

# **HOW TO LEAD PEOPLE TO CHRIST, PART 1:**

## **THE CONTENT OF OUR MESSAGE\***

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The title of my two-part article may lead you to expect a discussion on how to do personal evangelism. Hopefully you will get some ideas about personal work from these articles, but this is not my major objective. Instead I want to discuss how grace theology should affect the way we present the gospel, whether to individuals or to groups.

Nevertheless, before I address my subject, let me say this. I do genuinely enjoy talking to people about their eternal salvation. I have done so with many, many individuals over the years.

A close friend works with me in my office. When I first met him, he did not understand the way of salvation. But over a period of years, after many conversations on the subject, he became a believer. He understands that salvation is absolutely free even though most of the people he knows do not. The salvation of this friend is one of the most highly valued results of my years of service to Christ. It is an immense joy to know that our friendship will continue eternally in the kingdom of God.

What I am saying is this. I am a teacher by spiritual gift. But I enjoy doing the work of an evangelist as much, or more, than I enjoy teaching. So as I talk today about putting good theology into our soul-winning, I am talking about a most important issue. And I also try hard to practice what I am preaching to you today!

The question I am raising is a simple one: Have we allowed solid grace theology to properly affect the way we proclaim and share the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?

I propose to address this question under two headings: (1) The content of our message and (2) Our invitation to respond to it. I will consider the first of these topics in this article, and the second, in Part 2.

### **I. THE DESERTED ISLAND SCENARIO**

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Let me begin with a strange scenario. Try to imagine an unsaved person marooned on a tiny, uninhabited island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. He has never heard about Christianity in his life. One day a wave washes a fragment of paper up onto the beach. It is wet but still partly readable.

On that paper are the words of John 6:43-47. But the only readable portions are: “Jesus therefore answered and said to them” (v 43) and “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life” (v 47).

Now suppose that our unsaved man somehow becomes convinced that this person called Jesus can guarantee his eternal future, since He promises everlasting life. In other words, he believes Jesus’ words in John 6:47. Is he saved?

I suspect that there are some grace people who would say that this man is not saved because he doesn’t know enough. For example, he doesn’t know that Jesus died for his sins on the cross and rose again the third day. Needless to say, there is a lot more he doesn’t know either, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the eternal Sonship of Jesus or the doctrine of the virgin birth.

But why is he *not* saved if he believes the promise of Jesus’ words? It is precisely the ability of Jesus to guarantee eternal life that makes Him the Christ in the Johannine sense of that term. Our Lord’s exchange with Martha in John 11:25-27 demonstrates this clearly.

You remember it, don’t you? “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?’” (John 11:25-26). Her reply is a declaration that she believes Him to be the Christ. Martha said, “Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world” (11:27).

Notice here that to believe that Jesus is the Christ means to believe that He guarantees resurrection and eternal life to every believer. But now let us look at John 4. In that famous passage we have the Samaritans saying to the woman who had encountered Jesus, “Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world” (John 4:42).

Observe that the common denominator to both passages is the term “Christ.” On Martha’s lips He is “the Christ, the Son of God,” and on the lips of the Samaritans He is “the Christ, the Savior of the world.” This is not an accidental or insignificant difference.

In Jewish prophecy and theology the promised Christ was also the Son of God—that is, He was to be a divine person. Recall the words of Isaiah: “For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given...and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (9:6-7). But in Samaritan theology, the Messiah was thought of as a prophet and the woman at the well is led to faith through our Lord’s prophetic ability to know her life. Her words, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet” (4:19) are a first step in the direction of recognizing Him as the Christ. There is no evidence that she or the other Samaritans understood the deity of our Lord.

But they *did believe* that he was the Christ. And John tells us in his first epistle that “whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (5:1)! A full theology of His person is not necessary to salvation. If we believe that Jesus is the One who guarantees our eternal destiny, we have believed all we absolutely have to believe in order to be saved.

Years ago, as a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, I washed dishes in the dining hall to pay for my meals. Often after I had finished this chore I hung around and talked theology with another student who swept up the kitchen every night. One night this student made a statement to me that I have never forgotten. He said something like this, “I know that I trusted Christ for salvation before I realized that Jesus was the Son of God.” I was surprised because I had never heard anyone say this before.

