

The Holy Spirit and Evangelistic Preaching

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Introduction

If we asked the question: “*Should we rely on the Holy Spirit in Evangelism?*” Christians from all theological persuasions will immediately answer with a resounding: Yes! When we probe deeper, however, to ask what such reliance would look like in practice serious differences will almost immediately emerge.

The purpose of this article is to outline what I believe to be a Biblical view of the role of the Spirit in Evangelism and not to dissect the differences that exist on this issue. It would, however, probably be helpful to begin by briefly sketching two positions that are quite common in different sectors of Evangelicalism. This should provide a useful framework for the rest of our discussion.

Position #1 – The presence and power of the Holy Spirit in Evangelism can be ‘manufactured’

The most famous proponent of this view was probably Charles Finney (1782-1875), a major figure during the Second Great Awakening. In his *Revival Lectures* Finney spells out several techniques and methods that might be followed to get people to make a decision for Christ. He insisted that following these methods will result, in an almost mechanistic way, in the conversion of people and in revival. Listen, for example, to this statement from Chapter 1 of *Revival Lectures*: “*There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. A revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means—as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means...A revival is as naturally a result of the use of means as a crop is of the use of its appropriate means.*”⁶⁶ According to Finney, and his spiritual heirs, Spirit filled Evangelism is simply a matter of ticking the right boxes. One of the boxes to be ticked in this scheme is certainly high-

⁶⁶ Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 4-5.

octane emotional preaching with a great deal of ‘fire and brimstone’ mixed in. I could spend the rest of the article discussing Finney’s methods and legacy but allow me to just make a point that was already obvious in Finney’s own day. Few of the ‘conversions’ (if we can indeed call them conversions) were long lasting. One of Finney’s own co-workers reported the following after visiting one of the towns where they worked: "*I have revisited many of these fields (where we laboured) and groaned in spirit to see the sad, frigid, casual, contentious state into which the churches had fallen.*"⁶⁷ I think it would be fair to say that we can here see a trend emerging that is still very much part of the reality of some types of mass evangelism based on Finney’s methods: Impressive initial results but little long term fruit. This should obviously cause us to ask some searching and legitimate questions about whether the conversions were in fact anything of the sort because if the Holy Spirit was truly involved the long term results would most probably have been very different.

Position #2 – The presence and power of the Holy Spirit can simply be assumed

In the position outlined above you have to do certain things for the Holy Spirit to, with all due respect, ‘make an appearance’. The second position is in many ways the linear opposite of this. Allow me to illustrate this by recounting an experience that I once had in Egypt. I was invited to go and listen to a former Coptic Orthodox priest who was now preaching the Gospel of Grace. On coming to the hall where he was speaking we could barely enter through the crush of people. Thankfully someone saved seats for us. Given the level of energy and excitement I think I expected rip-roaring revivalist preaching. What we got was exactly the opposite of ‘rip roaring’ however. The preacher faced slightly away from the congregation, lowered his eyes and spoke in what could only be described as a low drone. No eye contact, no gestures no variations in his tone of voice. From the translation of the sermon I could hear that it basically consisted of a series of Biblical texts that were strung together interspersed with brief commentary by the preacher. When I questioned some Egyptian friends about the preacher’s style afterwards they said that it was in essence a reaction against the exalted role given to ritual in Orthodox liturgy. The liturgy had to be done ‘just so’ and the presence of God would be assured. This former priest reacted to this by simply reading and summarising the Word in modern Arabic (instead of the ancient Coptic

⁶⁷ Quoted in: B. B. Warfield, *Studies in Perfectionism* (Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958), 26.

language that very few modern Copts understand) and doing nothing that could attract attention to himself as the one ministering the Word. This was such a novel experience for his hearers (almost all of them former Copts) that they responded very positively to it. There are probably very few people reading this who would ‘try this at home’ (by being as boring as possible so as not to be in the way of the Word!) but I am sure that readers from a Reformed background can sympathise with why he did what he did. We are often so wary of efforts to manipulate the Spirit (as if such a thing was possible) that we often go to the other extreme, namely simply equating the ministry of the Word with the automatic presence of the Spirit. To put it another way: Many of us believe that it is enough to do proper exegesis and application and then deliver the results to an un-evangelized audience. The presence of the Spirit can simply be assumed in such circumstances. The problem with making this assumption, however, is that it becomes very easy to simply ignore the role of the Spirit in Evangelism.

