

Conversion

Does it need to be said? The immediate object of evangelism is the glory of God in the conversion of sinners. This is what we are talking about. Our aim is not to get unbelievers to attend ‘church’, not even with the hope that they might be converted. Conversion itself is our aim.¹ This is what evangelism is about. The means, the method, the management of it all – that is one thing, but what we must have is the clearest understanding of what we want by all our evangelism. It is necessary, therefore, to be clear about what we mean by conversion; or rather, what Scripture means by conversion. The two are not always the same!

Let me admit the obvious at once: ‘conversion’ or ‘converted’ is not a common New Testament word.² But this is of little or no consequence. ‘Trinity’, as a word, is entirely absent from the whole of Scripture.³ It is the *idea* that counts. The scriptural concept of ‘conversion’ pervades the New Testament, and what the Scriptures tell us about conversion is unambiguous. Sinners have to hear the gospel preached. They come under the conviction of their sin. They cry out to Christ in repentant faith. God washes them clean in the blood of his Son, and imputes to them the righteousness of Christ. They are immediately justified. They are immediately positionally sanctified. The Spirit witnesses to them that they are Christ’s (Rom. 8:1-17; 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13-15; 4:30, for instance). Their lives are utterly changed. They begin to live out their

¹ C.H.Spurgeon devoted a lecture to it: ‘On Conversion As Our Aim’.

² Depending on the version, I make it about ten times. But what happens when we include words such as ‘repent’, ‘repentance’, ‘turn’, and the like?

³ ‘New covenant’ appears only four times; ‘law of Christ’ only once; ‘the ten commandments’ only three times; ‘justification by faith alone’ never.

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new life in Christ by way of progressive sanctification.⁴ Thus they show that they must have been born again (John 3:3-8; 1 Thess. 1:4-10),⁵ that they have been taken out of Adam and put into Christ (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:22,45-49), united to Christ (Rom. 6:1 – 7:6; Eph. 2:6), removed from the realm of darkness, and transferred or translated into the kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13).⁶ In short, they are converted. They have a new attitude, a new mind, a new will, a new heart, a new desire (Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:25-27). And all this will produce a corresponding newness or change of life.⁷ Obviously so, since regeneration is a renewal; indeed, it is a rebirth. We can be talking about nothing less than a momentous change; the converted are no longer ‘in the flesh’, but ‘in the Spirit’ (Rom. 8:1-17; 1 Cor. 2:14-15; Jas. 3:15; Jude 19), no longer ‘in Adam’ but ‘in Christ’ (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:22,46-49), new creatures (2 Cor. 5:17). This, and nothing less, is conversion. And it is essential. Until a sinner is converted, he will live and die – and spend eternity – under the wrath of God. Unless men are converted, they will perish. So said Christ (Matt. 18:3).

The following scriptures – merely a sample – set out the meaning of the word clearly enough:

⁴ See my *Fivefold; Positional; Assurance*.

⁵ John 3:3-8 shows that religion, knowledge of Scripture, the equivalent of being ‘churchified’ or ‘going to church’, respectability, familiarity with biblical terms, are not enough. Regeneration, followed inevitably by conviction, repentance and faith, is essential.

⁶ Believers are ‘in Christ’. This phrase is no makeweight: it appears nearly 250 times in the New Testament, so important is the concept. The GNB translates ‘in Christ’ as ‘in union with Christ’. Excellent!

⁷ I know that some, brought up in godly homes, have a difficulty here. But, granted it may not be as dramatic as the conversion of rank worldlings, even so there is a radical newness in their conversion. The fact is, however, with Relationship Evangelism overwhelmingly we are talking about reaching the ‘unchurched’, those who have had little or no connection with any godly upbringing, and obviously with no experience of ‘church attendance’. This particular difficulty, therefore, is not a major issue (if any) for Relationship Evangelism.

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If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Cor. 5:17).

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour, for we are all members of one body. 'In your anger do not sin': do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: no immoral, impure or greedy person – such a man is an idolater – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.

