

Evangelism, ugh!

Modern day 'altar-call' religion lacks the astounding good news of what God has already done for us through Jesus Christ:

When the gospel is preached today, it often includes statements like, "Make your decision for Christ and you will be saved," or "Jesus loves you and gave his life for you, so turn to him and he will save you." Or, in the older tradition, sinners are exhorted to "turn away from sin" and "give up your old evil ways" to escape eternal death.

But notice how it's the sinner who must decide, the sinner who has to turn to God, and the sinner who has to turn away from sin? It's all up to the sinner. If a sinner wants salvation then he'd better do these things himself first. In this kind of evangelism, then, it puts enormous pressure on the sinner to make the first move. It's up to him to make a decision, and entirely on his own resources, too.

But how can any human make an authentic, life-altering decision for God when he's at enmity with God, he's weak and sinful, and even a single link with God forged from his own resources would be as frail as this weakest link and subject to the vagaries of his change of mind? To be told at this point in his life that he has to make a decision because his eternal life depends on it, is the worst news possible. How can he make a sensible, genuine decision in his pathetic state of mind, or even know if he's making the right decision in the first place? Even worse, it's missing the entire point and the good news of the gospel that Jesus, in his grace and love on behalf of all mankind, has already done what we cannot do, and made our decision for us.

So where do evangelists get this idea that we must make a decision first, before God extends his grace and love to us? It comes from not wanting to relinquish the freedom, or the right, that we think we have to make our own decisions. God's unconditional act of grace, then, is rarely preached and often rejected.

Instead, the gospel becomes just an appeal to self-interest. When evangelists exhort a sinner to "come to Jesus to be saved," it's for the sinner's own sake and advantage. They emphasize the benefits of salvation and other advantages on offer, urging people through fear of death and Hell to make their decision for God. The motivation offered to the destitute sinner, therefore, is entirely self-centred. He'd better make a decision for Christ to preserve his life, avoid punishment, and get all the personal advantages of being "Christian." This kind of evangelism, though, is in direct conflict with what Jesus taught us about God's saving act by the power of the Holy Spirit in his Son.

It's also in direct conflict with what Jesus taught about a person losing his life, rather than seeking to preserve it, and renouncing one's self-will and so-called rights, taking up one's cross daily, becoming a servant just like Jesus, and following him wherever he goes. The modern evangelist, however, soon realizes that a message like that is unlikely to attract many followers or "converts." So he goes instead for the more attractive, emotionally-hyped gospel focusing on blessings, gifts, miracles, healings, "spiritual experiences" and feelings, and other emotionally-charged offerings designed to frighten or attract our poor ignorant sinner into making his "personal decision for Christ."

None of this, however, teaches the poor sinner anything about the God of love and grace who gives sinners to Christ, as Jesus said in **John 6:44**. Sinners don't need to make a decision for Christ, because God made the decision for them! The sinner has no say in the matter whatsoever. He comes to Christ based purely on God's decision, not his own.

And, what's more, when the Father calls a sinner to Christ, the sinner comes. "All that the Father gives to me *will come* to me," Jesus says in **verse 37**. He also says in **verse 39** that he won't lose any of those the Father gives him, too. Again, it's all decided for us. Making our own decision for Christ never comes into it.

And what a huge relief that is! Because it means we need never fear a change of mind, a weakening of our resolve, doubting our belief is firm, or all the other anxieties which beset the poor "convert" who, urged by self-interest, responded to an "altar call" message proclaiming a gospel of rewards or emotional gratification.

It also means we'll never have to look fearfully back over our shoulder wondering whether we really gave ourselves to Jesus, whether we really believe and trust him, or whether we will continue trusting him, or not. We'll never have to worry if our faith is adequate or if it might fail, either. And why don't we have to worry, wonder or fear? Because, first of all, it's the Father who gave us to Jesus and, secondly, it's not our personal commitment and faith upon which we rely. We rely instead on what Jesus Christ has done and continues to do - in our place and on our behalf - in *his* obedience to his Father's will, **verse 38**.

Knowing this, that Jesus is responding to God on our behalf, completely frees us from all self-interest and ulterior motives in believing and following Christ. And knowing too that God, having begun a good work in us, will in Jesus complete it, frees us into spontaneous and joyful praise and worship.

It makes the real gospel so much more attractive than the hyped-up "altar call" of modern evangelism. In the real gospel, God loves us so utterly and completely that he gave himself for us in Jesus. He not only pledged his very being as God for our salvation, he also demonstrated his unconditional love for us by dying for us precisely because we were his enemies and because we were totally unworthy of him. And he did it in such a "once-for-all" way that he could not go back on it without undoing the incarnation and the cross.

None of it involves anything from us either, because Jesus has already made us his own before we believed in him - and apart from us believing in him, too. And he's bound us to him in his love so completely that he'll never let us go. He did this not only as God but as human also. As God and human, he's done for us what we cannot do for ourselves, acting in our place, including our acts of faith, belief and responses to God's love. Within his sacrificial life on this earth and on behalf of all humanity, he made the vital decision for us.

Whatever personal decision we may have thought of making, Jesus has already included it in his own self-offering on our behalf, and been fully and completely accepted by the Father. We are, therefore, already accepted. Jesus' belief becomes our belief, and his response to God becomes our response to God. Jesus, therefore, can present us before God as those who have already believed, already responded - and - already decided. He has done, and does, all that we need to do and cannot do, for us. He does it all in our place and on our behalf.

This sets before the helpless sinner the astounding good news of what God, in his unconditional grace and mercy, has fully and freely provided for him in Jesus Christ. We see it in the cross. The cross is our window into the heart of the Father, giving us a glimpse of the all-encompassing love of the God who loves us more than he loves himself.