preliminary considerations

The title of this workshop focuses our attention on two matters: evangelism and its motivation.

#### A. What is evangelism?

For the purposes of the workshop, evangelism may be defined simply as the intentional communication of the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Notice that this definition focuses on process rather than product. The believer bears the responsibility to speak the truth; he has no control over the outcome.

#### B. Motives: A tale of two worldviews

Why does the believer speak?

The issue of motives is difficult. Our creaturely limitations and the noetic effects of sin complicate the discussion. It is hard even for the believer to evaluate his own heart. Once he engages in self evaluation and has made appropriate alterations, the believer still finds it difficult to maintain the right path. However, difficulty does not absolve responsibility. It is imperative that we seek to know what our motives *ought* to be and try to align our affections consistently.

Discussion of motives (regardless of the intended subsequent action) will inevitably point us to one of two paradigms; one is theocentric and the other is anthropocentric. No other categories of motivation exist, viz.:

Motives may be based on our love for *God*.

Or,

Motives may be based on our love for *man* (ourselves and/or others).

Some will object that this is a false dichotomy, but the perception of logical fallacy evaporates if we push the discussion to the foundational level of Christian worldview. At that level, we must frame the real issue this way: should our motives (for any action) derive from love for the Creator or love for the creation? Given only these two options, we may rightly say, love for the Creator.

The core theological teaching that limits the discussion to these two categories, namely the biblical truth we call the Creator/creature distinction. This means (among other things):

God is original	creation is derived
God is a se	creation is dependent
God is prior	creation is subsequent

Because these things are true, God is the source, means, and end of the created order. It exists *in toto* according to his decree and to serve his purposes. There is no way to reject this distinction or even to ignore it without embracing a sub-Christian worldview characterized by the assumption that the created order has some measure of independence and intrinsic value.

## II. The ultimate motive—in *everything*: love for God

Human motivation is complex and multifaceted. The fact that we can answer “why” questions at many levels illustrates the point. “Why did you do X?” will sometimes be answered biologically, relationally, psychologically, etc. Multiple answers might be true simultaneously, but not all answers carry the same weight. The most important answer is unique, superseding and explaining all other answers. Such an answer is ultimate.

“Why evangelize?” evokes many good, but inadequate answers. We need to identify the *ultimate* answer. I contend that the believer’s love for God, understood biblically, supersedes all other reasons for evangelism. It is the ultimate motive that makes sense of all other reasons.

### A. The greatest commandment and the biblical worldview

Jesus unequivocally taught that Deuteronomy 6:5 is the greatest commandment.

Matthew 22:35-38

<sup>35</sup> *One of them [the Pharisees], an expert in the law, tested him with this question:* <sup>36</sup> *“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”*

<sup>37</sup> *Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’* <sup>38</sup> *This is the first and greatest commandment.*

This commandment is uniquely comprehensive, providing direction for every aspect of life. It is the necessary expression of a biblical worldview because it is rooted in the Creator/creature distinction. Moses issued this comprehensive command in connection with the famous *Shema*:

Deuteronomy 6:4

<sup>4</sup> *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.*

The God who commands our love in every area of life is none other than YHWH, the true and living Creator. Consequently, the very essence of sin is misplaced love, love directed toward the creation.

Romans 1:25

<sup>25</sup> *They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.*

B. The greatest commandment and the *imago Dei*

Jesus connected Leviticus 19:18 to the greatest commandment.

Matthew 22:39-40

<sup>39</sup> *And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’* <sup>40</sup> *All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

Taken in tandem, these two commands form a foundation for all human activity and interests. We must note that Jesus did not tell us to love God *and* the earth or our animals. Everything in life revolves around love for God and love for people. The two objects of love are inseparable because people bear the *imago Dei*. The second command (love your neighbor) flows from the first (love God).

Therefore, we must neither give equal weight to the two commands, nor elevate the second above the first, nor (especially) pursue the second apart from the first.

Consider the implications of following constructions:

“I love man because I love God.”

“I love God because I love man.”<sup>1</sup>

The first is obviously valid while the second is obviously invalid.

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<sup>1</sup> Some would argue that John says this very thing in 1 John (e.g, 4:20). However, John does not mean that love for another human is the *source* of one’s love for God, rather that love of man is the *evidence* of one’s love for God.

