

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 16, 2012**

## **WHY EVANGELISM MATTERS**

### **Romans 10:14-21**

I want to talk with you today, in the context of this passage in Romans 10, and in the larger context of Paul's teaching on the sovereignty of God in salvation, about why evangelism matters. If by His free and sovereign choice, God has already elected those who will be the beneficiaries of His grace in salvation, why should we bother with evangelism? If it is true, as Paul confidently declares in the opening verses of his Letter to the Ephesians, that God "chose (elected) us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight," and that "in love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons [and daughters] through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will – to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has given us in the One he loves" (Ephesians 1:4-6), is evangelism really necessary? Doesn't the doctrine of God's sovereignty in salvation (aka the doctrine of election), if it is true, negate the need for evangelism? If God in His sovereign freedom and grace has already determined who will receive the gift of salvation, doesn't it render evangelism irrelevant? If this is so, how can evangelism possibly make any difference?

These are good questions. Serious questions. Hard questions. And I realize that you may not be satisfied with the answers I will attempt to offer today from God's Word (not because of any deficiency in God's Word, but because of a deficiency in my understanding or explanation of it). You may not be satisfied with the attempts I've made over the last several weeks to explain some admittedly problematic and thorny theological matters. You may not be satisfied with some of the conclusions I've come to in my efforts to better understand, and to better help you understand, what the Bible teaches about God's sovereignty in salvation, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, our freedom and responsibility to accept or reject the gospel call to repent and believe in Christ for salvation.

If you're not satisfied, it's OK. I'm not fully satisfied with my understandings and explanations of these things either. If you still have questions, it's OK. I still have questions, too. I am nowhere close to being in a place where I can tie up every last theological thread into a pattern that makes complete sense to me. But that is OK, because God has shown me – and all of us, I trust – enough about Himself in what he has revealed to us in creation, in what He has given us in His Word, in His redemptive acts throughout history, in the person and work of His Son on the cross for us, and through the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives even today, that I can trust Him confidently – completely – for all the things my mind simply cannot grasp.

It doesn't mean that I stop asking questions or seeking understanding. Nor that you should. But I choose to "trust in the Lord with all my heart, and lean not on (my) own understanding." I choose to "acknowledge Him [as Lord] in all (my) ways," confident that He will never lead me astray (Proverbs 3:5-6). I take comfort in the words of Moses to the people of Israel near the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, where he said that "the secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever" (29:29). So I choose to trust God to take care of the hidden things, the secret things, the things beyond my ability to make

sense of them. But I want to understand everything God desires and enables me to understand, that I may know Him as He wants to be known, and love and serve Him as He both desires and deserves. And I want the same for you.

### **EVANGELISM AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD**

So, what can we glean from Paul's teaching here in Romans 10 about the relationship between evangelism and the sovereignty of God in salvation? By a series of rhetorical questions in verses 14 and 15, Paul proceeds to demonstrate how and why evangelism matters. As Ray Stedman points out, Paul has already said in verses 1-13 that "to be salvaged from the wreck of humanity," that is, to be rescued from the wreck we have made of our own lives and of this world in our rebellion against God, "you have to call on the name of the Lord" in faith. Paul is emphatic in verse 13 that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord" in this way "will be saved." *Everyone*.

But this declaration prompts a litany of questions in verses 14 and 15, which flow with unrelenting logic from one to the next. Calling on the name of the Lord Jesus in faith brings salvation, yes; but how can you call on His name if you don't believe in Him? And how can you believe in Him if you have never heard the message about Him? How can you hear the message unless someone tells you, unless someone preaches the good news? And how will the message get out, how will anyone preach the good news and spread the gospel, unless they are commissioned and sent by God?

To look at it from the reverse angle, Paul says it is like this: Unless messengers of the gospel are commissioned and sent out, no one will preach the gospel to those who desperately need it (which is all of us). Unless the gospel is preached, no one will hear the message of Christ. Unless people hear, they will not believe the truths of the gospel. Unless they believe the gospel, they will not call on the Savior. And unless they call on His name in repentance and faith, they will not be saved.

In the sovereign plan of God, this chain of events is necessary for the salvation of unbelievers. Calling on the Lord for salvation depends on believing. Believing depends on knowing about Him. Knowing about Him depends on hearing. Hearing depends on telling. And telling depends on commissioning and sending by God. This, says Paul, is why evangelism matters. It matters because it is the means God has sovereignly chosen to bring sinful men and women to salvation, which is all by grace.

