

# IN RESPONSE - DECISIONS, DECISIONS, DECISIONS

by Dennis Prutow

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There are questions about the effectiveness of traditional evangelistic methods in our age. One of the most popular methods of evangelism, from the personal perspective, is Evangelism Explosion. I realize I am treading upon sacred ground for many. However, I want to bring out one aspect of EE which is similar to many programs centering on personal evangelism characterized by the drive for a decision registered in a prayer of commitment.

Dr. James Kennedy tells us,

There are five great laws of selling or persuading: attention, interest, desire, conviction, and close. It does not matter whether you are selling a refrigerator or persuading men to accept a new idea or philosophy, the same basic laws of persuasion hold true. Did salesmen invent these? No, they just extracted them. They learned that is the way the human mind and heart reach conclusions and take actions. This is what Jesus did, for example, with the woman at the well.<sup>1</sup>

*I shall show you the gospel is not set forth in Scripture in terms of selling.* The gospel is not a sales pitch. The word gospel itself tells us this. It means "good news." God sees fit to change human lives by means of declaring the news. God changes lives through telling the story of Christ.

The close of the sales presentation is a prayer. In discussing "The Prayer of Commitment" Dr. Kennedy tells us,

Many have been lost at this point because of the way they were asked to pray. It is especially true of adults and older people who have perhaps been in church for many years and should know how to pray, but have never prayed audibly in their lives. They are horrified at the thought of having to pray spontaneously in front of a stranger. Therefore, in asking them to pray, I have found the wording very helpful (note especially the pronouns).

Well Rene, if this is really what *you* want, *we* can go to the Lord in prayer right where we are. *I* can lead *us* in prayer and *we* can tell him what you have told me just now—that you want Christ to come into your heart to be your Savior and Lord and you want to repent of your sins and receive the gift of eternal life.<sup>2</sup>

Again, it is common knowledge in evangelical circles that this type of close to a gospel presentation is stock and trade. There is a problem however. Dr. Kennedy tells us this is the mode of operation of Jesus with the woman at the well. *I shall show you this is not the case. Neither with the woman at the well nor in any other example of one on one encounters in the gospels or in Acts do we find a gospel presentation brought to a close with a prayer of commitment.*

Despite the example of Jesus and the apostles, we tend to feel very guilty when we do not follow the lead of modern personal evangelism. My wife tells the story of relating the gospel to a fellow school teacher and feeling terribly guilty about not pressing to "close" the presentation with prayer. The next day, the school teacher informed my wife she had "closed with Christ" herself, by herself, after the discussion of the previous evening.

Here is the danger. If we fail to take into consideration the distinction made in Scripture between the image of God in the broad sense and the image of God in the narrow sense, we may genuinely think people are converted when they give intellectual assent to the gospel. We may wrongly encourage people they are Christians when the inclination of their hearts has not been changed by the Spirit of God at all.

Evangelicals are fond of saying it is within the power of the individual to decide for Christ. They think they know how the mind and heart reach conclusions and take actions. From the perspective of the image of God in the broad sense this may be true. Sales people know how to wrest a decision out of peo-

ple to buy a product. Ministers use the same tactic. This is not evangelism.

Reformed people are fond of saying no proper decision can be made for Christ without the prior work of the Holy Spirit. So far so good. Yet if we do not take the distinction between the image of God in the broad sense and the image of God in the narrow sense seriously, a decision for Christ must be, *de facto*, the fruit of the new birth. Taking the distinction seriously, we realize this may not be the case. The basic inclination of the person's heart may not be changed at all. The decision may be purely the result of rational reflection based on self-interest.

The Westminster divines knew it is possible for people to claim they are Christians, look like Christians, give a very believable profession of faith in the church and actually not be Christians. This thought appalls us. However, Westminster Confession of Faith 10:2, offers a warning. It begins, "Others, not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come to Christ...." Westminster Larger Catechism, Answer 68, says the same thing. *I shall show you this is the truth of God by examining the proof texts used by the Westminster divines to support their contention.*

Finally, the un-discerning drive for a decision to follow Christ registered in a prayer of commitment can lead to the anomalous situation of people confessing Christ but also confessing they do not have it within them to follow Christ. This is the Romans 7 dilemma. "The willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.... I practice the very evil that I do not want" (Romans 7:18-19). *I shall show you the person in Romans 7 is not the Christian; he is the person under conviction experiencing certain common operations of the Spirit.*

I will then discuss the true, biblical, Reformed evangelism we ought to practice as we interface with the world.