But I did not quarrel with that statement then, nor would I quarrel with it now. It is the name of Jesus that brings salvation whenever anyone believes in that name as his or her sure hope of eternal well-being. We are not saved by believing a series of theological propositions, however true and important they may be. We are saved by believing in Jesus.

That’s why the man on the deserted island can get saved with only the barest minimum of information. When he believes John 6:47 he is believing in Jesus as the Christ.

## II. WHAT ABOUT THE CROSS?

But what about the cross of Christ? Is it not essential for a man to know about that in order to be saved?

This leads to a question about the eleven apostles who believed in

Jesus before He died. Did they understand the cross or the significance of His death? Did they understand the necessity of His resurrection? Of course they did not, as John 20:9 makes perfectly clear.

You recall that text. In recounting how the unnamed disciple came to believe that Jesus had risen, it is said of Peter and of himself that “as yet they did not know the Scripture that He must rise again from the dead.” The eleven disciples had believed in Jesus long before they understood that He must die for their sins and rise again. As Peter says so emphatically in John 6:68-69, “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

The disciples of Jesus were saved without knowledge of the death and resurrection of their Master. However, some people today would say, “But it’s different now that the cross is behind us. Now we have to believe in that as well.” Do we? Where does this idea come from? Certainly not from the Gospel of John.

Let us think a moment. The events described in John’s Gospel occurred before the cross. But the entire book was written afterward. In my view, it was written before 70 AD, but if we prefer a later date in the 80s, my point will be even more forceful. At the time of writing, the cross was years ago, and if belief in the work of the cross was by then necessary for salvation, John definitely gives us the wrong impression by stressing the way the cross dumbfounded even His most intimate disciples.

Let me put it to you this way. The Gospel of John is the only book in our New Testament canon that explicitly declares its purpose to be evangelistic. Of course, I am thinking of the famous theme statement found in John 20:30-31, where we read: “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”

This statement does not affirm the necessity of believing in our Lord’s substitutionary atonement. If by the time of the writing of John’s Gospel, it was actually necessary to believe this, then it would have been not only simple, but essential, to say so.

Inasmuch as the key figures in John’s narrative *did* believe in Jesus before they understood His atoning death and resurrection, it would have been even more essential for John to state that the content of faith had changed. But of course he does not do this. The simple fact is that the

whole Fourth Gospel is designed to show that its readers can get saved in the same way as the people who got saved in John's narrative. To say anything other than this is to accept a fallacy. It is to mistakenly suppose that the Fourth Gospel presents the terms of salvation incompletely and inadequately. I sincerely hope no grace person would want to be stuck with a position like that.

Let me repeat. Neither explicitly nor implicitly does the Gospel of John teach that a person must understand the cross to be saved. It just does not teach this. If we say that it does, we are reading something into the text and not reading something out of it!

What is my point? That we should not preach the cross of Christ to men? Not at all. I will make it emphatically clear a little later on that I think we should. Instead, I am arguing that we need to focus on the core issue in bringing men and women to faith and eternal life. What is that core issue?

Very simply it is this: We want people to believe that Jesus guarantees their eternal destiny. Of course, we would like them to believe a lot more than this, but this at least must be believed. Our failure to clearly define our goal in evangelism can have a negative or impeding effect on our efforts to lead people to simple faith in Christ.

### **III. ADDING TO THE GOSPEL**

Most of us deplore the efforts made by Lordship people to add provisos to the message of faith in Christ. According to them, true faith has not occurred if it is not accompanied by surrender or by a commitment to live for God. We rightly reject such ideas.

But in our own circles, there is a tendency to add theological information to our message of faith. Some people even regard belief in the virgin birth as essential to salvation, and in the absence of such belief they would not admit that a person is saved. They do this despite the fact that the Gospel of John makes no effort to present this doctrine. In fact, in John 1:45, Philip announces to Nathaniel that he has found the Messiah and he refers to Him as "Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." John never bothers to set the record straight, since in any case Jesus was legally Joseph's son. But no doubt Philip thought of Jesus as the naturally born son of Joseph and Mary.