I will attempt, in the rest of this article, to chart a middle way between the two positions articulated above and I will do this by showing that first, evangelism is a hopeless undertaking without the supernatural regenerating power of the Holy Spirit and second, that the Holy Spirit chooses to make use of fallible human beings like ourselves in bringing people to Christ.

The article will conclude by focussing on some of the ways in which we can cooperate with the Spirit in Evangelism.

1) Evangelism is a hopeless undertaking without the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit.

Modern day followers of Finney would say that the role of the Holy Spirit in Evangelism is simply to convince (or convict) people of their sinfulness so that they can make the decision to let go of their sin and follow Jesus. The idea of the Spirit convicting people certainly has Biblical backing (See **John 16:8-11**, for example). However, we should make sure that we fully understand what is meant by this in Scripture.

How should we then understand this convicting role of the Spirit? Is it something that can be achieved by careful planning and doing the right thing at the right time? Does it come down to the Spirit using particularly effective techniques of persuasion to nudge people in the right direction so that they can make the right choice (as Finney would have argued)? Is he some kind of ‘master debater’ able to sway people with powerful argumentation? I think

the Biblical message is that the Spirit's role is much more profound and fundamental than that. I believe that the Bible teaches that *if it was not for the Spirit's role in calling people to Christ, granting them new life and enabling them to confess Christ as Lord and Saviour, evangelism would be a hopeless undertaking.*

Allow me to briefly unpack the previous statement:

The Spirit's role in calling people to Christ: We may think that when we make a Gospel appeal all that is going on is that words are being spoken. We need to look below the surface however. When true conversion happens that outward call to the Gospel is always accompanied by an inner call (often called the effectual call). Effectual calling is as someone once put is '*an essential link between predestination and justification by faith*'. The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Question 31) describes it as follows: "*Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.*"

Without this 'enlightening of minds' the Gospel will fall on spiritually dead ears. As Paul puts it in **1 Corinthians 2:14**: "*The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.*"

The Spirit's role in giving new birth: The Bible clearly describes fallen human beings as 'dead' (cf. **Ephesians 2:1-3**), they cannot come to faith in Christ without the Father first drawing them (**John 6:44**). How can this 'deadness' be reversed? This is where the ministry of the Holy Spirit in giving new birth (often known as the doctrine of regeneration) comes in. As a human being is irresistibly drawn by the Holy Spirit to faith in Christ, the Spirit miraculously births new life into that person based on the completed sacrifice of Jesus. It is the Spirit who gives life (**2 Corinthians 3:6**). Without this divine rebirth, which is a sovereign work of God's Spirit, no one can truly call him/herself a believer. As Jesus Himself said: "*I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.*" (**John 3:5-6**)

The Spirit enables us to confess Christ as Lord: I had a very interesting experience when I first started to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with

Muslims. There was one old man who constantly tried to get me to say the words of the Islamic confession (*There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is the Messenger of Allah*) in Arabic. To his great irritation I did not oblige him. When I asked why this was so very important to him he replied that he was very concerned about what would happen to me on the Day of Judgment. He felt that it might be better for me if I had actually taken the confession onto my lips; even if it was just once in my life and despite the fact that I did not mean what I said. Before we scoff at his skewed and superstitious theology we might do well to consider that some forms of modern evangelism have basically the same kind of idea at heart. Some evangelists believe that a simple action, a simple confession, a simple prayer (even if not sincerely meant) might be enough to save. It is relatively easy to record 'decisions for Christ' in this way. Is this true conversion, however? I would venture to say that in many cases the answer would have to be 'no'. A true, heartfelt confession of Christ as Lord and Saviour is only possible as the result of a deep and profound work of regeneration by the Spirit. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:3: "*Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.*"

To summarise: Any attempt to evangelize without the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit is a doomed enterprise. He is the one who generates the inner response to the Gospel, he is the one who brings new birth and he is the one who enables the confession that 'Jesus is Lord.'

