

# Beloved

The Weekly Pastoral Letter of Dr. T.J. Gentry – August 10, A.D. 2008 – Evangelism IX

Grace to you and peace, beloved. May the Lord be with you!

Evangelism is like a panoramic lens in relation to our view of the kingdom. When we consistently do it, we begin to see a much bigger picture before us. We start to perceive the church as a very big body; *much bigger* than the proverbial four walls of our own congregation or theological camp. If we're not careful, we may even conclude that there are actually Christians outside our own denomination! More amazing still, some of them are Arminians or evangelical Catholics or Anglicans or (take a deep breath) even Charismatics!

Seriously, it is amazing and a bit unnerving to see the doctrinal barbed wire begin to come down when we evangelize. Now before you write me off as some starry-eyed ecumenical minimalist, hear this. *I'm not saying that doctrine is unimportant, and I'm not minimizing my Reformed commitments in particular.* (I like tulips; I really do!) I am saying, however, that evangelism has a certain way of uniting the ranks. It brings disparate parts of the church together at the center – where man's need and God's solution are the primary consideration. It brings us to a simple, basic understanding of the cross where Jesus died to save sinners. Yeah, yeah, I know that all of that requires interpretation and nuance, but have you ever noticed that in the entire book of Acts, for example, not one gospel presentation bears the mark of any particular commitment to an understanding of the extent of the atonement? The details come out after the conversions; the gospel given, however, is simple and straight forward. Man is a sinner. Jesus is the Savior. All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. Period. And a commitment to this type of basic evangelistic proclamation by Christians of many different persuasions is the means God chose to reach the elect. As a matter of fact, it seems that the current situation in evangelism reveals that God is using more non-Reformed thinkers than Reformed thinkers. (I guess He knows we get pretty busy sometimes. What, with all the doctrinal policing we need to do and all the blogs we need to read.) ☺

Again, seriously consider what evangelism forces us to do. If we commit to sharing the simple gospel, we will have to do so with broadly evangelical statements that anyone who truly believes in salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone will agree with. There is no evangelism tract that I know of that presents the gospel by teaching some version of particular redemption and Reformed dogmatics. Imagine what it might sound like. "Hello, sir. I would like to share with you the good news that

from the foundation of the world Jesus was slain to efficaciously secure the salvation of the elect. Of course, this was all rooted in the pactum salutis and ought to be understood in a particular lapsarian framework. Nevertheless, you may be one of those elect and therefore, I am going to offer you the gospel in an outward call with the hope that the Holy Spirit will make it known inwardly and thereby regenerate your dead heart (spiritually speaking, of course)..." Can you imagine sharing the gospel like this? Of course not. We would never approach evangelism with that type of message. Neither would a committed Wesleyan or Baptist approach it with the details of their particular version of systematic theology. At least I hope not.

We all share a basic message that, on the surface at least, we agree on. Actually, we agree below the surface, as well. We all believe that Jesus is our only hope for salvation, and that regeneration is essential, and that we cannot merit God's love or favor. The details beyond that are important, but not in the actual work of evangelism. Discipleship is where fine points of theology are made and the theological jargon and titles are taught. In evangelism, though, we focus on the basics. And the "we" doing the focusing is a very big group. As I said, a much bigger group than our congregation or denomination or reading list. It is truly a big kingdom when we look at the ranks of evangelists. Consider, for instance, how many churches come together in a Billy Graham crusade. (By the way, I did not just endorse everything he says or does. He has been, however, used of God – Arminianism and all!)

Assuming I still have your interest and you are not busily writing up charges to bring before my presbytery, I want to press you one final time. What is your goal in evangelism? Do you want to see converts to Christ more than anything else? Would you evangelize even if you knew those converted would go to someone else's church? Do you want to see converts to Christ or converts to your particular confession? Well, which is it? The underlying question is this. Is your confessional commitment more important than the simple gospel? While I agree that it is difficult to separate one's systematic understanding of the gospel from the actual gospel message, it is possible and even necessary. Commit to the gospel and look around at those with the same commitments. Some have collars and robes, some have jeans and sandals, some speak in tongues, some have women in the pulpit, and some look just like you. As long as the Jesus is the same, do you really need to make your preferences the issue? I think you know the answer. – T.J.