

Sermon 75, Five Steps in Evangelism, Acts 26:18

Proposition: Christ's commission to Paul outlines the process of conversion and tells us how to evangelize.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the passage before us this evening is worth pausing over, because it gives step-by-step instructions on evangelism. Now, I freely admit that I did not notice this on my own; I got this entire sermon from evangelist Jim Wilson's book *Taking Men Alive*. But the content is just so good, so life-changing, that I want to proclaim it to you tonight. You see, most of us have no idea how to do evangelism because we are looking at the whole enchilada and thinking "That is a big enchilada." Perhaps you think back to your own conversion, and the years of preparation and the baby steps that led up to it, and then the years of follow-up work as you continue to pursue Jesus, and you think "How on earth am I going to communicate all of that in a three-minute conversation, or even a thirty-minute conversation?" The answer, of course, is that you're not. And therefore, we tend to want to give up before we've even started because we have such an exalted concept of what the Christian life is. That concept is correct; getting saved really is something the size of your whole life, something that takes a lifetime to understand, internalize, and live out. But my point today is that, armed with this playbook from Jesus, you will be able to focus on a manageable-size step of the process. You will be able to evaluate where the person you're talking to is at, and by the grace of God say something that represents progress in the right direction. Don't think that you have to complete all the steps in one conversation. Working on a piece of the process, taking even a portion of one step, is the goal. Jesus, in this verse, tells us how to evangelize.

I. Christ's Instructions Give a Step-by-Step Process

Now, the first claim I want to make this evening is that Christ's instructions to Paul recount a step-by-step process. When I first saw Wilson making this claim, I was extremely skeptical. It seems rather obvious that opening eyes, turning people from darkness to light, from the power of

Satan to God, getting their sins forgiven and getting them into church are all ways of describing a single event that we call regeneration, getting saved, conversion, or getting born again. These are mere facets of conversion, and none of them is “before” or “after.” They are simultaneous.

Now, pragmatically speaking, it is that kind of thinking that paralyzes Christians and stops them from evangelizing. But let’s think about this a little more deeply, folks. Is having your eyes opened really equivalent to having your sins forgiven? That is, could you say “If you become a Christian it’ll open your eyes” or say “If you become a Christian you’ll get your sins forgiven” and expect your audience to understand that those are two ways of describing the same event? I don’t think so.

Wilson puts it like this: What happens when you shine light on someone whose eyes are closed? When someone is in bed, trying to sleep, and you come in and turn on the light, what kind of reaction do you get? Exactly. A negative one. That’s because people whose eyes are closed don’t want the light. And so the first two steps here are clearly sequential. You can’t first shine the light, then open the eyes. If that happens, the person who opened their eyes is extremely upset with you. They didn’t want to open their eyes. They wanted to keep them firmly closed. And what about the central element here: turning from Satan’s power to God? This is a Kingdom element. This is a theme near and dear to Luke’s heart. He is all about the Kingdom of God. Submission to Christ as Lord comes before the benefit of forgiveness, in this telling. In other words, in this step-by-step account, you first tell about the kingdom and only then about forgiveness. The inheritance of Heaven and total sanctification comes last.

Particularly because of the order of the first two, then, I believe that Jesus is giving us sequential steps.

II. Christ’s Instructions Tell Us How to Evangelize

And furthermore, we ought to follow these steps. That *does not* mean that we are required to walk through every step. Rather, we need to figure out where on the ladder the person we’re evangelizing is. Is this a total pagan, someone with eyes squeezed tightly shut? Someone who’s halfway there, who sees the light but is not yet ready to submit to God’s rule? Or are we talking to someone who is already sold on the first steps, a professing Christian whose life is just not matching up? You see, holiness is the last step for a reason. There are a lot of people who are pretty regular in church but also captive to some pretty awful sins. They still need further conversion, understood as a lifelong process of becoming more like Jesus. To these people, we don’t need to shine the light and say “Have you heard about Jesus? He is Lord.” They know that. They learned it a long time ago. What they need is to hear about taking their place among the sanctified, those whose faith in Jesus is growing.

How do you learn where someone is at? You have to learn to listen and ask questions, then listen some more to the answers you get. You will soon be able to tell where your conversation partner is.

III. The Five Steps

So what are the five steps? Let’s talk about each of these in detail. This is the way Paul evangelized, and this is the way that Jesus told all of us to evangelize.