2) We are called to cooperate with the Spirit in Evangelism

What should our response be to the fact that Evangelism is a hopeless exercise without the ministry of the Spirit? Should we simply resolve to 'leave it with Him' and occupy ourselves with other things? If we do this we are missing the following very important point: In addition to the fact that we can confess that Evangelism is properly the work of the Holy Spirit we can also confess that we as believers are called to co-operate with God in this work. Paul expresses this truth as follows in **2 Corinthians 5:17-20**:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's

ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

The inner call is therefore often accompanied by an outer call preached by 'Christ's ambassadors'. We do not fully understand how God makes use of this activity but the fact is that he does. As J.I. Packer puts it in his classic *'Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God'*: *We must realize, therefore, that when God sends us to evangelize, He sends us to act as vital links in the chain of His purpose for the salvation of His elect. The fact that He has such a purpose, and that it is (so we believe) a sovereign purpose that cannot be thwarted, does not imply that, after all, our evangelizing is not needed for its fulfillment. In our Lord's parable, the way in which the wedding was furnished with guests was through the action of the king's servants, who went out as they were bidden into the highways and invited in all whom they found there. Hearing the invitation, the passers-by came.[Mt xxii.1 ff.] It is in the same way, and through similar action by the servants of God, that the elect come into the salvation that the Redeemer has won for them.*⁶⁸

In our Evangelistic ministries we should therefore always hold the Work of the Spirit and our own work in creative tension. As G.C. Berkouwer put it: *"We may never ignore our calling nor ignore the dynamic of the Spirit!"*⁶⁹

If we are indeed vital links in the chain of Evangelism is there a way in which we can fulfil this role in such a manner that it will not get in the way of the work of the Holy Spirit? I believe there is. Allow me to briefly attempt to outline some crucial aspects of our response:

a) Preach the Gospel in utter dependence on the Spirit: If we truly believe that the Spirit is ultimately the one who brings people to Christ that should profoundly influence the way in which we view evangelism. The 'marching orders' of the church as we find them in **Acts 1:8** are prefaced with a declaration that being Christ's witnesses will happen under the power of the Holy Spirit: *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

Reliance on the power of the Spirit was therefore a central theme for Paul as he spoke about his Gospel ministry, as is evident from the following passages:

⁶⁸ J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. Nottingham: IVP, 1961, 106

⁶⁹ C.G. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, 217

- *My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a **demonstration of the Spirit's power**, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. (1 Corinthians 2:4)*
- *"...our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction." (1 Thessalonians 1:5)*

May we constantly keep this key teaching in mind. Evangelism is not about us and about our abilities. It is, in the first instance, the Spirit who brings people to Christ through His awesome power.

b) Pray for the ability to ‘make known the mystery’ of the Gospel: One of the best ways to express our dependence on the power of the Spirit is to pray! Paul explicitly asked for prayer for his Gospel ministry. After he admonishes the Ephesians to ‘pray in the Spirit’ he makes the following request: *“Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel...”* (**Ephesians 6:19**) This is a great prayer request to repeat in our own times when we preach the Gospel. It is also something that should be a key part of any Evangelistic ministry.

