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Putting the Evangel back in Evangelism

Why does the word "evangelist" make me squirm? It's not just the caricatures of the brylcreemed money-grubbing weeper on Christian cable TV. Okay...well, that's part of it. But there's more. It's the message that "evangelists" tell.

More often than not, it is not news about something wonderful that has happened. Rather, it's a prediction of something that will happen if I do something (usually that I will go to heaven after I die if I pray the right prayer, and especially if I send in money to pay the Brylcreem bill). In other words, it's a sales pitch.

For any would-be religious salesmen out there, here is the formula for building and selling any man-made religion:

1. Pick your preferred deity/deities or blissful state.
2. Convince people that he/she/it is far away.
3. Outline a method for closing that distance.
4. Invite people to try your method.
5. When it doesn't work, sell your book or seminar or church that will fix their faulty execution of the method.
6. Repeat Step 5 ad nauseum.

I suggest that the breathtaking, dangerous, and life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ has been smooshed into the reeking mold of religious consumerism. And evangelism has morphed from journalism (news-telling) into advertising (product-selling).

For example, let's take a closer look at one of our favorite gospel tracts: "The Bridge Diagram."

First, there are two cliffs separated by a bottomless gorge, with "God" on one side and "Man" on the other (Steps 1 and 2 above).

Then the good news: The Cross has bridged that gap. And all we have to do is cross the bridge by performing a method called "faith" (Step 3 and 4). If we do, God will forgive us, and we can leave the world behind and go be with God in that other spiritual realm where he lives.

Finally (the part not usually included in the tracts), you can manage your misery by hopping from church to church, seminar to seminar, book to book (Steps 5 and 6), until you die. Then you'll be happy.

Let's ignore, for the moment, the fact that we've constructed a finite god who exists alongside creatures who live and move and have their being in something other than God. Let's ignore the fact that our method doesn't work very well (If it worked, the Christian publishing industry would have nothing to do).

Instead, let's look at our "good news." Jesus has put up a bridge, and if we cross it, God will start having a relationship with us. In other words, God has done 99% of the job. And only 1% remains

for us to do. What great news!

Not really. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. And if the chain that binds me to God includes a link as weak as my ability to "have faith," then the chain is weak indeed. And deep down, we are all perfectly aware of this. Hence the overwhelming anxiety of "Christian" life.

The one who lives by this "gospel" will constantly wonder: "Have I really crossed the Bridge? Have I stopped in the middle? Have I crossed but then crossed back over? Have I fallen off the Bridge? How much faith is necessary? What quality of faith is required? How many works must be added to my faith for me to be sure?"

In other words, How can I be sure that I have successfully saved myself by my works? In the Evangelical Protestant world, our preferred work of righteousness is called "faith." But deep down, we all know our works of faith are filthy rags. And we hope God will notice that our rags are slightly less filthy than our neighbors, and on that basis maybe cut us some slack.

My life was changed forever a few years ago, in a brief conversation with my friend and theology professor John McKenna, a student of T.F. Torrance. I told him "I want to be sure I am saved. I want to get my ducks in a row to be sure my salvation will happen. Please tell me what the ducks are, and what row to put them in." I will never forget his reply: "Whatever ducks there are, Christ has already put them in their rows. Rest."

My faith doesn't change God. My faith changes me. As Jesus died on the cross, he did not say "It is 99% finished." I don't need to worry about my ability to have faith. The life I live, I live by the faith of Christ. His faith is stronger than my faith's weakness. Finally, some good news! A truly evangelical evangel!

Suddenly, the evangelist has nothing to sell, only good news to share. The message? Inclusion in God's being, knowing, and acting:

You are part of God's life. Believe it, because it's true. God's life is one of shared excitement and friendship and joy, and you're included in it. God's life is a fascinating conversation that has been going on forever, and you've been pulled into it. God's life is a daring adventure that is transforming the universe, and you're already part of it. Really. Let me tell you the ways I see God's life happening in you...

In other words, the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news.

~ John Stonecypher