

New Testament Evangelism (it may not be what you think)

(Acknowledgments to Edwin Crozier for his insightful article, "How did Jesus Evangelize?" for helping to guide and coalesce my thoughts on this subject.)

Something has bothered me for a long time, but I never really stopped and thought about exactly why or what to do about. Then a few weeks ago, I read an article by a fellow preacher who (apparently was bothered about some aspects of the same thing) who had not only thought further about it, but organized those thoughts and written them down. Our last few lessons have emphasized the power and efficacy of God's word to provide us with salvation and allow us to function as Christians in ways that please Him. Good, in fact great! So why do so many feel it (this same *powerful* and *efficacious* word) is somehow insufficient for evangelism? "Wait, what do you mean? Who believes/practices that?"

Think about it: How do most people, including many of the 'religious' ones, believe "evangelism" is supposed to work? We're asked, "What did Jesus do?" And then we're told, "Well Jesus didn't go into 'church buildings' and wait for those seeking the truth to come to Him. He went where the *real* people- the poor, the sick, the hungry, and the 'sinners' (the *tax-gatherers* and *prostitutes*) were, and *helped* them. Then, having shown them how much He cared for them, He had '**earned the right**' by **meeting their physical needs to talk to them about spiritual things**. And they, now fed, clothed, and healed, were willing to listen to His message of salvation, which, the way, consisted of telling them how much God loves everyone 'just the way they are' and no matter how sinful they might be. After all, 'People don't *care how much you know* until they *know how much you care*.'" (I have no doubt, by the way, that for some and perhaps even many people this is true.) **But...**

Let's be clear about a few things before we proceed:

1. Christians *ought* to be concerned about and willing to help others in need as they have opportunity and ability to do so, cf. Mark 14:7; Luke 10:25-37;
2. Sinners of every stripe, color, and both genders must *hear* and *obey the gospel* in order to be saved, Matt.7:24-27; Rom.10:17; Gal.3:2,5;
3. The *light* and *salt* of a Christian's *godly influence* can definitely and should surely 'open doors of opportunity' for the gospel, cf. Matt.5:13-16; and,
4. My point is NOT that we should *care less* or *do less* about our fellow man's *physical* suffering and meeting his "felt needs," but that we should *care more* and *do more* about his *spiritual* condition and meeting his "eternal needs."

However, I reject the notion that New Testament teaches:

1. **Evangelism** is dependent upon first *going to* and *meeting the physical or felt needs* of its objects; because:
 - a. That's not the way the first *gospel preacher*, John the Baptist, did it, **Matt.3:1-12**. Note: John made *no effort* to be *relatable* or *establish relationships* with "the people," vv.1,4 (more or this later!); he also didn't *go to the people*, they *came to him*- in the *wilderness* no less, vv.1,5; his *preaching* was about "*repentance*," the then *coming King and kingdom* and *destruction*

for those who refuse to *repent and be baptized* for the *forgiveness of their sins*, rather than God's *love, mercy, and acceptance*, vv.2,8-12; also note that **John never miraculously healed, fed, healed, or clothed anyone** (John 10:41; and there is also no record of him sharing *camel's hair clothing* or *locusts and wild honey* with anyone either). John simply **preached the word, v.1**; **people came to him, believed the word** he spoke, and **repented** and **were baptized** without him *feeding, clothing, housing, or healing* any of them.