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<sup>1</sup> D. James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970), p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

# IN RESPONSE - WHERE IS THE SALES PRESENTATION?

by Dennis Prutow

Does the New Testament ever characterize the gospel of Jesus Christ as a sales presentation? No it does not. First and foremost, the gospel is news. It is good news. Those bearing the gospel are messengers. This is the meaning of the Greek word standing behind the English we use. The first appearance of the term in the New Testament is in Matthew 4:23,

And Jesus went about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of disease and all manner of sickness among the people.

The Greek term translated gospel is τὸ εὐαγγέλιον. The root is the word *message*, as in 1 John 1:5, "And this is the message which we have heard from him and announce unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." The Greek word for message is ἡ ἀγγελία. The prefix eu, εὖ, simply mean good. The gospel is good news, the good message.

The biblical background of this word harkens back to the messenger or runner who delivered messages for or brought news to the king. When David's army led by Joab was fighting against Absalom, 2 Samuel 18:24-27 says,

Now David was sitting between the two gates; and the watchman went up to the roof of the gate by the wall, and raised his eyes and looked, and behold, a man running by himself. The watchman called and told the king. And the king said, "If he is by himself there is good news in his mouth." And he came nearer and nearer. Then the watchman saw another man running; and the watchman called to the gatekeeper and said, "Behold, another man running by himself." And the king said, "This one also is bringing good news." The watchman said, "I think the running of the first one is like the running of Ahimaaz the son of Zadok." And the king said, "This is a good man and comes with good news."

When God announces the deliverance of Israel from Babylon through Isaiah, he uses similar language.

How lovely on the mountains Are the feet of him who brings good news,

who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation, and says to Zion, "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7).

The apostle Paul picks up this theme in describing those who proclaim the gospel. He asks a question and then answers with a quote. "How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!'"

The gospel *is* news, *good news*, brought by faithful messengers in the service of the King. "For 'gospel' means 'good news,' tidings, information about something that has happened."<sup>1</sup> This is a far different construction that a sales person trained with a very refined sales presentation.

The only place in the New Testament the gospel is associated with the selling of goods, the apostle Paul condemns such selling. "For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God" (2 Corinthians 2:17).

Even so, some vigorously maintain evangelism has certain affinities to sales. Randall Balmer asked Dr. Billy Graham, "To what extent is your calling as an evangelist and exercise in selling?" Here is Dr. Graham's answer.

Well, I think there is a sense of parallel. The thing that one is selling or giving, because we're not selling the gospel, the gospel is free, but the way you present it has certain parallels. And there is a certain salesmanship in evangelism because I'm trying to sell people not for money but for what it will do for their own hearts and what it will do for them in eternity.<sup>2</sup>

As a young army chaplain I purchased some life insurance. I was convinced by the insurance salesman, although the quarterly premiums were large, to put my name on the dotted line. It was

a mistake I later regretted. The salesman, however, was successful. He closed the deal. Sales techniques do bring closure. Speaking of Liberalism in the church, J. Gresham Machen observes that liberal preachers err. They "make a mere persuasion of the will all that is needed for salvation."<sup>3</sup>

When we approach the gospel as a sales presentation, we may make the same error. We may have little thought for the deeper inclinations of the heart. We may even believe, wrongly, that a decision made with the use of our natural faculties *allows* the supernatural change wrought by God. When this is the case, the foundation for change in conversion to Christ is human power. As John R. W. Stott warns,

Therefore there is a great danger in what is sometimes called 'decisionism', as if all a man has to do is pull himself together, exercise his will power and 'decide for Christ'.... The very language of 'decisions' and 'decision-cards', though doubtless of practical convenience, is too man-centered to be anything but gravely misleading."<sup>4</sup>

Paul approaches the gospel in an entirely different way. "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16). He goes on to say, "My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:4-5).

The very meaning of the term tells us gospel is not and cannot be a sales presentation. A sales presentation may readily lead to faith resting on the wisdom of men rather than on the power of God.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), p. 121.

<sup>2</sup> Randall Balmer, *Crusade: The Life of Billy Graham* (Chicago: Cutting Edge Productions and WTTW, 1993).

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<sup>3</sup> Machen, p. 119.

<sup>4</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Our Guilty Silence: The Church, The Gospel and the World* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967), p. 49.

