

The *SBJT* Forum: How May ‘Non-Evangelists’ Fulfill the Great Commission?

Editor’s Note: Readers should be aware of the Forum’s format. Carl F. H. Henry, D. A. Carson, and C. Ben Mitchell have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal’s goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers’ views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the Forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: How did you view your ministry as editor of *Christianity Today* as fulfilling the Great Commission?

Carl F. H. Henry: Not every Christian is divinely called to be a career evangelist. Without a heartbeat for evangelism, however, no Christian occupation or profession is fully exemplary. Jesus’ followers are mandated to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of our planet. Fidelity to that mandate has made Christianity the first religion with a global presence. That distinctive reflects the evangelistic passion and outreach of devout believers pursuing many vocations, yet simultaneously bearing witness to the joyous salvation that the crucified and risen Lord bestows on penitent followers of the Redeemer.

As a young man the Gospel had been eagerly shared with me by an elderly widow working in a newspaper office, by a real estate salesman, and through the ritual of the small Episcopal mission church that I attended. In 1933, at the age of 20, I made a spiritual commitment to Christ as Savior and Lord. I then entered Christian college and seminary eager to grow in grace and in knowledge of things pertaining to Christ.

When I sought a life-partner my wonderful mate-to-be thought, as I did also, that she would be marrying a preacher. Instead, I twice served three-month periods as an interim pastor, only soon to be called to college and seminary teaching positions, as well as invited to fill numerous writing and editorial opportunities.

In my 1956-68 span as editor of *Christianity Today*, I considered it an instrument contributing to the fulfillment of the Great Commission, one no less appropriate and legitimate than engaging in an evangelistic campaign or teaching college or seminary classes in Christian philosophy and theology. The decisive issues were qualification, divine compulsion, and readiness. I was no Billy Graham, no C. S. Lewis, no Fulton Sheen or any of four billion others. But my conversion experience was so transformative that I would have gone to mainland China had God constrained me. I had good academic credentials, treasured the Bible, and believed in the power of prayer.

Christianity Today was dedicated to biblical theology, biblical evangelism, biblical ethics, and biblical apologetics. Its targeted reader audience was highly selective:

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thinking evangelicals. It soon became the thought-journal most read by pastors, lay leaders, seminarians and collegians, and church school teachers. The editors clarified the distinction between the content of the Gospel and its traditional and modern rivals and called for fidelity to the incarnate and inspired Word.

Time magazine soon noted that *Christianity Today* attested the existence of an international, interdenominational scholarship supportive of evangelical theology. Pastors who, under modernist or neorthodox influence, had defected from biblical Christianity wrote not only to engage in theological dispute but also to acknowledge and commend an evangelical alternative.

The printed page—magazines, books, and textbooks—holds an incomparable place next to the Bible in our communications era for conveying the Word of God in the form of objective truth. A skillful evangelical reporter, an editor on the staff of the local newspaper, a magazine contributor, or a Christian columnist can focus the assumptions that undergird the contemporary age, indicate why the postulates of the present era are subject to logical scrutiny, and call for replacement by a transcendent Word. In this way they can fulfill the Great Commission.

SBJT: How does your role as scholar, teacher and writer fulfill the Great Commission?

D. A. Carson: That is a penetrating question that leaves little room in which to hide. I shall try to answer it in five points.

(1) I see myself first and foremost as a pastor, not a professional scholar or writer. The Lord called me to gospel ministry. Three times I have been involved in church planting, and I served a church as pastor before embarking on doctoral stud-

ies. If I now teach at a seminary, it is because for the time being I believe the Lord wants me to train other pastors and Christian leaders. But although I may remain here for the rest of my working life, I would certainly not rule out the possibility of a return to pastoring a local church. That is the front line, and there are times when working in a quarter-master's slot (which is where I am) prompts me to examine my own priorities.

So now the question becomes not only more urgent, but raises questions about my integrity: How do your present roles reflect your calling to be a pastor—a calling which surely includes the responsibility to fulfill the Great Commission?

(2) When I was a young man, through twelve years of tertiary education and early pastoral ministry, I was involved in a fair bit of evangelism. The problem with my present work teaching in a seminary is that I teach Christians all week, and when I preach on the weekend I'm usually preaching to still more Christians. It is frighteningly easy to go weeks and months without a single serious conversation with an unbeliever. Quite apart from the failure to evangelize, in due course one loses the ability to engage in easy conversation with almost anyone. Moreover, in a fast-changing culture like ours, not only does one lose the common touch, but one is soon out of date. The danger is that the only serious contact you have with the broader pagan culture is through books.