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Therefore do not be partners with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them (Eph. 4:17 – 5:11).

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints – the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought [translated] us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:3-14).

We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to

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all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath (1 Thess. 1:2-10).

I offer no apology for quoting at length. I want the scriptural nature of what we are talking about to be laid out as clearly and fully as possible. This is what conversion is. This is how conversion will show itself. That being so, one must be deliberately blind if he cannot see that this is what Scripture means when it talks about conversion. If I may accommodate Christ's complaint to the Jews (John 5:40), I put it bluntly to all such: 'You are not willing to see'.⁸ And conversion is what we want when we approach sinners with the gospel, when we preach Christ to them.

And there is another point: the Bible shows that conversion is a crisis. I do not mean 'dramatic'. But I do say that conversion is a crunch-point experience.⁹ This is under heavy attack today, and on several fronts.¹⁰ Relationship Evangelism, by its very nature, ruins the biblical concept of conversion by encouraging the notion of a process – a process

⁸ See also Matt. 21:23-27 (AV or KJV). The Jews might say they could not tell, but Jesus knew it was not a question of 'could not' but 'would not'.

⁹ Nowhere is this shown more clearly than in the biblical 'but now' (Rom. 3:21; 5:9-11; 6:22; 7:6; 8:1; 11:30-31; 16:25-26; see also John 15:22,24; Acts 17:30; 1 Cor. 15:20; 2 Cor. 6:2; Gal. 4:9; Eph. 2:12-13; 5:8; Col. 1:26; Heb. 8:6; 9:26; 12:26; 1 Pet. 2:10), which D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones rightly described as one of the most important of all biblical phrases. This has two aspects – in the history of the world and individual experience. It is the latter that concerns me here. See my *Christ Is All* pp78-79.

¹⁰ See my *Hinge; Conversion; Infant*.

heavily tied in with ‘church’, a process which is often drawn out.¹¹

This is so important, I must repeat it:

Relationship Evangelism, by its very nature, ruins the biblical concept of conversion by encouraging the notion of a process – a process heavily tied in with ‘church’, a process which is often drawn out.

Indeed, Evans’ book, with the necessary tinkering of the incidentals, would serve as an excellent manual for running an efficient production-line or manufacturing process. The fundamental point about Relationship Evangelism is that it is a process. It expects, it works on, the principle of process. The church, with its programme of events, becomes a conversion production-line.

Except! What does Evans say about conversion? This is the vital question. He tells us a great deal about how to set up evangelistic schemes, deeds ministry, and the like, how to run them, manage and evaluate them. But what does he say about the end, aim and purpose of all this activity? What goal is he seeking with all this organisation of ‘deed ministries’? In short, what does he say about conversion? Where does he define it biblically?

The answer is, in this regard, Evans’ book is woefully inadequate.¹² His ‘exposition’ of the subject is pitiful. The

¹¹ Evans: ‘We [at Kempston] began to organise deeds of kindness and ministries of mercy in a more deliberate way... People started to come. They spread the word about the benefits... After a *couple of years*, the workers were a bit worried that the church leadership would be asking: “Where are the gospel results?” But leaders *have to give this time* and not be driven by a quick return. As relationships were cemented, questions and opportunities arose which led to a few people initially, and then many, *beginning the journey to faith*’ (Evans pp172-174, emphasis mine; see also Evans pp150-152). Note ‘the journey to faith’ instead of ‘conversion’.

¹² Evans is frequent in his use of ‘conversion’, ‘convert’, and so on, but it is the definition that is vital.

