

Is Evangelism Merely a Life and Death Matter?
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Introduction

January 2, 2007, seemed like a normal day on the subway system. A father was waiting at a station with his two young daughters. As train number 1 approached, though, a young man collapsed and fell into its path. Wesley Autrey immediately leaped to the tracks to prevent Cameron Hollopeter from being crushed. The train operator braked hard, but five cars passed over the two men before it stopped. Wesley Autrey called out, “We’re O.K. down here, but I’ve got two daughters up there. Let them know their father’s O.K.” Thankfully, the rescue attempt was successful. Both men are alive and well. We salute Mr. Autrey for his selfless heroic act. It reminds us (in a small way) of what our Savior did for us on the cross of Calvary.

However, Jesus’ death on the cross differs from what Mr. Autrey did in a number of ways. Let us consider only one difference. Neither Mr. Autrey nor Mr. Hollopeter died under that subway on January 2, 2007. If one or both of them had died that day, the rescue would have been unsuccessful.

Unlike Mr. Autrey on January 2, 2007, Jesus died. Furthermore, His death did not prevent human beings from dying. Other than those believers who remain alive until the rapture, people are born and they die. Everyone dies. Even Methuselah died.

A casual observer might think that Jesus failed: Both He and those saved by Him die. However, He offers a salvation that transcends death. We know that the salvation He offers transcends death, but is this an essential feature of the gospel message? We would all agree that evangelism is a life and death matter. That is, only those who have believed the gospel of grace have everlasting life. In that sense, all of us can agree that evangelism is a life and death matter.

The question remains: Is evangelism merely a life and death matter? Is it merely a life and death matter? *Yes*, and *No*. In one sense, evangelism is strictly a matter of everlasting life versus everlasting death. In another sense, evangelism is not restricted to the issue of everlasting life versus everlasting death. Let us consider first the way in which the issue is narrow.

The Narrow Focus on Life and Death

Although most of the Sermon on the Mount addresses Jesus’ believing disciples,¹ the gate imagery in Matthew 7¹³ has pertinence to unbelievers: *Enter by the narrow gate*. The gospel is a narrow gate. Jesus never apologizes for the gate being narrow. Not only is the message narrow because it is only Christ who gives life, but because Jesus narrowly focuses the message upon His promise of everlasting life.

¹ Matthew 5:1–2, “And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. ² Then He opened His mouth and taught them.” It is true that multitudes also gathered, but Jesus directed virtually all of the Sermon on the Mount to His believing disciples.

Note Christ's repeated narrow focus in John:

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. (John 5²⁴)

Believing the Father's testimony about Christ gives everlasting life. Any reader who does not know that he/she has a guarantee to live forever with Christ does not believe John 5²⁴. Any reader who does not know that he/she will not be at the Great White Throne does not believe John 5²⁴. Any reader who does not know that he/she possesses life, rather than death, does not believe John 5²⁴.

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life. (John 6⁴⁷)

Once again, one cannot believe this verse without believing that Jesus has given him/her everlasting life, a life that starts now and is guaranteed not to end.

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name. (John 20³⁰⁻³¹)

If a person does not believe that he/she has life in Christ's name, that person has not believed what John 20³¹ indicates: Jesus gives life to believers.

How did Jesus approach Nicodemus. Now, this was a man who already understood that Jesus was a teacher sent from God. Furthermore, he represented a larger group that already believed this. Note his use of *we*.

This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." (John 3²)

What did Jesus say in John 3³ to this man who knew that He was sent from God?

Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

The message to Nicodemus was one of life. Jesus spoke of being born again. That Jesus regards Nicodemus himself as one who needs to be born again is clear from verse 7.

Do not marvel that I said to you [singular], 'You [plural] must be born again.'

The use of a plural form *you* as Jesus addressed Nicodemus indicates a need for both Nicodemus and the others he represented to be born again. Even though those Nicodemus represented recognized Jesus as a teacher sent from God, they still needed the new birth. They did not yet connect Jesus with His guarantee of everlasting life.

Jesus wants her to affirm her belief that He will resurrect deceased believers and that He gives everlasting life to believers. She said, *Yes, Lord*. That was a sufficient answer. Yes, she had already believed that Jesus will resurrect dead believers and gives everlasting life to believers. Believing Christ's promise is a matter of life and death. That was her simple answer to a *Yes* or *No* question.