In our current discussion, some will insist that we must evangelize out of love for man, but that concept needs to be nuanced. In what way do we love man? Do we love him for his own sake? The only answer that aligns with a biblical worldview is that we love man because he bears the *imago Dei*. God maintains supremacy in all things.

C. The greatest commandment and the glory of God

Without question, God is at work in all things for his own glory. He purposes to reveal his greatness and goodness within the universe so that created beings will respond with worship.

Romans 11:36

<sup>36</sup> *For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.*

Salvation serves this greater purpose. Ephesians 1:3-14 demonstrates the doxological nature of God's work in salvation. Unquestionably, the primary concern in the history of redemption is the glory of the Triune God.

Since doxology saturates the Scriptures, the glory of God has become a fashionable theme—popular, but often theologically vacuous. In some circles, it serves as a mere label that provides the sanitizing justification for almost any pragmatic evangelistic method.

This controlling purpose of history is an extension in the Creator/creature distinction. Glory ascribed to the Creator by his creatures is the appropriate and necessary acknowledgement of God's priority, originality, and aseity. If we fail to draw the connection between God's glory as the defining purpose of all things and the Creator/creature distinction we undermine any effort in ascriptive glory. Without this basic theological mooring, our ascription of praise becomes nothing more than admiration of qualities that differ from ours only in degree.

D. The greatest commandment and evangelism

A major implication of the great commandment remains to be explained: the specific relationship between it has with evangelism. Or, exactly how does loving God translate into a passionate proclamation of the gospel? C. S. Lewis' insightful (and frequently quoted) observation about the nature of praise is helpful if we substitute, or perhaps better, include the matter of evangelism in his notion of praise.

*But the most obvious fact about praise – whether of God or anything – strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honour. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless . . . shyness or the fear of boring others is*

*deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise – lovers praising their mistresses [Romeo praising Juliet and vice versa], readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite game – praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. . . . Except where intolerably adverse circumstances interfere, praise almost seems to be inner health made audible. . . . I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: 'Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?' The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can't help doing, about everything else we value.<sup>2</sup>*

Packaging and programming slick presentations and technique driven strategies can never produce and sustain genuine evangelism. It must flow naturally from hearts that delight in nothing but God.

### **III. Taking a look at biblical reasons for evangelism through the lens of two worldviews**

Most discussions of proper motivation for evangelism run to three concepts: compassion, gratitude, and obedience. Though the terminology is biblical, it must be placed squarely in a biblical worldview. Otherwise, these concepts become distorted and compete against true evangelism.

#### **A. Compassion**

By far, this reason has received the most attention from pulpits in evangelicalism. Understood properly, it reflects the attitude of our Lord.

Matthew 9:36–38

*<sup>36</sup> When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup> Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. <sup>38</sup> Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."*

Evangelistic concern must include compassion for those suffering the consequences of sin. But compassion for humanity for its own sake leads us into an anthropocentric worldview the results of which can be disastrous. When relief

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<sup>2</sup> "The Problem of Praise in the Psalms" in *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958), pp. 90-98.

of suffering (whether in this life or the next) becomes the ultimate goal, the centrality of God is displaced and the door is opened to pragmatic methodology. Medium and message shape each other so that the former cannot be twisted without distorting the latter. For this reason, misdirected compassion has contributed to the rise of easy believism.

The tenth chapter of John provides an interesting and balancing perspective on the subject of compassion. Jesus stood before the tomb of his friend Lazarus. The Scriptures simply and dramatically say, *Jesus wept* (John 10:35). Clearly, this is an expression of compassionate pity, however closer examination of the context reveals that more is at work than sorrow for the death of Lazarus and the grief it brought. Jesus not only anticipated Lazarus' death, but he took steps to ensure that it would happen—he planned it in order to accomplish a higher, ultimate goal.

John 11:4–6

*<sup>4</sup> When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." <sup>5</sup> Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. <sup>6</sup> Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.*

He planned to raise Lazarus from the death for purposes related to God's glory. Given the fact that Jesus knew that he was about to bring great joy with a resurrection miracle, we need ask, why did he weep? I suggest that the compassion of Jesus runs deeper than concern over a specific instance of suffering. He connected that particular instance of suffering to a larger storyline. Humanity suffers because the *imago Dei* has been marred; the *imago Dei* has been marred because humanity has loved the creation rather than the Creator. This big picture anchors our compassion in concern for God and his glory and thus safeguards against methodological drift.

## B. Gratitude

The Bible demonstrates that gratitude provides impetus for evangelism.