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nearest he comes to New Testament teaching on it may be found in one paragraph:

What [the jailer] was given was the gospel of grace. He was told, in effect: ‘You don’t need to “do” anything; it has already been “done” for you. You only have to “believe” (trust in/depend/rely) on another’. That other? The crucified Saviour Jesus Christ. Salvation had been *achieved* by him so that it could be *received* by us.¹³

This, in all Evans’ book, is the closest he comes to spelling out ‘conversion’. As such, it falls far below Scripture. Surely, when publishing a book on such a subject as evangelism, Evans should have told us, and told us in close detail, precisely what he aims to achieve with his system. Surely, we have the right to know what the main aim is in all that is being discussed. And that, as I continue to stress, has got to be the glory of God in the conversion of sinners. So don’t we deserve, shouldn’t we demand, shouldn’t we expect, a much fuller definition of conversion than Evans gives us here? Why does he not give us a chapter on conversion, right at the start of his book, setting out a full biblical exposition of this vital matter? And why is it that what we do get on it is nearly all anecdotal?

Let me resort to a little management-study myself. When I was a schoolteacher in the 70s, ‘Aims and Objectives’ was the buzz phrase. Constantly, we were being urged to have, and set out, our ‘Aims and Objectives’, both in the big picture and the daily lesson. ‘Aims and Objectives’ came top of the list. It was the first thing the ‘adviser’ – nark, more like – wanted to see when he called on me as Head of Department. I had to produce my wad of paper, ‘Aims and Objectives’. *And there was something in it*; not all that the inspectors thought there was, I might add, but there was something in it. Well, surely, in a manual – and that, whatever may be claimed to the contrary, is what Evans has produced – a manual for reaching the lost and seeing them converted, we should have been given, as a priority, what he understands by ‘lost’ and

¹³ Evans p187, emphasis his.

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‘conversion’. Surely that should be a given? But, as far as I can see, Evans never uses ‘unregenerate’,¹⁴ he uses ‘sinners’ but three times, mentions the ‘lost’ (in the sense of ruined sinners) only twice. ‘Organise’, however, or one of its derivatives, appears the best part of 100 times. What does this tell us?

Getting back to the jailer, yes, of course, all that Evans says is gloriously true. *But it is what Evans does **not** say that makes for trouble.* Let me select just one point. The jailer was under conviction of sin, anxious about being saved, was he not? Where is Evans’ talk about our part today in making the sinner anxious, bringing a sense of conviction of sin, a sense of condemnation and the wrath of God? The jailer knew he was in danger of damnation, didn’t he?¹⁵ Is there any of that kind of talk in Evans’ approach to sinners? And this, I say, is just one point.

As I have observed, Evans is highly anecdotal. Take this testimony. Evans tells us of a man whose life was in a mess: ‘He asked me a very significant question about his life’. One thing had led to another:

Church attendance and a seeker course followed, and then, one evening in my front room, the truth of the gospel dawned on him. He had to rely on what Christ had done, not try to be a better person to gain acceptance with God. He believed the gospel, and I had the privilege of taking his baptism.¹⁶

I can only say that Evans’ description of this man’s ‘conversion’ falls far short of the way Paul would talk about such an event. The fact is, although Evans rightly speaks of ‘he had to rely on what Christ had done’,¹⁷ with his ‘he

¹⁴ He never uses ‘regenerate’ either.

¹⁵ If not, what were Paul and Silas playing at?

¹⁶ Evans p206. See my *Seeking*.

¹⁷ And, as I have already quoted, he rightly said in an earlier passage: ‘You only have to “believe” (trust in/depend/rely) on another’ (Evans p187). Yes, and when speaking of motivating believers – not speaking of conversion, please note – he declared: ‘Only believing the gospel deeply can change our desires so that, trusting in and experiencing the grace of God...’ (Evans p104). Again: ‘Sarah...

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believed the gospel' to describe the man's conversion, he here shows – or, at the very least, he gives me the strong impression of showing – that he has a Sandemanian view of faith.¹⁸ As he does in this:

'Gospel' means 'good news'. It's a message proclaiming that God is reconciled to his worst enemies by the blame-taking death of his Son, and all who believe his message begin a new life. Christians have received and believed this good news.¹⁹

Sandemanianism! This should not cause surprise since Relationship Evangelism, by its very nature, has an in-built tendency to look for and produce a Sandemanian view of faith.