# IN RESPONSE - WHERE IS THE PRAYER?

by Dennis Prutow

We have seen the gospel is not a sales presentation. Sales is not the model of Scripture. Much good is done and people are brought to a saving knowledge of Christ by means of Evangelism Explosion and similar programs. However, we ought not to reduce the gospel to the level of a vacuum cleaner.

When the gospel is viewed as a sales presentation, human beings are often manipulated in order to extract the all important prayer of decision. Is this biblical methodology?

To answer, let's examine the ministries of Christ and the disciples. How did they approach individuals? Matthew 9:9 it says,

And as Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man, called Matthew, sitting in the tax office; and He said to him, 'Follow Me!' And he rose and followed Him.

Here Jesus dealt with Levi on an individual basis. Jesus issued a simple call, "Follow Me." Obviously there was a decision on the part of Levi to get up and follow Jesus. Levi committed himself to Jesus Christ. He determined to follow Jesus as a disciple.

Notice there was no sales pitch on the part of Jesus. There was a simple call, "Follow Me." Levi, confronted by Christ and confronted with the proposition he ought to follow Christ, was forced to determine his next step. "And he rose, and followed Him." Because there was no sales pitch, there was no traditional close; there was only a simple exhortation, then a simple response. There was no verbal pressure applied. Jesus made no request for Levi to pray on the spot.

Another individual with whom Jesus dealt was the woman at the well. The narrative found in John 4:1-42 is often used to explain how everyday situations and simple elements of creation can be used to point individuals to the Savior. James Kennedy uses this situation as a model. In this narrative, Jesus simply presents Himself to the woman. "The woman said to Him, 'I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called the Christ) when that One comes, He will declare all things to us' (John 4:25). Note the response of Jesus, "I who speak to you am He" (John

4:26). This woman, like Levi, was confronted with the Christ and she knew it. Having been confronted by Christ, she was forced to determine her next course of action. "So the woman left her waterpot, and went into the city, and said to the men, 'Come, see a man who told me all things that I have done....'" (John 4:28-29). Note the absence of anything which smacks of a sales presentation. There is no verbal or emotional constraint placed upon this woman by Jesus. Although Dr. Kennedy tells us to expect a prayer of commitment, Jesus does not request the woman to pray by the well. The conversation was 'unfortunately' interrupted by the arrival of the disciples and the woman went her way.

What was the result of the evangelistic encounter? John 4:39 tells us, "And from that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, 'He told me all the things that I have done.'" The woman broadcast the news regarding Christ. As a result, the encounter Jesus had with this single woman by the well resulted in the conversion of many others in her city.

One final example of Christ dealing with an individual is Luke 19:1-10 which relates the story of Zaccheus. Jesus was in Jericho. Zaccheus, a chief tax-gatherer who was quite rich, wanted to see Jesus. He climbed a tree. "And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, 'Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house'" (Luke 19:5).

Christ confronted Zaccheus. He heard an exhortation from the lips of Jesus. He then decided his next course of action. "And he hurried and came down, and received Him gladly" (Luke 19:6). Note the lack of modern evangelistic procedure. There is no request for Zaccheus to pray with Jesus there at the foot of the tree or later at home. However, we do know of Zaccheus' salvation. "Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house....'" (Luke 19:9).

Another excellent example of one on one evangelism is the story of Philip and the Ethiopian. An Ethiopian court official had been in Jerusalem to worship. This man was educated and had a copy of por-

tions of the Old Testament Scriptures. He was riding in a chariot or carriage and was reading from Isaiah 53 when Philip encountered him. The Ethiopian invited Philip to explain the Scriptures.

And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?'" (Acts 8:35-36).

Again we see two characteristic elements in this story. First, there is a forceful presentation of Christ. There is little doubt the Ethiopian was confronted with the Lord Jesus Christ and His work on the cross on behalf of sinners. Isaiah 53 is a classic prophecy fulfilled in detail by the sacrificial work of Christ. There is no sales pitch. On the contrary, Philip explained the Scriptures. The Ethiopian determined his next course of action.

Second, we see no insistence on the part of Philip that the Ethiopian pray with him there beside the road. The Ethiopian wanted to be baptized. This is the biblical response to the gospel.

When we look at the ministry of the apostle Paul, we see the same thing. Read Acts 16:14-15 and Acts 16:25-33. You will find no trace of the sales model. You will find no mention of a prayer of commitment. The gospel is not a sales pitch. Gospel presentations in the New Testament are never closed with the traditional prayer of decision.

