

THEOCENTRIC EVANGELISM

by Wong Kim Tok

*Discovering God's Prior Work
in Bringing People to Himself*

I. DISCOVERIES IN MINISTRY

About three years ago, I was invited by an English Proficiency lecturer to share the Gospel with a group of 10-15 research scholars from China. I tried using apologetics—man's search for origins, science (what little I knew of it) and the Bible, the historicity of Jesus, the trustworthiness of the Bible, closing with key passages from John's Gospel. After each session there was a question and answer session. I felt that those men were genuinely seeking. What was the result of those 10 weekly sessions? Nil. Zero. But it got me thinking that I was missing something. We were somehow not connecting.

Some months later the same lecturer introduced a co-laborer and me to a few of her students. This time, we met them individually. Our modus operandi was to introduce them to the knowledge of God using a modified version of the *KNOWING GOD* series (originally developed by Warren and Ruth Myers). Then depending on their readiness, we might cover major portions of one of the gospels, or use the *Studies in Christian Living* "Knowing Jesus Christ." The result? Including our lecturer friend, our little network saw more than forty decisions for Christ over a one and a half year period from April 1999. We were all amazed at such fruitfulness. At one stage, we had people receiving Christ every week! What was the secret?

Initially I thought that was the "right method," along with much prayer and a lot of faith. These definitely were key factors. But we believe it was something else that we stumbled upon accidentally that explained the fruitfulness. As we related to each one, we tried to know their background to understand them better. We were totally unprepared for what we were to hear. In fact it took months before we could understand the import of their stories and discern some patterns. Here are some samplings collected over the period:

Case #1. JH had never heard of the Gospel before but whenever she faced crisis (e.g. a major exam,) she would pray to God. She told us that she had always had a sense that God existed. So when she heard the Gospel she immediately recognized God as the God she had prayed to before. We were amazed that a God-denying educational system and culture could not eradicate the awareness of the true and living God

Case #2. SM was a "nibbler" who seemed to take in Bible truths a bit at a time. He wanted to stop but agreed to meet one last time. The following week, he became a

completely changed man. During his preparation for the study, he had come across Hosea 11:3,4. He was genuinely touched by the loving patience of God even for people like him who ignored Him. When we gingerly talked about the subject of eternal judgment, he responded positively, saying that he knew there was a hell. Puzzled, my colleague and I asked how he got to that conclusion when he had never read the Bible before. It seemed that in high school, he had to study European literature translated into Chinese, of course. In the process he had read Dante's "Inferno" a canticle about Hell, which made a deep impression on him. Needless to say, our friend rather gladly put his faith in Christ. It was amazing to us that without any contact with the Bible or the Gospel, God had sown seeds of Biblical truth into this man.

Case #3. When he was an undergraduate, an English teacher from America had given WC a Bible. He had just come to Singapore when he had a dream. In his dream, a glorious being appeared to him. He woke up and pondered over the meaning of life. When asked who he thought that glorious person was, he replied "Jesus." We had opportunities to appeal to him to believe but it seemed he was not ready at that time.

Case #4. KJ was very bright but as a child idled his time away. One day, he heard a voice telling him, "Wake up and don't waste away your life." He studied hard and did well academically. Unfortunately soon after entering college, his father, a farmer, died. Penniless, he faced the prospect of giving up his education. Strangely, he received a letter containing a promise of financial help from a benefactor he never knew and was able to complete his college. He did well enough to secure a highly competitive scholarship to do research in Singapore. His wife later came to Singapore, looking for a job. Beyond their wildest dreams and against major obstacles (like limited English) she got a position in a prestigious cancer research institute in her very first interview. Coincidentally, the person who interviewed her had studied at their alma mater before! KJ was absolutely intrigued by such providence and design in his life events. However he has yet to conclude that it was the hand of God.

These are only a sampling of many similar examples. From such conversations, we slowly saw a pattern emerging. Somewhere, somehow, in their lives in China, God was at work preparing them for this opportune time when they could hear the gospel and come to faith. Even in cases where they did not have any "spiritual" or supernatural experiences, they could identify other significant moments like a fear of death at a certain time of their lives or wondering what was beyond this world, which opened their eyes to eternal realities. When I tried to search the Scriptures to find Biblical precedents, I came to a new understanding of the primary work that God the Father is doing in all our lives in drawing us to Him.

II. JESUS' TEACHING ON THE FATHER'S PRIOR WORK. John 6

John 6 is a pivotal point in the ministry of Jesus. When He revealed Himself as the Bread of Life, many of His disciples could not accept His teaching about how one could relate to Him and left Him. To those who desired the bread of life, He taught that it was the Father who drew them to Himself through three different processes.

1. THE FATHER GIVES MEN

“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.” John 6:37

Jesus acknowledged that it is the Father who gives. In other words, anyone who ever comes to Christ is a gift from the Father to Jesus. God forbid that we would ever think that the fruit of evangelism is “ours.” Of course when asked, we would all be theologically correct and affirm that God is the One who is truly at work. But deep down, we feel a primary influence in someone’s salvation. The fruits of evangelism are not trophies nor are they ours to give to Jesus. It is a common habit to give credit to human instruments. Jesus commented in John 6:32 that it was not Moses who gave them manna but the Father.

2. THE FATHER DRAWS MEN

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.” John 6:44

Jesus knew that it was the Father who is actively drawing people, even teaching them (6:45) and when they listen to the Father speaking, they will come to Jesus.