So what is this Sandemanianism? Having published on this doctrine,²⁰ I will not develop it here, but in essence Sandemanianism reduces saving faith to mere or bare assent to the truth: 'Believe the gospel'.²¹ 'Believe [the] message.., Christians have believed this good news', in Evans' words. Of course, sinners have to assent to the truth; they have to believe the gospel (Mark 1:15). As John said:

confessed her new-found trust in Christ. I remember it well'. Very good. He went on: Roger, her husband, 'came to a gradual assurance of God's grace in Jesus' (Evans p185), which is hardly a ringing endorsement of the biblical doctrine of conversion. I am not nit-picking. We are faced with so much incipient Sandemanianism, it is crucial that we are explicit that trust is the essence of saving faith.

¹⁸ See my *Secret*.

¹⁹ Evans p143. This fails, and fails badly, on two main counts. *First*, some vital words are missing: sin, wrath, condemnation, repentance, trust, conversion. I am not faulting a man for a word. I fear the concepts are missing, not just the words. In this connection, do not miss Evans' less cutting 'blame-taking death'. *Secondly*, as I argue above, Evans' teaching is pure Sandemanianism. Saving faith is more than receiving and believing the message.

²⁰ See my *Secret; Saving*.

²¹ I am not forgetting Christ's words: 'Repent and believe in the gospel' (Mark 1:15), and similar. Assent is a vital part of saving faith. The trouble comes when assent – whether by accident or design – is made the whole of saving faith.

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Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God... We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son... I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:1,9-11,13).

But all this needs to be carefully nuanced. Saving faith does not stop at assent. Sinners are not saved by assenting to the facts. Evans said of the man in question that he 'believed the gospel'. Very good. But did the man actually *trust* Christ? Heart trust is essential; it is the *sine qua non*:

Thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you *wholeheartedly obeyed* the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness (Rom. 6:17-18).

If you confess with your mouth: 'Jesus is Lord', and believe *in your heart* that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is *with your heart* that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved (Rom. 10:9-10).²²

Calvin on Romans 10:10: 'Faith is a firm and effectual confidence (trust, dependence), and not a bare notion only'.
Matthew Henry:

It is with the heart that man believes, which implies more than an assent of the understanding, and takes in the consent of the will, an inward, hearty, sincere and strong consent. It is not believing (not to be reckoned so) if it be not with the heart.

²² There is much more: terms like 'receiving' Christ, 'coming to' him, and so on, all speak of 'trusting in' Christ (Isa. 45:22; 55:1-7; Matt. 11:28; John 1:11-12; 5:40; 6:35; Eph. 1:12-13; 2 Tim. 1:12). They certainly go much further than mere assent.

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As for the man in Evans' account, did he repent? Did Evans tell (command) him to repent (Acts 17:30)? Remember, I am not faulting a man for a word, but Evans puts all this in print. If he did tell (command) the man to repent, if he thinks sinners must be commanded to repent, if he is convinced that sinners should be urged and persuaded to repent, should he not have said so in the context of his book? Remember that his book, whatever his caveats, reads as a manual; it certainly will be treated as such. Even as I write, it is being treated in that way by many.

Sandemanianism – overt, implicit or incipient – is one of the greatest blights of contemporary evangelical preaching. And it is spreading like the plague. Relationship Evangelism will do nothing to reverse it. I foresee a new generation of Sandemanian preachers coming from it. If I am right, the consequences will be grim in the extreme.

So much for the jailer (in Acts 16). Does Evans do any better when he speaks of Lydia and her experience? Judge for yourself:

There are many religious people around today. This story [of Lydia] teaches that the religious need the gospel of Christ as much as anyone.²³ Why? It's only when the beauty of Christ's gracious sacrifice for them captivates their heart that they respond to God's will with a desire to see him glorified. Deep peace replaces either the self-righteousness or the deep personal sense of guilt and failure that religious duty inculcates. Duty carried out even 'for the one true God' doesn't have the power to replace our locked-in selfishness and ingrained desire to serve God *for what we get from him*. In Christ we get *him* and find he fulfils the deepest desires of our heart. Love, joy and peace are the result flowing out from within us (Gal. 5:22-23). Millions of religious people need the freedom that only the gospel brings. Giving them the opportunity to hear the message is critical.²⁴

²³ They need Christ!

