

Rethinking Evangelism

A conversation with Dallas Willard

A LOT OF PEOPLE SUSPECT THAT NOT ONLY IS the world shifting in some significant ways, but assumptions of what it means to do evangelism in that world are shifting, as well.

The questions, of course, are not only about methodology. Practices are always an extension of certain ideas, and many of our approaches to evangelism have been deeply rooted in particular assumptions about the gospel—some of which may need to be rethought.

To help us with that process, we talked with Dallas Willard, a professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California who—in the midst of university life and the church—has worked with the challenges of evangelism and discipleship for years. He has also been a pastor, and is well-known for his books on spirituality such as *The Spirit of the Disciplines* and, most recently, *The Divine Conspiracy*.

Our conversations with Dallas took place in a couple of different settings. On each occasion, we fired our toughest questions to him about discipleship, the life to come, religious pluralism—issues we face day after day in our churches and with our friends. The following are excerpts from those discussions.

Evangelism

Much of evangelism today is rooted in a misunderstanding of salvation. People have been told they are Christians because they have confessed they believe that Jesus died for their sins, but the total package is presented in such a way that it leaves the general life untouched.

Biblically, salvation means deliverance; the question is, “Deliverance from what?” The common message is “deliverance from guilt.” But the full concept of salvation in the New Testament is deliverance from our present sins. Deliverance from sins comes from the new life of God’s Kingdom when we place our confidence in Jesus the person.

The problem is that we have been obsessed with this idea that the real issue is “making the cut” to get to heaven. We have taken the discipleship out of conversion.

The Gospel

In today’s presentation of the gospel, Jesus’ death is primarily presented as a ransom that deals with guilt and the effects of guilt regarding our standing before God. But there is more to life than guilt. Once you have been forgiven, you still have to live. Jesus is about the redemption of actual life from actual sin. It is by entering into his life, which is still ongoing on earth, that we are delivered from actual sin. The New Testament is absolutely clear on this. You just take Colossians 3, Philipians 3, 1 John and Titus 3. All make it clear that the righteousness which is by faith is a matter of being delivered from the evil that is around us in action and that we are in danger of falling into ourselves.

Faith in the living Christ raises us above merely being delivered from the consequences of sin. We need a doctrine not only of justification but of regeneration. We need a picture of our life in God that does not leave most of our life untouched. What has happened today is that we’ve reduced salvation to justification. We’ve reduced the saving work of Christ to his death on the cross. So what relevance has the resurrected Christ? None! Apparently, we would have gone to heaven even if Christ had never risen from the dead, because the payment was made in full on the cross. At that point, we would have all gone to heaven

because God could not have found anything against us; it would have all been forgiven. Nothing else would have been available to us to make us ready for heaven, so that we would be comfortable when we get there! I shudder when I think of many people who are professing Christians today winding up in heaven; I don't know what's going to happen to them. I think they could not be very happy in heaven if they have not gotten acclimated here.

Discipleship

The leading assumption in the American church is that you can be a Christian but not a disciple. That has placed a tremendous burden on a mass of Christians who are not disciples. We tell them to come to church, participate in our programs and give money. But we see a church that knows nothing of commitment. We have settled for the marginal, and so we carry this awful burden of trying to motivate people to do what they don't want to do. We can't think about church the way we have been.

We need to clear in our heads about what discipleship is. My definition: A disciple is a person who has decided that the most important thing in their life is to learn how to do what Jesus said to do. A disciple is not a person who has things under control, or knows a lot of things. Disciples simply are people who are constantly revising their affairs to carry through on their decision to follow Jesus.

Dialogue

Evangelism is for the lost. People who regard themselves as not in need can be enjoyed as good company, but there is not much that will be done for them if they think they don't have a need.

Now, for those who have a need, it's very simple. You help them understand their need, and then you tell them that if they put their confidence in Christ now, in the sense that "confidence" ordinarily has in human life—which is to trust and to act on that trust—they will come to know a different kind of life than they presently have. They will enter into an interactive life with God and his Kingdom, and there will be differences in their life which can only be understood in those terms.