She then gave an essay answer as her reason for believing that Jesus will resurrect all deceased believers and that He gives everlasting life to all believers. She said, *I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world*. In effect what she says is:

Of course I believe that You will resurrect every believer and that You give everlasting life to every believer, because the Christ, the Son of God, must do that.

Why would she infer that He must resurrect believers and give them everlasting life? Resurrection and everlasting life enable the Messiah to keep some key Old Testament promises.

For all the land which you see I give to you [Abram] and your seed forever. (Gen 13¹⁵)

Dwell in this land, and I will be with you and bless you; for to you [Isaac] and your seed I give all these lands, and I will perform the oath which I swore to Abraham your father. And I will make your seed multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your seed all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 26^{3-4,3})

The promise was not merely to a patriarch's seed, but to the patriarchs themselves as well as to their seed. In Genesis 13, Abraham himself receives title deed to the land forever. Likewise, in Genesis 26, Isaac receives title deed to the land forever.

Paul makes the same type of argument as Martha did in John 11²⁷, that resurrection and life are essential to Jesus having anyone in His kingdom. Note what Paul says in Acts 26

⁶ *And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers.*

⁷ *To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews. ⁸ Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead? (Acts 26⁶⁻⁸)*

Israel's hope is that they will possess the land promised to Abraham and his seed forever. How could Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob enjoy what was promised, apart from being resurrected and possessing everlasting life? After all, Hebrews 11¹³ says, *These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth*. Abraham did not receive the promises in his lifetime. He would only receive that which Israel hopes through resurrection and everlasting life. In that light, Martha says, in John 11²⁶,

Of course I believe that You will resurrect every believer and that You give everlasting life to every believer, because the Christ, the Son of God, must do that.

³ The translation of both passages replaces *descendants* with *seed*, a more literal rendering. Otherwise, the rendering is like that of the NKJV.

Yes, the message of believing that Jesus Christ guarantees me everlasting life is a narrow message. That is exactly how Jesus characterizes the message in Matthew 7¹³: *Enter by the narrow gate*. The gospel is a narrow gate. Jesus never apologizes for the gate being narrow. Not only is the message narrow because it is only Christ who gives life, but because Jesus narrowly focuses the message upon His promise of everlasting life.

Having a narrow message for a world that loves a broad-gate message would seem to be a problem. What is the solution?

Presenting a Narrow Message to a Broad-Gate World

The title of this paper gives a clue: *Is Evangelism Merely a Life and Death Matter?* In one sense it is restricted to the life-death issue. Yes, the message is narrow. However, we have scriptural precedent for treating the message as a funnel. Not every unbeliever that we meet is ready to dialog about everlasting life the moment we meet them. Yet, that is the narrow gate by which Matthew 7¹³ speaks: *Enter by the narrow gate*.

Four Models of Communication

Narrow-to-Narrow



Wide-to-Wide



Inverted Funnel



The Funnel



Narrow-to-Narrow. This, the first model unwisely assumes that an unbeliever is ready to dialog about everlasting life with no introduction. Although such a presentation may present a theologically accurate gospel, it may not be the wisest way to address an unbeliever. After all, what is an unbeliever? He/she is a professional at missing the point of the gospel.

Let us consider two scenarios to show why the narrow-to-narrow may not be the wisest approach. If we approach a down-and-outer who is well-acquainted with his sinfulness, he may regard Christ's gift of life as too good to be true. He rejects it, not because of denying that he needs life, but because he cannot imagine God being that gracious.

Another scenario also shows that the narrow-to-narrow may not be wise. Imagine the up-and-outer who is so self-righteous that he imagines himself as being good enough to merit life by his own works.

If all we can say to either of these people is that Jesus gives everlasting life as a gift to believers, we have not met them where they are. This is a failure to communicate. It does not do anyone else much good, if we have an accurate message, but fail to take some simple steps to communicate it well. The unbeliever holds a broad gate view, but the narrow-to-narrow approach may not help him narrow down his view at all.