²⁴ Evans pp146-147, emphasis his.

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Before I respond in a little more detail, let me say that I admit that we don't have a very full account of Lydia's conversion as recorded by Luke (in Acts 16). But we do have this:

On the sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptised, she invited us to her home. 'If you consider me a believer in the Lord', she said, 'come and stay at my house'. And she persuaded us (Acts 16:13-15).

'The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message'. What was 'Paul's message'? I can do no better than quote what the apostle himself said about his style and content of preaching. First, when addressing the Corinthians, then when addressing the Ephesian elders, and then from what he wrote to the Philippians (presumably including Lydia in the recipients)²⁵ after he had left.

First to the Corinthians:

I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (1 Cor. 9:16).

What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord (2 Cor. 4:5).

And then the Ephesian elders:

You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn

²⁵ Imagine what she would have said if Paul's practice by the river had not squared with his profession in his letter!

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to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus... I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace... I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God (Acts 20:18-21,24,26-27).

And now, above all in this context, his letter to the Philippians:

Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh – though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead... As I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things (Phil. 3:2-11,18-19)

To my mind, there is a clear difference between Paul’s approach to Judaisers (and do not forget, in the practice of Judaism was where Paul found Lydia) and Evans’ approach to religious people today. As I ponder the apostle’s words, I don’t detect much talk about ‘the beauty of Christ’s gracious

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sacrifice’!²⁶ Quite the opposite! Now look at it the other way round. Where, in Relationship Evangelism, is the roughness, the sharpness, the directness, the bluntness, the unvarnished confrontation, the candour of Paul’s speech?

This lack of frankness – I might go as far as to say, a lack of honesty with Scripture and its consequences – seems to be typical of Evans’ approach. Take his advice (in question form) to church leaders on the management of the way they should handle this very sensitive (but vital) matter of conversion:

Do you ever interview people about their conversion stories in Sunday meetings? What are the pluses and minuses of doing this? How can you ensure that the downsides don’t ruin the very big positives?²⁷

Two things stand out: there must be no negatives and the business must be engineered.

²⁶ What about ‘the offence [or stumbling block] of the cross’ (Gal. 5:11)?

²⁷ Evans p210. As is evident, Evans places a big emphasis on using testimonies, ‘conversion stories’, as an evangelistic tool – but, as I will soon show, only after they have been properly ‘vetted’ and ‘prepared’. Although Evans owns his debt to Lloyd-Jones (Evans p10), he signally fails to adopt the latter’s rejection of testimonies in evangelism. With reference to Lloyd-Jones, as Iain H.Murray observed: ‘It was customary among evangelical Christians at this date to encourage the practice of giving “testimonies” as a form of evangelistic witness’. Lloyd-Jones, to put it mildly, was not enamoured. ‘For one thing, he noticed that the giving of testimonies tended to reduce all conversions to a similar pattern, to standardise experience in a way which went beyond Scripture. And yet, at the same time, testimony-givers were prone to emphasise what made their story noteworthy. No doubt the motives were often well-intentioned, but the effect could easily be carnal and man-centred. Hearers readily became impressed with the dramatic and unique features of a story, instead of with the grace of God which is identical in every conversion’ (Iain H.Murray: *D.Martyr Lloyd-Jones: The First Forty Years*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1982, p150). In the chapter ‘The Issue Defined’, I will return to the Evans/Lloyd-Jones connection.