I have also just finished pointing out that the disciples who did believe in Jesus did not understand the significance or necessity of

His death and resurrection, according to John 20:9. And this was true despite the fact that John the Baptist announced Him as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29). If we require an understanding of these truths before faith in Christ can be valid, we are obviously requiring more than the Gospel of John does.

Let me say this: All forms of the gospel that require greater content to faith in Christ than the Gospel of John requires, are flawed. Evangelism based on such premises will also be flawed, because we will be tempted to test professions of faith in terms of the doctrines we think must be believed. Instead we should be focusing on whether an individual believes that Jesus has given him eternal life.

Evangelism, therefore, is intended to bring men and women to the place where they believe that Jesus guarantees their eternal destiny. If a person does this and we insist on more than that, we will be guilty of seeking to invalidate the simple exercise of faith that really does bring salvation.

Even in the grace movement, we are sorely tempted to make the gospel more complicated than God makes it. We can hardly bring ourselves to believe that a man who is largely ignorant of evangelical theology, yet genuinely trusts Christ for his eternal well-being, is truly saved. We have every reason to be embarrassed by this tendency on our part.

According to the apostle Paul, God is “the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:26). Moreover it will be “at the name of Jesus” that “every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess” (Phil 2:10). The name of Jesus therefore is a mighty and exalted name, compared to which all other names in our age or in any other age are inferior and weak. No one has ever trusted in that name for his or her eternal well-being who has not been saved by doing so. And this is true no matter how little they might have known about the One whom that name represents.

I think we need a renewed emphasis on the power of Jesus’ name. As Peter declares in Acts 4:12, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other *name* under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” If there is one salient fact about the proclamation of the gospel in this present age, it is that God saves all those, but only those, who believe in this name for eternal salvation.

Another way of saying this is that the name of Jesus is the one and only way to God. “No one comes to the Father, except through”

Him (John 14:6). Naturally this eliminates the idea that a pagan person who has never heard the name of Jesus can be saved by believing in something like the light of creation. Therefore, that is why we must always have missionaries and witnesses to the saving power of Jesus' name. Without the name of Jesus there is no salvation for anyone anywhere in our world.

But the flip side of the coin is this: Everyone who believes in that name for eternal salvation is saved, regardless of the blank spots or the flaws in their theology in other respects. Another way of saying the same thing is this: No one has ever trusted that name and been disappointed.

In other words, God does not say to people, "You trusted my Son's name, but you didn't believe in His virgin birth, or His substitutionary atonement, or His bodily resurrection, so your faith is not valid." *We* say that, but God's Word does not.

Suppose I am in some deep financial trouble and a stranger named Sam, let us say, tells me he will get me out of my trouble if I will just trust him to do it. Perhaps Sam strikes me as a reliable and honest type person and I am convinced that he can and will do what he says. So I leave the matter in his hands and sure enough, he comes through and saves me from my financial problem with a generous infusion of cash. Did I believe in him? Sure.

But suppose after trusting him, I find out that he is a corporate CEO and a multi-millionaire. Would he later come back to me and say, well you didn't know enough about me when you trusted me, so I'm afraid I can't help you? Our deal is cancelled.

I hope you think this illustration would be an absurd way for this CEO to act. If he invites my faith and I give it to him, why should he deny the reality of that faith on the basis of my ignorance about his vast resources? On the other hand, is it not true that knowing these things up front would make it a whole lot easier to trust him to help me in the first place? I will say more about this in a moment.

Suffice it to say, however, that Jesus never fails anyone who trusts Him for everlasting salvation. No one on earth will ever possess more than a rudimentary understanding of our Savior's person and work. But if I know I can believe on Him for salvation, and I do, He is too great to fail me. It is this conviction that ought to arm us for the work of sharing the gospel with people.