- b. **And that's not the way Jesus did it either, Matt.4:23-25**. There's no doubt that or argument that Jesus *healed physical diseases*, but note the order here: *teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, then healing*. When *great multitudes* arrived, He *taught them*, 5:1-2,3 – 8:28-29. **The proclaiming and teaching the gospel was the objective**. But when did Jesus ever go to a *leper colony, poor house, hospital, tax-collector convention, or bordello* to "meet physical needs" of the people to "earn the right" to teach them the gospel? Did He ever host a *clothing drive*, start a *food pantry*, or organize a *pancake supper* or a *fish fry* in order attract the masses to hear the gospel? Or, did He *preach the word* and *feed/heal* those who came to *hear* and *responded* to it? You tell me. **"But what about when He fed the 5,000?"** Yes, what about it? Note carefully exactly *what* happened, *how* it happened, and *why* it happened from **John 6**: Jesus *went away*, v.1; the multitude *followed* "*because they were seeing signs He was performing on those who were sick,*" v.2; but this was *their* motivation, not *His*, vv.26-27, and He proved it by *continuing to preach* and *teach* despite their *loaves and fishes* desires, vv.28-31 → vv.32-65 → v.66.
- c. **Jesus miraculously healed, restored, and fed to prove who He was, not to "attract people" or "meet their physical needs" in order to "earn the right" (by showing how much He cared) to "teach them spiritual things,"** John 5:33-47; John 20:30-31. Furthermore, Jesus went to a *place* or *synagogue* and starting *teaching*. When people came, listened, and responded, He *fed* and *healed* them. And what did He *teach/preach*? That *God loves and accepts everyone* "just as you are"? Hardly. He taught much the same things John did about *the kingdom of heaven* and *what is required to enter it*. He taught about the *necessity of repentance* (or *you will likewise perish*) and *obedience to God*. And He taught that no matter how badly one has "messed up" their lives, they can *repent, return, obey*, and be *saved* (just like the *adulterous woman* and the *Prodigal Son*).

I also reject the notion that the New Testament teaches that...

2. Evangelism is dependent upon establishing relationships with its objects.

- a. **"What just a minute- didn't Jesus go and eat with the tax-gatherers and sinners?"** Let's look at Mark 2:13-17 and note a few things:
- His *teaching* attracted a *multitude*, and so He *taught them more*, v.13;
 - He *called Matthew/Levi, the tax-collector*, to "*Follow Me!*" and he *did so*, v.14;

- *Matthew/Levi* apparently invited Jesus home with him for a meal, v.15a;
 - *Many tax-gatherers and sinners* also came on their own or were invited **“for there were many of them, and they were following Him,”** v.15b.
 - So which came *first*- the *teaching* or the *relationship*?
- b. There is no doubt that Paul established very *close relationships* with some of the people he taught, cf. 1Tim.1:2; Titus 1:4; Gal.4:15; nor is there any argument that establishing a *rapport* and/or *relationship* with someone can be tremendously helpful in teaching them the gospel, cf. 1Cor.9:19-23. But we must also admit that such was not his only *modus operandi* for preaching/teaching the word, cf. Acts 13:6-12; 17:16-17ff; 21:37ff. Additionally, please explain how Paul was able to “rejoice” even when some preached Christ from the *impure motives* of *spite* and *selfish ambition* in Phil.1:15-18.

So you tell me: why didn't Jesus go to the *leper colonies* and heal everyone? Why didn't He eliminate *poverty, sickness, and death* in all Judea? Could it be because He came to “*seek and save that which is lost*” (Luke 19:10) with *truth, the word of God*?

And it's a sad day indeed when “Christians” no longer believe that such is sufficient to save men's souls... that the glorious gospel has to be “propped up” by *relationships* and *adorned with physical things* to make it attractive. Have we become “*ashamed of the gospel*” and forgotten that “*it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,*” Rom.1:16?

People “attracted” with *loaves and fishes* or *fun and festivities* will require more and more of the same to be “kept”! But people who *come to hear truth*, and are willing to *respond* to it... well, that's another matter entirely!

One final matter: Did Jesus love *people* or their *souls* more? Do we *love/care* for one more by meeting his *felt needs* or by giving him *truth* that can *save his eternal soul*? Admittedly, we can and should love and care for both people and their souls. But please don't deny the *power* and *efficacy* of the gospel of Jesus Christ by thinking the *only* way to evangelize is to “prop it up” with *physical accoutrements* and *relationships*.