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What do I mean by ‘negatives’? What does Evans advise his readers not to stress, but rather avoid? Conviction of sin, for a start. Indeed, where in all this Relationship Evangelism do we read much of ‘sin’? What about the sinner by nature, by reason of birth, being an offence to God, under the wrath and condemnation of God, far off from God, hostile to God, ruined and helpless and hopeless in sin, and all the other ‘disturbing’ (harsh but true) things we read of the natural man in Scripture? When Paul opened his extended discourse on the gospel in his letter to the Romans, where did he begin? With the wrath of God (Rom. 1:18)! And he didn’t just mention it, and get off the unpalatable bits as soon as he could so that he could get to Christ ‘fulfilling the deepest desires of our heart. Love, joy and peace are the result flowing out from within us... Religious people need the freedom that only the gospel brings’. Not at all! He spent verse after verse exposing the appalling depravity of the heart of both the pagan and the religious, the utter corruption of the sinner before God. As for the religious – the Jew – he pulled no punches:

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man – you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself – that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed...²⁸

For God shows no partiality. For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law...²⁹ on that

²⁸ It would take too much space here to deal with the verses I have omitted. See my *Christ Is All* pp38-48,342-347.

²⁹ See the previous note.

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day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth – you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonour God by breaking the law. For, as it is written: ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you’. For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision... For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God (Rom. 2:1-29).

And still the apostle had not finished. Indeed, his cataract culminated in this:

What shall we conclude then? Are we [that is, Jews] any better [than Gentiles]? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one’. ‘Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit’. ‘The poison of vipers is on their lips’. ‘Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness’. ‘Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know’. ‘There is no fear of God before their eyes’. Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin (Rom. 3:9-20).

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And when he got to gospel relief, we find the apostle setting out what he called ‘the gospel’ (Rom. 1:15-17 and on) in very different terms to Evans:

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a propitiation through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law (Rom. 3:21-28).

Where, in Evans’ book, is there anything remotely approaching this kind of language?

Here is yet more management advice from Evans, advice which is loaded with spiritual danger:

Are members getting enough training to share their faith?...
How prepared are your members to communicate the faith?...
We wanted to help people by training them to come up with a clear and concise version of their own story. To facilitate this, one member offered to vet each person’s story of coming to faith using understandable language and deliverable in about two minutes... Have you trained people in sharing their own conversion story?³⁰

³⁰ Evans pp101,196,198,210; see also p107,195. ‘Train’ is a key word for Evans. He uses it about 50 times. Paul’s ‘to train’ in Tit. 2:4 (the only occasion the word is used in the New Testament) means ‘to hold one to duty, to admonish, to exhort earnestly’. Applied to the question in hand, it does not mean ‘to coach candidates into giving a “correct” testimony’.

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Yes, but extreme care must be taken with this approach. Let me stress this vital point. We are treading on very thin ice here. ‘Coaching’ is altogether too possible. By that I mean informing the ‘candidate’ about what is required, jockeying him or her into giving the ‘right’ answers. Those who do go down this ‘coaching’ route should not be surprised to find would-be church members supplying testimonies which conform to what they know their trainer expects of them. In the end, it comes down to nothing better than ticking the boxes, except it is all covered up with a veneer of personal and individual sincerity. The results will be devastating.

Although 21st-century Kempston and 17th- and 18th-centuries New England are poles apart (you can say that again!), Evans should not forget the dangers inherent in his system. Harry S. Stout explained what happened in New England:

New England congregations... learned to label every stage of their spiritual experience... Such labelling... provided an objective standard by which ministers and congregations could judge the claims of aspiring members... Before... their public testimonies... prospective members understood the... order of salvation as it had been instilled over many years.³¹

This sort of thing is altogether too possible today. Stout noted ‘how thoroughly ordinary men and women mastered’ the process. They certainly did it in the past. They still do. The language may well be very different, but the principle is the same.³²

³¹ Harry S. Stout: *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England*, OUP, 1986, pp38-40. See also Perry Miller: *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1961; Norman Pettit: *The Heart Prepared: Grace and Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1966; R.T. Kendall: *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, Paternoster Press, 1997; Edmund S. Morgan: *The Puritan Dilemma. The Story of John Winthrop*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1958. See my ‘Preparationism in New England’.