We can invite people to find out about this. A standard move for me when I find someone who would like to know more is to say "Why don't you read the Gospel of Mark and come back next week and we'll talk about it?"

Evangelism and the Church

The primary function of the church is not evangelism, but to be a place for the dwelling of God on the earth. This requires that people grow and receive God and occupy their place with God. That would have a natural effect of evangelism. What we want is not just evangelism that makes converts. We want disciples...and if you are intent on making disciples and keep on that track, evangelism will take care of itself.

Of course, understanding that evangelism is a natural function of a healthy Body doesn't preclude specific efforts. But the role of the community would be a primary factor in this. Many people will be drawn in without any special strategy but simply by the health of the people.

Right now, evangelism with big meetings is in a very hard place—not only in trying to keep it going, but because of its results. Three out of four people who make professions at crusades never show up in any church. That's partly due to the fact that in our notions of evangelism today, being converted has nothing to do with community; it just has to do with your "personal relationship" with God.

Presenting the Message

We have to present our message as something that deals with the natural aspirations of the human heart. The reality is that people deeply desire to be good, but they are prepared to do evil, and to do it repeatedly.

Unfortunately, they live in a world where people feel they need to desecrate their souls to survive. What Jesus announced attracted people from every level.

I am uncomfortable with the distinction between evangelism and discipleship. What we call evangelism is often nothing more than soul-winning. Evangelism has come to mean getting people “across the line.” It operates according to a model of providing goods and services that has nothing to do with Christlikeness.

The real question is, How do you do “evangelism-discipleship?” My short answer: You ravish people with the blessings of the Kingdom. You make them hungry for it. That’s why words are so important—we must be wordsmiths. You use words to ravish people with the beauty of the kingdom. It’s the beauty of the kingdom that Jesus said was causing people to climb over each other just to get in. People become excited like the pearl-purchaser—they will give everything to get in.

Heaven and Hell

Heaven and Hell are God’s provisions for who we choose to be. It is a natural extension of the way we live. I tell people that what they get out of this life—after this life—is the person that they become now.

Probably the simplest way to understand Hell is as a cosmic junk heap, Gehenna. You can get in a lot of arguments about the details, but the basic fact is that there are some people who just can’t stand God. That’s the way they are in this life, so he doesn’t force his presence on them in the next. I don’t think we should regard God as happy that anyone goes to Hell. Scripture tells us that “it is not his will that any should perish.” But he does permit it. That is a testimony to the great value that God places on human personality. He values it enough that he is prepared for people to be eternally lost if that is what they want. I would be very happy if Hell were not an aspect of it; Hell is a terrible thought. Even among evangelicals we have people who say such an idea is not possible. I don’t feel comfortable saying that myself, partly because of what I see as the clear teaching of Scripture and partly because of what seems to me to make a lot of sense.

Preparation for the Life to Come

Those who remain undisciplined in this age will not be developed as they should be for their responsibilities in the next age. I don’t think, for example, that a person who steps into the next world as a child of God is going to have problems with rebellion against God, doing what they know to be wrong. But there is much more to our personality than that, because life is not just a matter of “not sinning.” When people have lived a life of sin, that affects everything about them—their capacity to live in a social context, or their ability to handle jobs and carry out projects—which I believe is what we will be doing in the age to come.

I do think Scripture teaches personal, though not moral, development in the life to come. I think the image of God in man is creative goodness, and that we are enlisted into God’s cause. The clear teaching of Scripture is that we will reign with him forever and ever. We will serve him forever. So we need to understand that that is the capacity in which we will continue to grow. And we will never cease growing in that regard.

So, suppose you have the responsibility of running a solar system? That’s going to be a demand on you, even though you’re going to be running it with God! So the rule is, if you were faithful over two cities, take five. People who have matured in their relationship with God are going to have a much better idea of how to run cities with God. Those who have not will have a lot of learning to do. So I think our preparation now makes a lot of difference. Once you get over the idea that you are going to be warehoused for all eternity when you die, lying about on shelves, listening to harp playing on Muzak, you can see how it makes a real difference.

http://www.vineyardusa.org/publications/newsletters/cutting_edge/index.htm