In the final analysis, therefore, salvation is the result of believing

in Jesus to provide it. Salvation is not the result of assenting to a detailed creed. Salvation does not even require an understanding of how it was provided for or made possible. All it requires is that the sinner understand the sufficiency of the name of Jesus to guarantee the eternal well-being of every believer. Thank God, salvation is so wonderfully simple!

#### IV. PREACHING THE CROSS

In the light of what we have just said, should we preach the cross of Christ? The answer to that is emphatically yes. And the most obvious reason for doing so is that this is what Paul and the other Apostles did.

According to Paul's own statement, when he came to Corinth to preach, he was "determined not to know anything among [them] except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). Later in the epistle, Paul describes his gospel as one that declared "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (15:3).

I need hardly tell you, do I, that the Greek word for "gospel" (*euangelion*) as well as the word for "preach the gospel" (*euangelizō*) are both words found frequently in Paul. Peter also uses these words a total of 4 times in his first epistle. Luke uses the verb many times in Luke and Acts, the noun twice in Acts. Matthew and Mark have both words.

Are you ready for this? John never uses either word in his gospel. Why? Because, as I have already suggested, John makes the Person of Jesus, not a set of doctrines, the object of the faith that brings eternal life. Fundamentally he is trying to get people to believe in Jesus for their eternal salvation.

But this is precisely where preaching the cross becomes so important. Why should men trust Christ for eternal life? The gospel gives us the wonderful answer. They should do so because Jesus has bought their salvation at the cost of His own precious blood. And God has placed His seal on the work of the cross by raising Jesus from the dead. As Paul states: He "was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification" (Rom 4:25).

The preaching of the cross greatly facilitates the process of bringing men to faith in God's Son.

#### V. DEALING WITH SOULS



This brings us to the bedrock issue of leading people to Christ. After all, that's the title of this article and I mean by it just what the title says. We need to lead men to *Christ!* Winning souls is a matter of leading people to a Person to whom they may safely entrust their eternal destiny. We are not leading them to a *message*, but to Jesus Christ as the object of their faith.

But more often than not, we have difficulty leading them *to* Christ, unless we lead them *through* the full gospel message. The gospel message is normally the avenue through which men and women come to understand why they can trust completely in the Savior. To be sure, trust in Christ *can occur* without a knowledge of the cross, but more often than not it doesn't. The message of the cross clarifies God's way of salvation.

On a very practical level, when I am dealing with an unsaved person, I find that if I simply tell him he only needs to believe in Christ, this usually doesn't make sense to him. Why should it be so easy? Why are not works required? To the unregenerate American mind, it doesn't sound reasonable.

So I find it not only useful, but indeed essential, to explain that the Lord Jesus Christ bought our way to heaven by paying for all our sins. In recent years I have liked to emphasize that He paid for all the sins we would ever commit from the day of our birth to the day of our death. This serves to stress the completeness of the payment He made. It is usually only in the light of so perfect a payment that people can come to see the reasonableness of a salvation that is absolutely free.

I say to people, "Jesus paid it all" and there is nothing left for you to do or to pay. All you have to do is believe in Him for the free gift of everlasting life.

One of my favorite illustrations goes like this: If a friend bought you a Rolls Royce and paid for it in full and offered it to you as a free gift, wouldn't he be hurt, or even insulted, if you insisted on paying for it yourself? In the same way, if we try to do or pay something to go to heaven, even though Jesus paid it all, aren't we insulting His great sacrifice and treating it as if it were not enough?

Most unsaved people can understand that point, even if they don't believe its true. The Savior's work on the cross thus becomes a powerful argument that He should be trusted for eternal life.

And apart from the cross, for most modern Americans, the offer of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone, just doesn't compute. Even

after hearing it, it still may not compute. But by offering the truth of the gospel to people, we give the Holy Spirit something to work with in their hearts. And in the final analysis, it is only the Spirit of God who can sweep away the blindness of the human heart so that the glorious light of the gospel of Christ may shine into unsaved hearts.

Nevertheless, let it never be forgotten: If anyone has faith in Jesus as the One who secures his or her eternal destiny, that person is born of God. Jesus has never yet failed anyone who trusted in His name for eternal salvation. And He never will.