A. Open Their Eyes

The first step, brothers and sisters, is to open eyes. Someone whose eyes are shut does not want to see. There is no point in presenting beautiful vistas before the person whose eyes are screwed shut. It doesn't matter; they don't want to see them! If your eyes are closed and I take you to the most beautiful spot in Teton Park, you won't care. In fact, you'll be annoyed that I'm dragging you out into some field somewhere because you don't see anything special there. It's dark, just like the inside of your mom's basement.

So our first goal in evangelism, the first way marker we're looking for, is simply to open eyes. You have to spark some curiosity, some desire to see something that they don't currently see, before you can get people to open their eyes. Telling them about Jesus is almost never the best way to get them to open their eyes. He is the light, and they are choosing the darkness. Turning the light brighter is only going to make them more stubbornly try to block it out.

How do we spark curiosity? Wilson suggests making cryptic comments, saying things like "Actually, there's a major source of happiness and we're almost right on top of it" or "I won't tell you why I was humming so happily in this terrible work environment. At least, I won't tell you unless you really want to know." In other words, don't give away anything at this stage. Jesus performed this step with Nicodemus by saying "You must be born again" — something He knew Nicodemus would regard as gobbledygook but would be very interested in figuring out.

Don't speak about Jesus directly. Get them interested in happiness, or satisfaction, or peace, or hope, or unconditional love, or perfection, or the right way of caring for the poor, or something along these lines. Paul's Athens speech is all about opening eyes. That's why he doesn't mention Jesus until the very end. He spends most of the speech on things that they could already understand and agree with within their Epicurean-Stoic framework. He got them curious — why have we been worshiping handmade deities in handmade temples all this time? That is totally unreasonable. What is the explanation for this utter foolishness?

You can also see from this step-by-step process that starting with "You're going to hell" is an absolutely ungodly and wrong method of evangelism. Jesus said to start by opening eyes; no one can bear to look directly at Hell. Holding it in front of people is going to get them to screw their eyes shut even tighter.

B. Turn Them from Darkness to Light

The second step, once you get them asking questions, once they manifest a desire for more light, is to attempt to shine the light on them. This is where you can explain more about Jesus as the perfect man who did everything right. If they are worried about oppression, focus on how He sets the captives free. If they are worried about moral degeneration, focus on how He is the great lawgiver, the New Moses. If they are worried about the environment, focus on Him as the creator and restorer of Heaven and Earth. If they are worried about the family, focus on Him as the Bridegroom and the Son. If they are worried about the economy, focus on Him as the Creator of all wealth and the providential provider for the birds and the lilies of the field. And so on. You need to know how Jesus meets every need and desire of the human spirit, and be ready to show how He lights up the world.

Now, I can honestly say that I have never met a non-believer at this stage. I think they are fairly rare in our culture, which does its utmost to discourage rational thought. Few people wonder about such things, because answers and talking points are stuffed down our throats from birth and we have almost no silent time to just sit and wonder. Philosophy begins with wonder, which is why there is so little philosophy, so little love of wisdom, in our day.

In China, there were many people that my sister and brother-in-law met who were at this stage. Their eyes were opened, and they were longing for more light. If you meet someone at this stage, give them as much Jesus as they'll take.

C. Turn Them from Satan's Power to God

The next stage is an even bigger step forward. At this stage, their eyes have been opened to the point that they recognize that though Jesus is the answer, He is not running unopposed for Master of the Universe. They have begun to recognize that Jesus' rule is not yet complete, and the reason it's not complete is that He is up against the mightiest adversary in creation—and further, that they personally have been serving this Adversary. In other words, you are now at the place where the person you're evangelizing can learn more about the mediatorial kingdom of Jesus and how it is driving back Satan's kingdom, conversion by conversion.

Getting someone to see that Jesus is the Savior of the family, of the environment, of politics is a big step. Getting the person to see that Jesus is the Savior of that person is an even bigger step. Realizing that I personally am part of the problem, that I am firmly in Satan's camp, that he is my pimp and I have his name tattooed on my rear end, where he sodomizes me whenever he feels like it, is enough to make a person vomit. This is the central and in many ways crucial point. When you show people their own complicity in the darkness, will they finish turning away from the darkness and run toward the light for salvation? Or will they try to crawl back into the darkness, preferring (literally) the Devil they know and the darkness that hides their own part in all this from them? If you meet someone at this stage, pray like Heaven. It's the trickiest point of all. This is where Paul lost people in synagogue after synagogue. They loved the light he shed on their sacred book, the way he explained the Messianic vision of the Pentateuch. But when he got around to showing that they were actually serving Satan, that was a bridge too far. They were done; they started rioting.