Last Sunday I commended J. I. Packer's classic treatise on *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* to you. In it he says: "The belief that God is sovereign in grace does not affect the *necessity* of evangelism" (emphasis his). "Whatever we may believe about election," he writes, "the fact remains that evangelism is necessary, because no (one) can be saved without the gospel." Then, after invoking Paul's declaration in verse 13 that "whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord (Jesus Christ) shall be saved," Packer goes on: "Yes; but nobody will be saved who does not call on the name of the Lord, and certain things must happen before any (one) can do this," he says, referring to the chain of events Paul delineates in verses 14 and 15. Unbelievers "must be told of Christ before they can trust Him, and they must trust Him before

they can be saved by Him. Salvation depends on faith, and faith on knowing the gospel. God’s way of saving sinners,” says Packer, “is to bring them to faith through bringing them into contact with the gospel. In God’s ordering of things, therefore, evangelism is a necessity if anyone is to be saved at all” (97-98).

Packer doesn’t stop there. He continues: “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 . . . our evangelizing is not needed for its fulfillment” (p. 98). I’m tempted to say it is above my pay-grade to explain exactly how all of this works, and how it all works together. But the Bible teaches that it does. God is sovereign in salvation. And evangelism matters, because it is the means God has ordained to bring the elect to salvation.

Paul restates this truth in verse 17, condensing the steps outlined in verses 14 and 15 from five to three: “Faith comes from hearing the message,” he says, “and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” The preaching of the word of Christ, the message that is *from* Christ and *about* Christ, leads to hearing, and hearing leads to believing. Unless the message is heard and understood, it cannot result in faith. And it will not be heard and understood if it is not proclaimed.

### **WORDS ARE NECESSARY**

There is a well-known saying, often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, that goes like this: “Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.” There is no reliable evidence that Francis actually ever said it, but the quote has understandably gotten a lot of traction over the years, because we recognize that if our proclamation of the gospel and our personal testimonies to God’s saving grace are to have the greatest effect, the witness of our words must be matched by the witness of our lives. Jesus calls us not only to talk the talk, but also to walk the walk. Not only to speak the gospel, but to live the gospel.

There is a problem with this saying, however. The problem comes from the inference one can easily draw, if it is not directly implied, that the gospel may be preached effectively *without* words, or that words are *not* necessary in preaching the gospel. Paul insists that words *are* necessary, for the gospel must be heard in order to be understood. Where does faith come from? It comes from *hearing the message* – or, I’m sure Paul would agree, from *reading* the message with comprehension. And the message that must be heard, the message our minds must comprehend and our hearts must embrace, is the word of Christ, which is both *from* and *about* Him.

Is it good and right and important to live out the gospel as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ? Of course it is. It is our calling in Christ. But the witness of our lives is to be accompanied by our witness in words. Words *are* necessary if the message of the gospel, the good news about God’s saving love for a world gone wrong, is to be heard and understood.

The Greek word *euangelion* (or *evangel*) simply means “good news” or “gospel.” It refers, of course, to God’s gracious provision of forgiveness, salvation, and new life for sinners through

the person and work of His Son Jesus Christ, who took on our flesh and blood, lived a life without sin, and gave His life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

To evangelize, in Packer's words, is "to exhort sinners to accept Christ Jesus as their Savior and to serve Him as their King" (39). Evangelism, he continues, "is the issuing of a call to turn, as well as to trust; it is the delivering, not merely of a divine invitation to receive a Savior, but of a divine command to repent of sin" (40). The gospel, he says, "is a summons to [both] faith and repentance." And lest we miss it, or somehow misunderstand, he reminds us that "God's promises are for *whosoever will*" (70). Evangelism is "a work of communication in which Christians make themselves mouthpieces for God's message of mercy to sinners" (41). And the promise of salvation is given to everyone who believes. *Whosoever will* may come, and *everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord in faith will be saved.

Can I explain how this "fits" with the biblical doctrine of election, the doctrine of God's sovereignty in salvation? Sorry. But it is what the Bible teaches. And I believe it.