2 Corinthians 5:14–15

*<sup>14</sup> For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. <sup>15</sup> And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.*

Paul explains the initial statement with a reference to Christ's death. This shows that "the love of Christ" is a subjective genitive (Christ's love for us). Because of Christ's loving, salvific work, Paul was hemmed in to one direction for his life: live for Christ. Though he did not specifically use the terminology of gratitude, this is a clear description of the concept.

Ironically, an anthropocentric worldview can both embrace and distort the concept of gratitude. If I love God solely because of what he has done for me, then I have become the focus and God is reduced to the one who dutifully pays the bills. When I translate that into my motivation for service, then a “do in order to get” mentality is inescapable. This is the default motivation for pagan religious expression. Arguably the “felt-needs” approach to evangelism seeks to tap this commitment to self.

If we believe that God is primary and love him for who he is, then worship and service are not conditioned by personal gain. His kindness inevitably instills wonder and evokes praise, but the worshiper who embraces a theocentric worldview can say with Job,

Job 1:21

*“Naked I came from my mother’s womb,  
and naked I will depart.*

*The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;  
may the name of the Lord be praised.”*

#### C. Obedience

The logic behind this reason is unassailable. God is our sovereign authority. We are responsible to obey him. He has commanded that we evangelize the lost. Therefore, we must evangelize. End of discussion.

If we place this argument in the context of an anthropocentric worldview, it undermines biblical evangelism. To the one committed to the priority of self-interest, an appeal to obedience reduces the evangelistic task to sheer, burdensome duty. To the one who broadens his ultimate concern to include others, an appeal to obedience has a desensitizing effect on the evangelistic task. Either way, an ongoing commitment to evangelism becomes unsustainable. In the end, this emphasis on duty promotes moralist preaching and the use of guilt to move the unmotivated.

In our present condition, Christians will continually struggle to obey God. However, those who have embraced a theocentric worldview see it as the natural outflow of our love for God. It is not burdensome because duty to God never conflicts with a higher commitment.

#### D. The forgotten reason: Jealousy

There is another clear biblical reason for evangelism, but you will seldom hear it articulated, namely jealousy for God. Yet it is an important reason for service in general and evangelism in particular.

Exclusive worship is grounded in the fact that God is jealous. (Exodus 20:5, 34:14).

The prophets' opposition to idolatry is described as jealousy for God (1 Kings 19:10).

For the purpose of the current topic, consider Paul's ministry in Athens.

Acts 17:16–17

*<sup>16</sup> While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup> So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.*

The reason that Paul proclaimed the gospel in the synagogue and marketplace was the fact that he was “traumatized” at the prevalence of false gods in that city. In short, he was jealous for God's exclusive worship.

It is fair to ask why jealousy seldom rises to the level of serious discussion when we talk about evangelism. Could this be evidence of failure to root out an anthropocentric worldview? This much is clear: when creation takes priority over the Creator, we will never be jealous for his glory.

#### **IV. Cultivating genuine love for God in the local church**

If, as has been argued, the ultimate motivation for evangelism is the believer's love for God, and if love for God encompasses multiple reasons for evangelism, then it follows that the church needs people who are ever-deepening in their love for God. The problem is that we can neither mandate nor program such love. It is a work of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Yet, God has given men to the church for the purpose of promoting a context essential to growth in love (Ephesians 4:11-16). Therefore, I offer the following suggestions to pastors regarding the cultivation of genuine love for God within the church.

- A. Preach to portray the majesty of God in Christ comprehensively and imaginatively.

*“In the beginning, God . . . .”* The first verse of Genesis introduces the subject of the Bible. He needs to be the subject of our preaching. We need to put his attributes on display. As the resident theologian, the pastor needs to use his pulpit

to help his people envision the glorious complex of divine attributes described in Scripture.

- B. Set truth in the “big picture” of what God is doing in history.

Our people’s concerns and interests must rise above today. They must understand the unfolding of God’s plan for history, its ultimate objective, and the role that we (the church) play in that plan. It is the big picture that gives depth and texture to the “glory of God” and rescues it from the realm of formulaic cliché. Place the sermonic text in the big picture.

- C. Blaze the trail for your people into the disciplines that lead to deep devotion.

Help them rescue Bible reading and prayer—particularly prayer—from the grip of perfunctory duty. Creatively lead them into the practices of God-centered, God-honoring, God-desiring devotion.