

It Is Written

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Cookie Cutter Evangelism

By David Weaks

I often find myself wondering: "Why are brethren not baptizing more people? Why aren't the numbers of people requesting baptism (Acts 8:36) commensurate with the amount of labor that Christians spend in soul-winning?" I have found that most preachers confess the same nagging concerns.

Is successful evangelism a question of method only, or is it a question of hard, dedicated work? While I whole-heartedly believe that we who teach do well to have a plan of attack and an organized method of delivering the gospel to people, I have always been skeptical of the magical "cookie-cutter" method that is 100% effective 100% of the time, with 100% of people. Some boast that invariably, by lesson number three or four of their classes, the prospect will start looking for water and demand baptism.

However, my experience has been that I must approach an Atheist and a Baptist differently. With the Atheist, I must prove to him that there is a God before I can talk with him about the plan of salvation. The Baptist already believes in the Creator, but he knows nothing much of the authority of God, so that is what he needs to study first.

The only "method" of converting both men is to teach both the gospel of Christ. That is where the power lies (Romans 1:16). My method, no matter how dazzling and brilliant, will be gutted of any power without the gospel as its substance. If you survey the New Testament you will find little reference to "method." The apostles and early Christians simply kept on preaching to and teaching anyone who would listen (Acts 4:19-20). They unflinchingly urged men to save themselves from this corrupt generation (Acts 2:40).

The presentation of the gospel of Christ can be accomplished in many ways. One can devise, write, and print his own study guides, and gear each lesson to impel the student down the road to the goal of him being baptized into Christ. But, there is nothing novel here. This is what gospel preachers have always done.

In the end, soul-winning has always been a long hard slog. The reality of our work is that the number and frequency of baptisms are largely out of our hands. Paul said, "I planted, Apollos watered, and God gives the increase" (I Corinthians 3:6). The only thing any preacher can do is preach and teach as faithfully as he can. The heart of the student will either receive the gospel or it won't.

Perhaps our effectiveness actually screeches to a halt when we stop preaching in order to hunt for the perfect "one size fits all" approach to preaching. Have we become victims of the marketing mentality of our day, in which selling sizzle over steak is what moves buyers into stores?

The conversion of precious lost souls is not a "shortcut" kind of thing. The well-prepared, patient teacher must teach and the student must be made to think about his spiritual condition and his duty to His Lord. The only thing we who preach and teach can do is labor to present the gospel in a manner that men are "cut to the heart" and ask "what must we do?" (Acts 2:37)

A hard-working, never-quit approach to soul winning is the only one I can find in the Bible. There is most certainly a long game and a short game in personal evangelism. Some people will "hear thee again on this matter" (Acts 17:32), and others will obey God "the same hour of the night" (Acts 16:33). But, a one size fits all approach that is always 100% successful in 100% of cases, seems more a

fantasy than a reality. Only the word of God succeeds every time (Isaiah 55:11). Our techniques can only help, but they can also hinder people's reception of truth.

Since I introduced the notion of a "cookie-cutter" method of Evangelism, please bear with me as I complete the analogy to the subject at hand. I was once a professional baker and I think this is a good comparison (I apologize in advance for comparing prospects to cookies, but it will make sense shortly). Every cookie ever baked has the same basic ingredients: flour, sugar, salt, eggs, butter, or shortening, as well as a leavening agent. Ideally, every single batch of cookies should always come out perfectly if baked in the same oven. But they just don't. One batch of cookies will be perfect, and another batch that you bake two hours later following the same recipe and techniques will fall flat. How is this possible? By comparison, the work of converting a sinner's heart involves the same set of variables. People are mostly the same, but their differences make all the difference in the outcome of a Bible study. How people receive and process information is often very different from person to person. Each person's knowledge, personality, temperament, bias, ambitions, goals, loves, affections, fears, religious training, and interests, can affect the outcome of a Bible study.

Here is how the cookie crumbles: Although every cookie you bake is made up of fundamentally the same materials, the subtle differences in all of those materials will definitely affect how your cookies turn out. If your baking powder is too old, your cookies will not rise properly and will be little thin puddles of grease. If you use bread flour rather than AP flour, your cookies will be good for masonry, not eating. If you use the wrong kind of fat, expect crumbs, not cookies. If your butter has too high or low a water content, your cookies will bite the dust. Even the humidity inside of the bakery at different times of the day will make bad cookies from a great recipe. Then there is the oven; the temperature can fluctuate a few degrees up and down without you realizing it so that one pan of cookies will be great, but the next one will flop.

Like cookie dough, the hearts of men and women are different from "batch to batch." A convert to Jesus Christ is made when one hears the gospel and believes it (John 8:24; Romans 10:14-17), repents of his sins (Acts 17:30), confesses his faith (Acts 10:9-10), and is baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38). When exposed to the crucible of the gospel, people respond differently. Not everyone's attention and appetite for spiritual things are the same. The Ethiopian eunuch was ready to be baptized as soon as he found a pool of water in which he could be immersed (Acts 8:36-37), but King Agrippa, while admitting his understanding of the gospel, was never baptized so far as we know (Acts 26:28). Was there something special about the method that Philip used with the eunuch that Paul failed to provide to Agrippa? No, both men preached the same gospel (Acts 8:35). Surely, Paul, who was inspired by God, and zealous, had the perfect "approach" (II Peter 1:20-21). Yet, he could not get the king into the water.

We who preach and teach the gospel are always looking for what works in reaching the heart of every person. This requires patience, flexibility, and the ability to properly analyze the knowledge and spiritual appetite of the people we are trying to convert. It also requires a thick skin and an ability to endure the disappointment. The gospel will convert a few here and there, and more than a few will never allow themselves to be changed by the gospel. Those who are eventually converted may need to "bake" a little longer than others before they are ready.

The one constant in our work is the gospel. It alone has the power to save, and it never changes by a single degree. The gospel is always the same for everyone, and it will always succeed in converting the good and honest heart (Acts 10:34-35).

Perhaps this business of personal evangelism is less a question of methodology than it is of good, old-fashioned, grinding work. More than one method can work, but only if it is the gospel that is taught. If you hit on a series of class notes that seem to produce good results, keep at it, but when it stops being as effective, try something else. In the meantime, keep busy educating yourself on the truth. Fan the fire of faith in your own heart. Never let an opportunity to teach someone pass you by. Quit praying for an "open door" big enough to sail the Queen Mary through (Colossians 4:3) when a small crack in the door to slide a tract to a lost soul may be enough to get the ball rolling. Just keep working, praying, and teaching. Put your faith in the message of hope and salvation, not in your ability to dazzle people into the water. Let us not grow weary while doing good (Galatians 6:9).