We ought to line up with the Bible on this. Paul says, "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). What about a prayer of commitment? Neither Christ nor the apostles used such a procedure. You may think I am leading people away from an established procedure which has born much fruit. Is our standard long held tradition based upon worldly procedures? No. Our standard is Holy Scripture. What of the prayer of commitment? I say again, Jesus and the apostles used no such procedure. Are we obliged to follow Christ and the apostles? 'In Response' is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 1997 by Dennis Prutow.

# IN RESPONSE - STILLBORN OR NEWBORN?

by Dennis Prutow

The New Testament warns us against apparent conversions. The Confession of Faith and the Larger Catechism say:

Others not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, *and may have some common operations of the Spirit*, yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved....<sup>1</sup>

All the elect, and they only, are effectually called; although others may be, and often are, outwardly called by the ministry of the word, *and have some common operations of the Spirit*....<sup>2</sup>

I am interested in the thought, emphasized by the italics, unbelievers may “have some common operations of the Spirit.” The Westminster divines referred to three Bible texts to substantiate this clause. The first is Matthew 7:21, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.” It seems men and women may make a confession of Christ as Lord, they may even preach and teach for Christ, yet these same people may not have a saving knowledge of Christ (Matthew 7:22).

Men and women exposed to the preaching of God’s Word in association with the covenant community of God’s people may be the subjects of certain *common operations* of the Holy Spirit and remain unregenerate.

Though they do not experience the regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit, yet they are subject to certain special operations and influences of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit strives with them in a special manner, convicts them of sin, enlightens them in a measure, and enriches them with the blessings of common grace, Gen. 6:3; Matt 13:18-22; Hebrews 6:4-6.<sup>3</sup>

Berkhof adds,

It should be borne in mind, however, that the term *gratia communis*, though generally designating a grace that is common to the whole of mankind, is also used to denote a grace

that is common to the elect and the non-elect that are living under the gospel, such as the gospel call that comes to both alike, and the inner illumination of those gifts of the Spirit of which we read in Hebrews 6:4-6. It is understood, however, that these privileges can be called common grace only in the sense that they are enjoyed by the elect and the reprobate indiscriminately, and that they do not constitute special, in the sense of saving, grace.<sup>4</sup>

We should note the very real possibility of people sitting under the gospel having a response of conviction and light yet remaining unregenerate and unconverted.

The Westminster divines point also to Matthew 13:20-21.

The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away.

Individuals may receive the seed of God’s Word with joy. The Word does not take root in their lives. These people look like Christians and talk like Christians. Yet they are not born again people.

In the first instance, that of Matthew 7:21-22, persons may make a profession of faith in Christ. They call Christ Lord. In this second case, Matthew 13:20-21, there is even joy in the gospel. There is sufficient light that persons have a genuine emotional lift. This seems to be evidence of conversion and the genuineness of the profession of faith. However, these confessors of Christ fail to bear the fruit of consistent Christian living. Jesus is very emphatic. “So then, you will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20). Temporary joy is not the fruit with which Jesus is concerned. The fruit is living by the standard of God’s Ten Commandments. Failure at this point brings final condemnation. “Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matthew 7:23).

Finally, the Westminster divines point to Hebrews 6:4. I quote verses 4-6,

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance.

The place where you most likely taste of the Holy Spirit and of the good Word of God is the assembly of God’s people, the church. Individuals sitting under the preaching of the Word of God in worship should get a taste of the powers of the age to come. These persons hear the indictments of God against sin. They also hear the good news of the death of Christ on behalf of sinners. As these men and women sit in the midst of God’s people, the temple of the Holy Spirit in the world, they may receive light from the Spirit. They may receive with joy the Word they hear. They may subsequently say of Christ that He is Lord. All this can take place, and the Confession says these people may be the subjects of certain “common operations of the Spirit” and “never truly come to Christ.”

If we say to persons who manifest a degree of conviction and a measure of illumination, this cannot take place without regeneration, we deceive them and ourselves. We may lead such people into wrongly thinking they are converted.

This may particularly be the case if we view the gospel as a sales presentation tied to a decision registered in a prayer of commitment. Our supposition is we know the five principles of sales, we know how human minds and hearts reach conclusions and take actions. On the natural level this may be true. However, we act *not knowing how the Holy Spirit operates upon human minds and hearts*. We press individuals into a decision with a prayer of commitment using sales techniques and we may produce stillborn professing Christians rather than see newborn confessing Christians.

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 10, Paragraph 4 (italics added).

<sup>2</sup> Answer 68 (italics added).

<sup>3</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), p. 289.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 435-436.