³² See my *Infant* pp269-270.

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Evans supplies examples – work sheets, in effect – to help believers to ‘share their faith’. One such involved a diagram of three crosses, coloured either black or white. By the proper interchange of the crosses at the right time, the punch line will be reached:

The gospel at its heart is about substitution... The good news is that Jesus, the Son of God, was willing to die ‘on their [*sic*] cross’ if they will turn to him.³³

Yes, substitution is indeed the heart of the gospel. Substitution is one of its cardinal features. Christ bore the sinner’s sin that the sinner might bear the Redeemer’s righteousness. Yes. It is a glorious exchange.³⁴ Nevertheless, look at Evans’ way of expressing this. Once again, I do not want to fault a man for a word, but as I read the Bible, I know of no talk of Christ dying ‘on *their* cross’. Moreover, do not miss the ‘if’ in ‘Jesus, the Son of God, was willing to die “on their [*sic*] cross” *if* they will turn to him’. Really? I find that Christ died to make unwilling sinners willing to receive him, not because they were willing. God’s will precedes man’s will (John 6:37,44,65). In any case, how could Christ die on the cross for me after (because) I am willing to receive him? He died for today’s sinners nearly 2000 years before they were born! So, I ask again, what does Evans mean by saying that Christ ‘was willing to die on their cross if they will turn to him’? ‘If they will’ smacks of salvation by works or merit, and it certainly puts man in the driving seat, whereas Christ is explicit: ‘You do not believe because you are not among my sheep’ (John 10:26). It is not believing that makes a man one of the elect; it is because he is elect that he is brought to faith.

In Scripture, there is nothing vague about the atonement. Yet ‘vague’ is hardly strong enough to describe Evans’ setting out of the atonement and conversion. Perhaps the cause of Evans’ vagueness lies deep in his own conversion and testimony:

³³ Evans p202.

³⁴ See or hear my ‘The Wonderful Exchange’; ‘The Glorious Exchange’; *Christ’s Obedience Imputed*.

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I have always been an inquisitive person, but was brought up without a religious background. A friend at school lent me a book about Christianity. It explained how we are all far away from a relationship with God. But it went on to show that God has removed the barrier of human rebellion by taking the blame himself. When Jesus died on the cross and rose again from the dead, that was what was happening. I found that this really made sense not only of my life, but of the wider world too. I took to heart³⁵ what I read and became a Christian. I now enjoy listening to other people's questions and showing them how the good news of Jesus can help them.³⁶

Is this the biblical view of conversion? If this represents Evans' experience, what kind of evangelism ought we to expect from him, and what kind of results is he looking for? Why is all this so very different to John Bunyan? – whom Evans quoted. We know that Bunyan listened to some women talking, and we know what they were talking about:

Their talk was about a new birth, the work of God on their hearts; also how they were convinced of their miserable state by nature; they talked [of] how God had visited their souls with his love in the Lord Jesus, and with what words and promises they had been refreshed, comforted and supported.³⁷

As Evans said, it was 'such personal talking about Jesus... led Bunyan to seek out... John Gifford'. Indeed, it was. Bunyan told us all this in his *Grace Abounding*. I acknowledge that Evans was trying to show the value of personal conversation – and in this he was right – but why could he not let his readers know something of the struggle Bunyan had, and, above all, the way he expressed his coming to faith in Christ? Listen to Bunyan:

³⁵ This is not the same as saving trust. 'To take to heart' means 'to think about it seriously, maybe because it is upsetting, disturbing'. Compare 'a change of heart'.

³⁶ Evans p199.

³⁷ Evans pp203-204.

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The Lord did more fully and graciously reveal himself unto me, and indeed, did quite, not only deliver me from the guilt that by these things was laid upon my conscience, but also from the very filth thereof; for the temptation was removed, and I was put into my right mind again, as other Christians were.