Throughout the history of the church, there have been some who (mis)understood the doctrine of election in such a way that they dismissed the need for evangelism at all. A famous example of this involves William Carey, known to us today as the "father of modern missions," who took the gospel to India, and whose exhortations and example provided impetus for the international missionary movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When Carey, just an ordinary English cobbler, first tried to convince his fellow Baptists that the Great Commission was intended for them – for all of Christ's followers and not just the first disciples – and that they were to go out into all the world to make disciples, he encountered fierce resistance. On one occasion, it is said, an older pastor interrupted Carey's impassioned pleas, saying, "Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine."

This pastor was so intent on protecting the sovereignty of God in salvation that he either failed or refused to connect the dots in the Bible that lead to the inescapable conclusion that, while God has the power to "convert the heathen ... without your aid or mine," He has sovereignly chosen to use people like William Carey, ordinary people – people like us, as the instruments of His mercy and grace, as messengers to communicate the message of His saving love in Christ. You and I together as part of the church, and you and I individually, are the messengers God has ordained to get the message out to the world, so that *whosoever will* – all whom God has elected to receive salvation – may come to Him in true repentance and saving faith. The work of evangelism carried out by ordinary people like us, by churches like ours, and by churches banding together in missions, is the means God has chosen to make Himself known in the fullness of His glory and grace, to make the good news of His saving love known everywhere, and to bring unbelieving sinners to forgiveness and faith in Him.

If we're honest about it, we know that nothing we can ever say or do can make anyone a believer. We cannot make sinners repent, no matter how eloquent our witness or how Christ-like our lives. Only God can make it happen. Only God can "birth" faith and repentance in someone's heart. And no one will ever come to Him in repentance and faith apart from what theologians call "effectual calling," which is "the operation [of His Spirit] whereby God causes sinners to understand and respond to the gospel.... (B)y it, God gives (us) new hearts, freeing

(us) from slavery to sin, abolishing (our) inability to know and do God's truth, and leading (us) actually to turn to God and trust Christ as (our) Savior" (Packer, 113).

Why do some people hear the message and reject it, while others hear and respond in faith? Paul acknowledges the puzzle of unbelief in verses 16-21. Why did so many of the Jews fail to embrace the gospel? How did their rejection of the gospel serve God's sovereign purposes? And what does the fact that Gentiles – non-Jews like most of us – were included in God's plan of salvation mean for the Jews?

### **ALL DAY LONG**

We may be left with unanswered questions, but this much is clear. The door is open, even today, and the invitation from God remains, to Jews and non-Jews alike. In verse 21, Paul quotes Isaiah 65:2, where the Lord Himself speaks of His patient, persevering love. "All day long," the Lord says, "I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people." *All day long*. It is a picture of His gracious heart. *All day long* He holds out His hands. *All day long* He stands with His arms open wide to receive anyone and everyone who will come to Him. *All day long*. Even today. But still, many do not respond. Many will not respond. Not just the Jews.

As it relates to the people of Israel, John Stott says: "In chapter 9 (Paul) attributed (Israel's unbelief) to God's purpose of election, on account of which many were passed by, and only a remnant was left, an Israel within Israel. In chapter 10, however, he attributes it to Israel's own disobedience. Their fall was their fault." And so, says Stott, "the antinomy" – the apparent incompatibility between two inescapable truths – "between divine sovereignty and human responsibility remains" (*Romans*, 289, 290).

And, we might add, between the necessity of evangelism and the sovereignty of God in salvation. Why does evangelism matter? It matters because in humankind's fallen condition, we are helpless to redeem ourselves or to make ourselves right with God. Evangelism matters because it is the means God has sovereignly chosen to bring unbelieving sinners to saving faith in Him. And, as far as evangelism is concerned, "the sovereignty of God in grace is the one thing that prevents evangelism from being pointless. For it creates the possibility – indeed, the certainty – that evangelism will be fruitful. Apart from (the sovereignty of God), there is not even a possibility of evangelism being fruitful" (Packer, 106).

So, let God use you to tell others about Jesus and His saving love. May God use us all for this purpose. For, unless we are commissioned and sent out by God – and we are – who will preach the gospel and spread the word? Unless we preach the gospel and share the message of Christ, how will anyone hear? Unless the message of Christ is heard, how will anyone believe in Him? Unless they come to believe in Him, how will anyone ever call on the name of the Lord and be saved? But everyone who calls on the name of the Lord in faith will be saved. *Everyone. Whosoever will.*

Lord let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.