The word “draw” is an interesting word. The Greek word is *helkuo*, meaning to draw in, or to drag along as in pulling in a net. Whenever this verb is used, the meaning includes the idea of force being used as in Acts 16:19. It was indeed very difficult for the apostle Paul to kick against the thorns when Jesus appeared to him. Leon Morris (in his commentary on the gospel of John) notes that there is not one example in the NT of the use of *helkuo* where the resistance is successful. The Septuagint uses *helkuo* when translating Jeremiah 31:3 from the Hebrew. The meaning of *helkuo* might also include an inner compulsion from God. Vines says that the metaphorical use of *helkuo* signifies drawing by inward power, by divine impulse

How then does the Father draw men into the kingdom? The Father uses many ways. It might be by the drawing power of the Cross (in John 12:32 – the same word *helkuo* is used). Or it could be the Father opening the heart of a seeking person as in the case of Lydia (Acts 16: 14). Or again it might be the believers being salt and light. God may use any means at His disposal to draw people to Him. God has used the life of our lecturer friend to draw many to Himself. By her excellent teaching skills, selfless caring way beyond the call of duty not only for her students’ work but their personal lives as well, and the wonderful opportunities she opens up by assigning topics where students write about their view of life, life purpose and related topics which helps her sift through those seemingly prepared to search for truth.

At one time [my wife] Dolly and I were regularly studying the Bible with four new believers in the university cafeteria. One week, a girl, WW just showed up. At the end of

the session, WW prayed to receive Christ into her life. As she knew one of the other girls in the group, we assumed that WW was invited by that girl. When we commended that girl for her initiative, she corrected us otherwise. Then WW admitted that she had been observing us for several weeks from the upper deck and was drawn by the animated discussions and fun the group had, munching homemade cookies, laughing and generally having a good time. She found out that it was a Bible discussion and then decided to invite herself. There was something about Christian fellowship that attracted WW.

2. THE FATHER ENABLES MEN.

He went on to say, *"This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him."* John 6:65

It would seem that there might be all kinds of obstacles obstructing a person coming to faith. Yet it is the Father who enables people to overcome these obstacles to faith. The Jews and Greeks each had their peculiar stumbling blocks (1 Cor 1:22-24). Unless the Father enables faith, the stumbling blocks will not become building blocks for faith.

The word "enable" is translated from the Greek *didomi* is related to the root meaning of "to give." The Zondervan NIV Exhaustive Concordance states that *didomi* can have many different specific meanings and referents depending on the context, and includes "to give," "to grant," "to make," "to enable," in the list of possible meanings. In the context of John 6, the "enabling" here could well be related to "equipping" people with faith to believe.

C.S. Lewis was a Rationalist and a Theist whose stumbling block was philosophy. Yet that same superior mind and logic came to accept the possibility of the supernatural and, along with the influence of JRR Tolkien's use of mythology came to embrace the historicity of Christ. When he became a Christian, he said of himself, "I give up. I admit that God is God." He later cites himself as "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England." God had obviously enabled or equipped C.S. Lewis to come to the point of faith.

III. "HE HAS NOT LEFT HIMSELF WITHOUT TESTIMONY" (Acts 14:17,18)

These truths indicate that God has always been working way ahead of the one who is seeking to evangelize someone or some group. Using two Old Testament characters to illustrate this principle, it might be like Abraham trying to evangelize Melchizedek, not realizing that the latter had prior revelation from God!

In Acts 14:17-18, Paul referred to God's creative acts and providence in nature as testimonies of His true existence. In Acts we can also recall the cases of the prepared heart like Cornelius, the Ethiopian eunuch, Lydia, and the Athenians who

worshipped the Unknown God. Instead of taking these as the norm, and believe in God's prior work in people, we tend to treat them as exceptions.

In Job 33:14-30, Elihu, who had more wisdom than the three comforters of Job, seemed to have figured some things out well ahead of us. He mentions the various ways that God speaks to man, which is most instructive. Elihu asserts that God speaks to man by means of dreams, visions, words of warnings, pain and suffering, angelic mediators. He uses all these means "to redeem [the] soul from going down to the pit."

Thus whether it is problems encountered, crises faced, blessings received, visitations of angels, dreams, reading the Bible, Christian friends, etc., these are God's ways of speaking to men, preparing them towards the point of acknowledging Jesus as Savior. When we meet them, they may be more aware of God than we realize.

IV. THEOCENTRIC EVANGELISM.

Theocentric evangelism focuses on God's prior work. It is not anthropo-centered (laborer-dependent). It is not about technique or methodology, though knowing some will help; neither is it about how skillful a laborer might be, all of which is implied in the fishing or harvest metaphor.

Theocentric evangelism, then, is to do evangelism with the conviction that God has already started working in the lives of individuals or groups long before we get to meet them. This principle, if practiced, should mean that somewhere in the process of evangelism, I should seek to discern how God had already intervened in the person's life and carry on from there. It is not a blank slate that one starts with.

V. A PERSONAL POSTSCRIPT

Since this discovery evangelism has never been so exciting for us. There is even a sense of anticipation and excitement as we wonder about what we will discover God's handiwork in the fabric of their lives. In fact evangelism becomes more meaningful as we seek to engage with people and enter their lives as they allow us. Not everyone that we witness to comes to faith but it takes the pressure off.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

1. In your own journey towards faith in Christ, have there been any crises, special incidents or events that God may have used early on to bring you towards Christ?
2. Are there similar processes among those that you know that have become believers, e.g among family members, relatives, friends or people in your ministry?
3. Are there possible examples of God's prior work in the encounters that Jesus had with Individuals?
4. How can people with the gift of evangelism relate this principle to their ministry?
5. Are there similar passages in the Bible that might relate to this principle? E.g . Acts 17:2-30

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