They went back to the darkness.

Don't let your beloved sinner do that. Whoever you're talking to, recognize that you have to proclaim the Kingdom of Jesus, which means that you have to say that He is Lord and that He demands exclusive allegiance. Renouncing Satan and all his works is not some kind of theoretical exercise; it is intensely practical. It relates to how you'll react when someone cuts you off in traffic. It relates to how you'll react when your wife burns the lasagna or your kid breaks a glass. It relates to how you'll cope when the familiar stirrings of lust and greed arise in your heart.

We try to obey Jesus every day; therefore, no one should know better than we church people how hard it is to turn from the power of Satan to the power of God. Satan lies and tells us that in his service we can do exactly as we please and indulge in all the greed, anger and

bitterness that we want. Jesus tells the truth and says that His yoke is easy and His burden is light. But it is still a yoke; He is still Lord, and you're still slave.

D. Proclaim Forgiveness of Sins to Them

Well, if you meet someone who is sold on the Lordship of Christ, who recognizes the Kingdom and wants to submit to the King, but is stuck on his own wickedness, what do you do then? The answer is that you proclaim the forgiveness of sins.

This is where a lot of modern evangelism starts — by telling people whose eyes are closed, who have no idea that they have any sins in the Biblical sense of the word, that their sins can be forgiven. That is like placing a robocall to a bicycle owner and telling him that he can get cheaper car insurance. He doesn't care! He doesn't have a car to insure. And in the same way, someone whose eyes are closed, someone who doesn't acknowledge Jesus as Lord and realize that he needs to repudiate the power of Satan, will not recognize that he has any sins that need forgiving.

If you notice, Peter speaks frequently of forgiveness in his sermons in Acts, but Paul uses the word only in Pisidian Antioch — almost as though he didn't get this far in the evangelistic speeches Luke has recorded for us.

Forgiveness is for sinners — for conscious sinners. People who know they've sinned make the best candidates for forgiveness. People who think they've done nothing wrong will see no need to seek forgiveness. If you see, you're still a sinner. Only the blind admit that they need help.

E. Get Them a Place in the Church

The final thing that Jesus told Paul to communicate is the inheritance of all the benefits of Christ's death within the church. Once you have gotten someone to the place where he believes in forgiveness of sins, you focus primarily on these final things: integrating the new believer into the body, and helping him grow in sanctification. In other words, these are the primary topics of ongoing ministry to those who are already believers. Even if you've served Christ for fifty years, you still need to hear about your inheritance and focus on being part of the family of believers who receive that inheritance.

1. Salvation Is a Communal Thing

Notice that Jesus says that believers receive the inheritance only among those who are sanctified. The inheritance is not going to Lone Ranger Christians. It is for Christians in community, Christians who are regular and active members of the community we call the church. No solo inheritance; it is in church that you inherit all that Christ died to leave you!

Do you believe this? That outside the church there is no ordinary possibility of salvation? Any inheritance you got outside these four walls, or rather outside this band of people, would be extraordinary. So seek the ordinary means of grace. Accept the communal salvation you have.

2. Church Demands Holiness

You see, your brothers and sisters here are your biggest allies in seeking holiness. If you want to stop sinning, you have to enlist help. And help is sitting all around you. On your own, you can't change much. With a whole team of fellow believers, brothers and sisters, you will be astonished

at what levels of sanctification God's power brings forth in your sinful self. I've seen lives transformed; that's the business we are in. It only works, though, if you let the church into your life and if you encourage one another and build each other up. Church demands holiness; the group is the object of sanctification, in some ways more than the individual. Jesus swore that He would build His church. If you are part of the church, you get built up by Jesus.

3. Faith Brings Holiness

How? By faith.

And that's where the whole sequence ends. You're starting with a wilfully, obstinately blind individual. By following the steps of evangelism, you end with a holy, faith-filled church member who enthusiastically participates in the body.

Is that where you are? Do you have faith in Jesus? If so, share it, using the steps that He revealed to Paul. Pay attention to where on this path everyone you encounter is. You can evangelize. You don't have to do everything; just try to move each person you can in the right direction. That alone is significant, and blessed.

We are not all commissioned to make evangelism our primary calling, but we all have good news and we need to share it, not hide it. Jesus is the primary witness; if we are to be like Him, we must be witnesses too. That's a gospel truth: If the news you've heard is genuinely good, you won't want to hide it. Amen.