So, twelve or fifteen years ago I made a number of changes. I started insisting that a certain percentage of the many conferences I speak at be evangelistic. Gradually my circle of such opportunities multiplied. Often my evangelism is done on university campuses; sometimes it is

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church-based.

But the lesson I learned about being intentional in this matter applies to many pastors as well. Some pastors I know never actually explain the gospel to anyone, except in some sermons, and even then mostly to friendly crowds of fellow believers. It is essential that we *seek out* people who have no connection with Christians, people who are sometimes overtly hostile. I have made many foolish decisions in my life, but the decision to *plan* to do more evangelism was a good one. Quite apart from the people who have been converted through such ministry, I find myself able to stand much closer to the front end of the culture than would otherwise be the case. That is important not only for my own integrity as a Christian witness and preacher, but also for my training of a new generation.

(3) That brings me quite naturally to the third point. My teaching ministry is largely geared to training pastors and other Christian workers. Over the years, not only many pastors but many InterVarsity Christian Fellowship staff, Campus Crusade for Christ workers, missionaries-in-training, Bible translators, mission executives, and national Christian leaders from around the world have passed through my classrooms. In some small way, God has enabled me to play a part in shaping them to fulfill the Great Commission. I often wish I did a better job. Yet at some time or other, my teaching and preaching have stretched outward to touch five continents. Sometimes conferences are organized in conjunction with other workers to help train people in evangelism. In May, for instance, under the title “Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns,” a number of us will be trying to pass on to others something of what

we have learned in our own attempts at obeying the Great Commission; by now you’ve probably seen the advertising. In my most sober moments, I am quietly amazed that God uses me and others like me in this task. Certainly there are immense delights when I see former students proving to be faithful and fruitful servants of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

(4) In the same way, my writing has been an indirect way of fulfilling the Great Commission. Very little of it has been directly evangelistic. Nevertheless individuals have sometimes told me they have been converted by reading one of my books. More strategically, books that build confidence in Scripture, books that explain what Scripture says, books that teach people to pray, books that help others to preach, books that help students to articulate the gospel in various cultures—all of these help shape their readers, and one of the effects is work and witness which, in the mercy of God, is a little more fruitful than it would have been otherwise.

Moreover, one of the books now on my writing agenda is overtly evangelistic. It stems from years of evangelistic preaching, and will come with a study guide to help small group leaders take groups of people through substantial chunks of the Bible and point them to the Lord Jesus.

(5) Finally, it is important to recall that the Great Commission is *more* than evangelism in some narrow sense. It is the Lord’s mandate to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that Jesus himself commanded. Strictly speaking, therefore, those who teach believers what Jesus taught are engaged in fulfilling the Great Commission. Of course, that sort of thinking could become a cop out: “I’m a

teacher of Scripture, so even if I never do a scrap of evangelism I'm fulfilling the Great Commission." Well, maybe—if you can parcel out the Commission into entirely discrete chunks. It sounds more like a dreary excuse.

Yet there remains some truth to it. While we recognize the overlapping gifts God distributes to the church, we should perceive that scholars, teachers, and writers have their assigned tasks to fulfill under one Master, whose "Well done!" on the last day is the ultimate reward. Mercifully, God himself is less judgmental than many who worship him, for it is written, "At that time [i.e. at the final judgment] each will receive his praise from God" (1 Co 4:7). That is wonderfully gracious, especially when we remember that, according to the Lord Jesus, on any objective scale we are never more than unprofitable servants.

SBJT: Can ethics and evangelism co-exist, or is it inevitable that the church loses evangelistic fervor when it becomes involved in ethical issues?

C. Ben Mitchell: The study and practice of Christian ethics is eminently evangelistic. In fact, I would argue that the bifurcation of ethics and evangelism produces an aberrant Christianity. Evangelicals's credibility before a watching world is tied to how well we do both ethics and evangelism. There are many reasons why this is the case. I will only mention a few of the more important ones.