c) Always understand that the work of the Spirit is ultimately beyond our control: Only the Spirit can bring people to repentance and conversion. We simply can't do this in our own power: Not through manipulation, not through ‘working the crowd’, not through chasing numbers. This means that we should be content to leave ‘results’ with Him. “Leaving results with the Spirit” cuts both ways in the sense that it can safeguard us from both *pride* and *despondency*. When many people are converted it should keep us from pride. Someone once sent me a quote from a church leader in Albania expressing his feelings about the stunning church growth in that country in the early nineties: *“I was very privileged as I watched the Albanian church grow. I am one of God's workers, yet in a sense a mere bystander ‘watching’ the Albanian church as it grows. Although it is God who plants churches, we, His servants must work our socks off in an attempt to keep pace with His initiatives.”*⁷⁰ Reminding ourselves that it is God's work, in situations like this, will prevent us from slipping into spiritually dangerous pride.

⁷⁰ John Butterworth, *God's Secret Listener: The Story of Captain Berti Dosti*. Oxford: Monarch Books, 2010, 158.

Sometimes evangelists will experience exactly the opposite of the growth described above. It is said that Samuel Zwemer the so-called ‘Apostle to Islam’ could count the number of conversions that he saw in Arabia after a lifetime of ministry on his two hands. Yet he persisted.⁷¹ He did this because he was convinced that the work is God’s work and that it was probably not yet time for the harvest in the part of the world where he was working.

d) Make sure that presentations of the Gospel are in line with the teachings of Scripture: Not all Gospel presentations have been created equal. In fact, sometimes the ‘gospel’ that is presented is nothing like the Biblical gospel (e.g. “*Become a Christian: Jesus will make you happy, healthy and rich*”). It should go without saying that our presentation of the Gospel should clearly reflect Biblical teaching on sin, salvation and redemption.⁷² At the heart of this presentation should be the cross and empty grave of Jesus Christ (cf. **1 Corinthians 15:3-4**: *What I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures*). Holding fast to Scripture is the best way to ‘keep in step with the Spirit’ when preaching the Gospel and is also our greatest safeguard against preaching ‘another Gospel’.

e) Clearly spell out the implications of the Gospel: It is the command of God that ‘*people everywhere should repent*’ (cf. **Acts 17:30**) Evangelistic preaching should, therefore, in my view be much more than simply ‘laying the facts on the table’ in a dispassionate way. A call to turn to God through Jesus Christ should be included. This outward call can certainly be a powerful instrument in the hands of the Holy Spirit as He issues the ‘inner call’ that brings someone into the Kingdom.

f) Put heart and soul into the presentation of the Gospel

Earlier in this article I referred to the former Coptic priest that I saw in Cairo who did not want to put any emotion into his sermon because he felt that it might attract attention to himself. His motivation was certainly laudable but

⁷¹ For a biography of Zwemer and a description of his ministry in the Arab World see: J. Christy Wilson, *Apostle to Islam: A Biography of Samuel M. Zwemer*. Whitefish MT: Literary Licensing, 2011.

⁷² I highly recommend the following work as a training resource for ‘God-Centred’ Evangelism: Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth*. Downers Grove IL: IVP, 2002.

he would have done well to pay attention to what happened at the conclusion of the first sermon after the Holy Spirit was poured out. Luke tells us the following about Peter: “*With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation”*” (**Acts 2:40**). It is hard to imagine Peter warning and pleading in a dispassionate ‘delivery boy’ style. He clearly believed in the truth of what he was preaching and he was committing himself fully to sharing this message. This obviously does not mean that every Evangelistic sermon should be a ‘fire and brimstone’ affair. I think it does mean, however, that we should deliver the message like we mean what we are saying!

3. Conclusion

I began this article by stating that Evangelism would be a hopeless affair without the work of the Holy Spirit. Thankfully we can rest in the knowledge that God is still calling people to Himself through the work of the Spirit. As believers we are called to be part of this great work. May we never attempt to ‘go it alone’ but may we be enabled to preach the Gospel in utter dependence on the Holy Spirit.