

## Evangelism: Wooing and Convicting

*By Peter Barnes*

Once a person becomes a Christian, he or she naturally wants to pass the faith onto as many others as possible. After Andrew met Christ, he then found his brother Simon Peter and told him the good news (John 1:40-42). That seems uncomplicated enough, but it is not always so. Modern evangelicalism tends to have one model for making the gospel known: it seeks to woo by being winsome. There is much to be said for this on many occasions. We are meant to speak the truth in love (Eph.4:15) and to present the Christian case with gentleness and respect (e.g. 2 Tim.2:24-26; 1 Pet.3:15).

Yet there is another side to doing the work of an evangelist. The Bible speaks of the need for a conviction of sin and hence a call to repentance, so it appears that in presenting the gospel, we need both to woo and to convict. We are offering what people need but not what they want. The Christian gospel wounds before it heals. Martin Luther tended to phrase things very graphically: 'When God begins to justify a person, He first condemns him; when He wants to build up, He first tears down; whom He wants to heal, He first batters to pieces; whom He wants to bring to life, He first kills.'

The approach of John the Baptist is not favoured today: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' (Luke 3:7) Those who responded were convicted of sin, and wanted to put things right (Luke 3:10-14). Paul too saw it as his task to preach the need both for repentance and faith (Acts 20:21; 26:20). At Athens, before pagan philosophers, he had called on his hearers to repent on the basis of the judgment to come, which of course required a general resurrection from the dead. This was proved by the resurrection of a man who was already raised, although Paul does not get to fill in Jesus'

name and details (Acts 17:30-31). To the dissolute Felix, Paul seems to have reasoned about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, before attempting to speak of Jesus as the Saviour of sinners (Acts 24:25). Felix was alarmed, and we have no indication that he was ever comforted.

It is the Holy Spirit who convicts us of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8-11), and the preacher is to be aware of this, and in tune with what is taking place. It was when Peter heard the Jerusalem crowd cry out: 'Brothers, what shall we do?' that he knew that there was genuine conviction of sin. It was then that he considered it timely to tell them to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:37-38). If we simply woo, we sound like a telemarketer who is offering something that people do not really need. If we simply aim to convict, we sound like an enemy who is attacking and does not have peoples' best interests at heart.

Who is sufficient for these things? How do we woo and convict at the same time – or nearly at the same time? Even when Jesus calls us to come to Him for He is gentle and lowly in heart, it is clear that only those who are convicted that they need rest for their souls will do so (Matt.11:28-30). The Canaanite woman adopts the posture of a dog waiting for crumbs to fall from its master's table before her faith is praised and her daughter is healed (Matt.15:27-28). We are to take up Jesus' cross and die (Matt.16:24-25), yet His yoke is easy and His burden is light (Matt.11:30).

One model is not enough. Only to woo is to mislead, and only to convict is to alienate. The Word of God is like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces (Jer.23:29) yet also sweeter than honey

(Ps.119:103). The need for evangelism to at least be double-sided is perhaps as easily illustrated as explained. James Montgomery Boice's father was an orthopaedic surgeon, and he once told his family how delighted he was when a man who was partially paralysed in an accident could feel something. That was the beginning of healing. So it is with the sinner who is convicted of sin. Yet there is more that is needed. Here we might cite Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote: 'We can neither understand nor preach the gospel tangibly enough. A truly evangelical sermon must be

like offering a child a beautiful red apple or holding out a glass of water to a thirsty man and asking: 'Wouldn't you like it?'

The sinner comes to Christ, convicted that he does not deserve what is offered, but convinced that Christ is rich in mercy.

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