Wide-to-Wide. The second model may well approach the unbeliever where he is: *in the broad gate*. This may be a case of "How to win friends and not influence enemies of the gospel of grace." The problem is that this approach does not help unbelievers get closer to understanding the message that gives life. In some cases, it represents a false gospel (a broad gate message). In other cases, it may be a knowledgeable believer staying silent about the narrow message, when the Lord has opened the door.

Inverted Funnel. The third model represents counter-evangelism. We may tell someone “Jesus has given me everlasting life through faith alone in Him alone. My security is not conditioned on me persevering to the end of my life in faith and good works.” If the hearer seeks to dissuade me of the grace message, he is applying the inverted funnel. That is, he is trying to cause me to cease believing my narrow-gate true message and to begin believing his false broad-gate gospel.

The Funnel. The fourth model exemplifies good communication of a true message. Truth, by definition, is intrinsically narrow. There can be an infinite number of false gospels, but only one true one. However, we need to meet the unbeliever where he/she is. Scripture evidences the use of the funnel to take people from where they are to where they need to be.

Our sons attended school at Scofield Memorial Church for a few years. We dropped them off each day near a sign which read something like, “The Bible as it is for man as he is.” Let us look at a couple of examples of the funnel.

Acts 16: Paul and the Philippian Jailer

Paul and Silas cast a demon out of a girl. Acts 16²²⁻²⁴ describes the aftermath.

*Then the multitude rose up together against them; and the magistrates tore off their clothes and commanded them to be beaten with rods. And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to keep them securely. **Having received such a charge**, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.*

Note that the jailer was warned against letting them escape. It would seem obvious that the officials would not want prisoners to escape. However, the vehemence with which they commanded the jailer is evident in the phrase: *having received such a charge*. This becomes significant, because the jailer was sure that the revolutionaries (Paul and Silas) must have escaped during the earthquake, as verses 25–26 indicate.

²⁵ But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed. And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself.

However, Paul urged him not to kill himself.

But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, “Do yourself no harm, for we are all here.”

The jailer still feared torture and execution for allowing the prisoners to escape.

Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. And he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household."

It is from his Roman superiors that he desires salvation or deliverance. Paul used *saved* as a catch-word, as an attention-grabber. Verse 32 assists.

Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.

Most Christians assume that Acts 16:31 says it all. It does not. Verse 32 shows that Paul and Silas needed to explain much to this man. It was not their closing line; rather, it was the opener. They needed something to cause the man to get his mind off suicide, so that he might hear them.

This approach to the passage simplifies the last part of the verse. The jailer's household would have also been in danger from the authorities, if the prisoners had fled. Paul seeks to cause the jailer to slow down, so that they can calmly explain that Jesus solves his bigger problem. He lacks everlasting life.

Observe that Paul has used a funnel. The man's concern was with consequences of the prisoners escaping. Acts 16:31 was an attention-grabber for a man in the broad-gate. It enabled Paul and Silas to explain calmly a narrow-gate message.

John 4: The Samaritan Woman

Jesus offered living water to her in John 4:10.

Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

Initially, she rebuffed Him, but He offered it again in verses 13–14.

Jesus answered and said to her, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life."

She mistakenly thought that He spoke of literal water. She liked the idea of not needing to come to the well again.

The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here."

Why did Jesus ask her to call her husband? It was not so that the man could carry the water pot. That was a job for women. Jesus knew about her moral status. Mentioning the issue of a husband would bring that out in the open.

The woman answered and said, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You have well said, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly."

Why did Jesus want the morality issue on the table? He was offering living water in spite of her failures. He had earlier spoken of living water as a gift. He really meant that it was a gift. Jesus has approached this woman through the funnel model. She was concerned about literal water. She also would have been likely to think that her moral status might cause Jesus to withdraw His offer. Instead, He took her from a wide-gate view to a narrow-gate view by using a funnel.

Conclusion

Yes, the message that Jesus gives is a narrow message. It directs our attention to death and the guarantee of life. Does that mean that we cannot talk to unbelievers about some of their concerns? No. Does that mean that we cannot talk about anything other than life or death? No.

What it means is that we have the opportunity to clarify issues. In so doing, we serve as a funnel in God's hands to assist people in finding the narrow gate. Unbelievers lack life and can wander aimlessly without finding the narrow gate. We can serve to point them in the right direction to the life that Jesus offers as a gift.