I remember that one day, as I was travelling into the country, and musing on the wickedness and blasphemy of my heart, and considering the enmity that was in me to God, that scripture came into my mind: 'Having made peace through the blood of his cross'... By which I was made to see, both again and again, that God and my soul were friends by his blood; indeed, I saw that the justice of God, and my sinful soul could embrace and kiss each other, through his blood. This was a good day to me; I hope I shall never forget it...

I... felt this word to sound in my heart: 'I must go to Jesus'... Then with joy I told my wife: 'O! now I know, I know!'... I longed for the company of some of God's people, that I might have imparted unto them what God had showed me. Christ was a precious Christ to my soul... 'You are come to mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born, which are written in heaven; and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaks better things than that of Abel'. Through this blessed sentence the Lord led me over and over, first to this word, and then to that; and showed me wonderful glory in every one of them. These words also have oft since that time, been great refreshment to my spirit. Blessed be God for having mercy on me.

You only have to place Bunyan's statement alongside Evans' to see the difference. And I am not at all concerned about its length. I am speaking solely about the quality.

Moreover, we want to do far more than get unbelievers interested in the gospel, or find how Jesus can 'help them'. We want them to be converted. And a vital part of this consists in their turning from their idols – yes, 21st-century Western man has his idols – just as Paul saw at Athens, Corinth, and in Thessalonica:

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While Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols... Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: ‘Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: “To the unknown god”. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you’ (Acts 17:16,22-23).³⁸

Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power (Acts 19:18-20).

You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

And if John felt it necessary to warn believers – ‘keep yourselves from idols’ (1 John 5:21) – it does not take an Einstein to work out what is going on in the pagan culture which surrounds us. The ‘unchurched’ who are being ‘churchified’ are pagans, nothing other than idolatrous pagans, sinners who need to be converted.³⁹

³⁸ See my *Confront*.

³⁹ I have put the word(s) in inverted comas throughout, even in extracts where it was (they were) not used originally. This is important. We are talking about an import, an invention, of high significance in this vital debate. I am convinced this should be made clear throughout. Evans does not use the phrase ‘churchifying the unchurched’. But this is what Relationship Evangelism depends on. Evans: ‘Many believers begin to spend more and more time with other Christians. Churches of all sizes can also draw them into an increasingly crowded programme, gobbling up all their discretionary time, so that there’s little time left over for relationships with people far from God, or they don’t think the ones they already have are of interest to the Lord. Churches can set up some programmes at which the majority of attendees are believers with just a sprinkling of non-Christians. Think of church football teams, church hobby clubs, for

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Evans' explanations are far removed from the biblical doctrine of conversion,⁴⁰ and smack of social improvement, the making of the lot of men and women better in this present world:

Mission moreover becomes narrowly focussed on what has been called a 'two chapter gospel', rather than a 'four chapter gospel'. Instead of a 'creation, fall, redemption, restoration' message, Christians emphasise only the problem of sin and the personal need for forgiveness. They aren't so conscious of the bigger picture which involves the Lord, who made the cosmos and gives every good gift, fixing all the problems caused by sin. In the 'four chapter gospel', in which disciples are aware of *both* the cultural mandate to go and develop the world, *and* the hope for a renewed earth at the return of the King, believers are drawn into a much more expansive mission, but which still has the cross of Christ and personal salvation at the centre.⁴¹

This extract represents a very serious flaw right at the heart of Evans' message. I find it a long, long way short of the biblical view of conversion. I advise all who are considering buying into Relationship Evangelism to think very seriously about all this.

So what is the issue?

example' (Evans p190). Clearly, Evans wants the 'unchurched into church'. But what of his: 'As new people came, they seemed to be added to the fringe. I assumed they weren't committed, but were consuming the parts of church they liked. So I would urge more dedication (Evans p104)? In addition to the 'consuming', note the 'as new people came'. Is Evans talking about believers or unbelievers? In his scheme, does it matter?

⁴⁰ See my *Hinge; Conversion*.

⁴¹ Evans pp109-110, emphasis his.