First, evangelical Christians need to revisit the ethics of evangelism. Evangelism is not a zero sum game. That is, there are some evangelistic methodologies which are inconsistent with the integrity of the gospel. Manipulative evangelism is contrary to the good news that Christ has come into the world to save sinners. The *kerygma*

is a content-full message. By playing on the emotions of hearers, some Christian evangelists risk proclaiming a content-less gospel. Whether it produces holy laughter or exploited guilt, manipulation is wrong. Any gospel presentation which sacrifices biblical content for emotive coercion is spiritual prostitution. The whole gospel is for the whole person and will clearly impact the hearer's emotions, but the ethical proclamation of Christ in his offices of prophet, priest, and king must not be corrupted by a pragmatic superficiality.

Second, evangelicals also need to revisit the evangelistic nature of ethics. Practical ethics are, by nature, evangelistic. The church, as the body of Christ, serves as prophet, priest, and king as she represents Christ in the world. In her prophetic office, the church speaks the word of the Lord to an institutional church and a secular culture which have rebelled against God. Like the prophets of old, the church calls for justice, equity, and truth. This proclamation is an ethical imperative. While part of the prophetic duty was to call for repentance, the prophets also functioned as a historical memory for the people of God. Malachi, for instance, called the priests to return to God by remaining faithful to their marriages (Mal 2:13-14). With her prophetic voice the church calls on God's people to return to ethical living and points to the revelation of God as the foundation for a life of obedience. Moreover, the prophets called on the culture to desert its idols and seek the Lord of hosts. This is an evangelistic imperative.

Third, the concern for righteousness and justice will demonstrate itself in redemptive ministry. The church, in her priestly office, exercises ministries of mercy, intercession, and redemption. The context of human fallenness becomes the context for priestly ministry when the

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church acts ethically. We must not see our neighbors suffering without suffering alongside and offering them spiritual and practical help. Christian social ethics provides the normative framework for ministry and may well provide the milieu for effective evangelism. Offering a cup of cold water in Jesus's name, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and attending to the dying are ministries which have eternal consequences (cf. Mt 25:31-46; Jas 2:14-26). Against the dark backdrop of the culture of death, with its embrace of convenience abortion and assisted suicide, priestly ministries offer a beam of light. Crisis pregnancy centers at one end of life and hospice ministry at the other are poignant ways for the church to act redemptively and evangelistically.

Fourth, the church's ethical and evangelistic ministry must also address politics. The benevolent king's function in the ancient world was to rule over and protect those in his kingdom. This is certainly true of our sovereign Lord who is both master and defender (Ps 2; Rev 19:11-16). Clearly, then, the kingly ministry of the church involves representing the will and the way of the king of glory. The apostle Peter enjoins believers scattered throughout Asia Minor to, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Pe 3:15b). Especially in a representative democracy, Christians have a voice in the public square.¹

Carl Henry says,

Because socio-political obligations devolve inescapably upon all Christians as citizens of two worlds, the Church is obliged to indicate what it means for political theory that the Christian life is to be maintained not only distinct from the world, but in relevant and responsible relationship to the

whole social-cultural realm, and to demonstrate the proper performance of political duty.... Recent secular interpretations of government lend additional importance to the Church's legitimate role, if not as spiritual watchman over the State, at least as a moral sentry within it. By courageous preaching the Church must identify as inimical to God any excessive demands of the State in the religio-ideological realm, and refuse to render to Caesar what is not his due.¹

In a representative democracy such as the United States, this notion of kingship must be worked out very cautiously. However, just and effective public policy must be built on the foundation of Judeo-Christian principles. To the degree that those moral principles are violated or ignored, justice and equity will be diminished and society will spiral downward toward barbarism.

Now, lest I be misunderstood, I am not suggesting a so-called Christian nationalism. What I am advocating are laws and governmental structures which are at the least not antithetical to scriptural principles. In American democracy, the church functions in its kingly role by valiantly defending the accommodation of religion and by seeking to influence legislation to reflect, at least implicitly, Christian virtues. Without religious liberty, effective evangelism will be significantly hindered. Thankfully, the gospel cannot be shackled by humanly-enforced restrictions, but an atmosphere of religious freedom is to be preferred to one of religious persecution.

Ethics and evangelism are by no means enemies. There is a symbiotic relationship between the two. Evangelism flourishes where Christians are living lives of ethical purity and when ethical concerns are at the heart of the evangelistic enterprise.

ENDNOTES

¹Carl F. H. Henry, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 82-84.